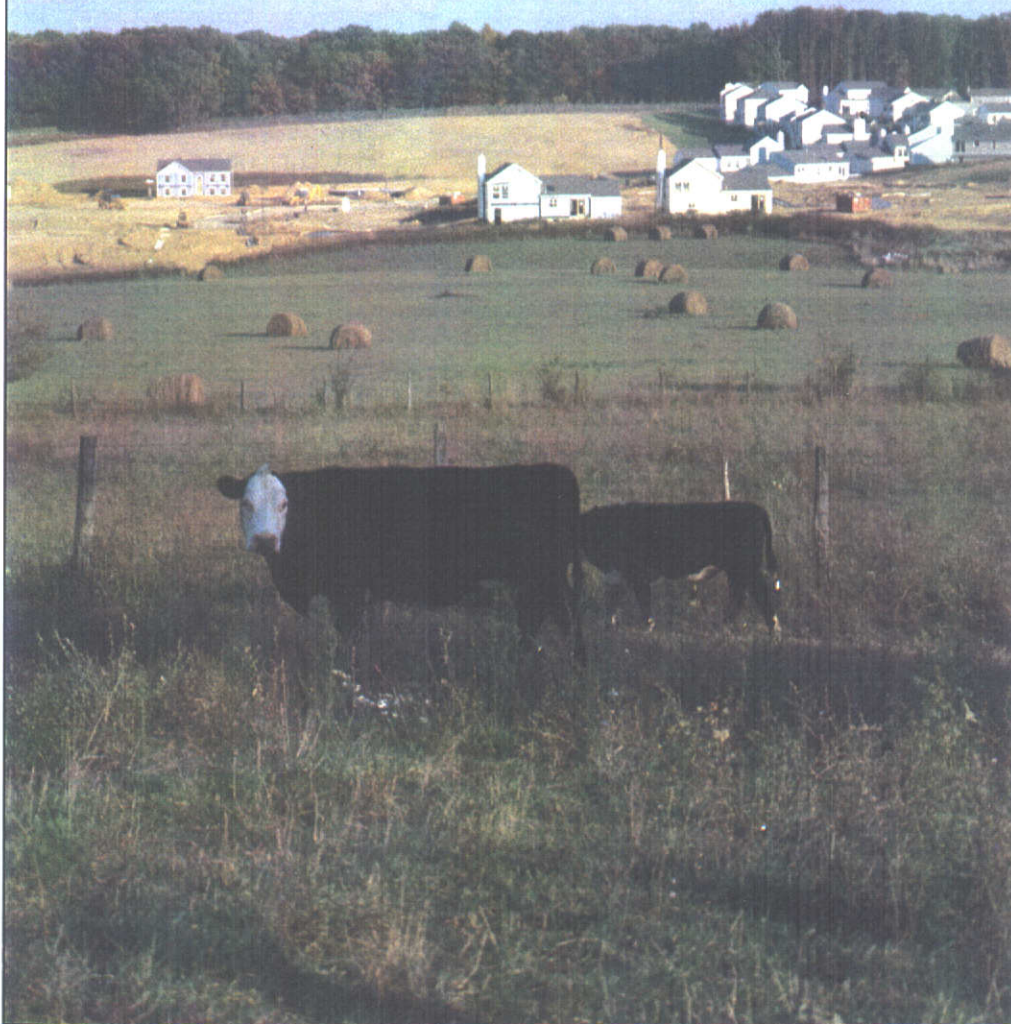


# Public education for growth management: Lessons from Wisconsin's Farmland Preservation Program

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**T**here is a growing national movement among state and local governments to manage growth creatively. More than a dozen states and hundreds of local communities have adopted one of a variety of approaches to growth management

(3,6,10,11). Because the key element of growth under local control is land-use policy, these new programs require or encourage local governments to develop comprehensive land-use plans consistent with state criteria. The importance of local public edu-

the educational materials. Agents used this information to educate local elected officials and the general public through programs tailored to the needs of individual communities. Generally, broad conceptual information was provided at public meetings, with more detailed information provided later on a one-on-one basis. Agents agreed that the most important aspect of their educational effort was personal contact.

**(4) A policy program that clearly facilitates local control increases receptivity to public education about the program or issue.**

In spite of national trends in the 1970s toward more centralized land use policies, all but one agent indicated a trend in their local community toward less government involvement (4, 12). Politically conservative rural citizens are likely to be suspicious of additional government influence of any kind. With a seemingly pervasive distrust for the state in issues concerning land use and private property rights, local initiatives and local control are crucial to the success of an educational effort.

To increase the likelihood of success for growth management education, efforts should respond to local, grassroots concerns and seek to place decision making and administration at the local or county level. Education regarding problems and opportunities related to local growth, including both negative and positive social and economic externalities, will be important in increasing awareness of the issues.

**(5) Individual educators must be aware that some actions may be perceived as advocating rather than educating. When educators are perceived as advocates, especially of a controversial issue, conditions exist for them to lose effectiveness by becoming alienated from their community.**

Educators must have a good feel for what various publics will perceive as advocacy. This was lacking in the farmland preservation education effort in situations where county-based agents were perceived as advocates of the program. Agents who fell into advocacy roles did so for a variety of reasons; one felt pressured into advocating by his committee's desire to have a large number of signups, another strayed into advocacy when he pushed the program too hard; others believed they were perceived as advocates simply because

they did not invite "non-advocates" to speak at local meetings where public agency representatives described the program.

Public perceptions of what constitutes advocacy include many things that cannot be controlled by an educator, including interpretations of information based on past personal experiences. It is crucial that the educator understand as clearly as possible where the boundaries between objectivity and advocacy are likely to be perceived. For example, encouraging a community to determine its own future may be acceptable; encouraging use of specific growth management tools may not.

**(6) Potentially controversial subjects such as growth management require process skills training for educators in areas including communication, social psychology and conflict management.**

There was general agreement that Extension provided very good training for agents on the substance of the program. Some agents' experiences, however, illustrated the dangers of not knowing enough about the audiences to whom the policy information was targeted: some pushed information for which there was no perceived need, pushed too hard or too fast, and ran up against unknown opponents. Education efforts might have been more successful if Extension had provided better or more information to agents, especially new agents, on the process of education in high controversial programs.

Process training for growth management education should be considered in areas such as the following: communication strategies (e.g., how information is sent and received and potential causes of interference with the message); social psychological theories about attitudes, personalities and public opinion (e.g., how attitudes are formed and change and predictors of behavior); and consensus building and alternative dispute resolution techniques, (e.g., whether a "win-win" situation is possible and how to achieve it).

**(7) Sufficient and explicit administrative and financial support for local public education is essential. Higher levels must be willing to back up local educators as they extend themselves in the growth management area.**

The farmland preservation program ill