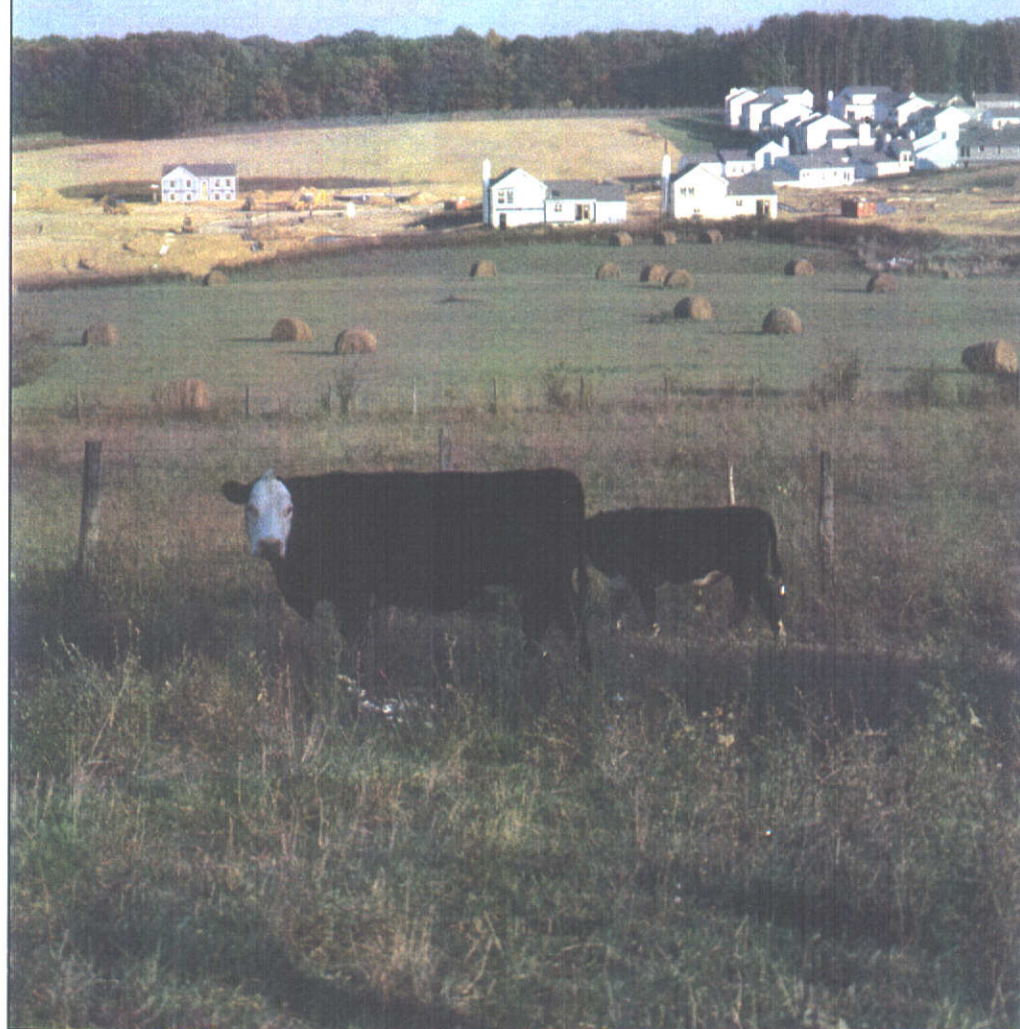


# Public education for growth management: Lessons from Wisconsin's Farmland Preservation Program

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There 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-



cation and involvement in such efforts is increasingly evident; many decisions made in the past by trained planning professionals are today made with extensive citizen involvement, by a citizenry increasingly knowledgeable about the issues (8). In a recent national survey, for example, the local growth management approaches which were self-assessed as highly effective included strong community outreach and education as key factors in their success (11).

### **UW-Extension's land-use planning education efforts**

University of Wisconsin Cooperative Extension has been active in public education for land-use planning and natural resource management throughout this century. Its most recent period of intensive involvement in land-use planning was in the 1970s, when efforts centered around the newly passed state program for farmland preservation (7,2). In 1991, one of the key issues that emerged from an Extension strategic planning process was the need to renew efforts in public education around land-use planning and to begin working in the area of growth management (14).

To help guide development of this new educational programming, Extension undertook an evaluation of its public education efforts for farmland preservation (9). Farmland preservation was chosen for several reasons. For example, both farmland preservation and growth management are land-use policy issues related to population growth pressures. Also, both issues can become highly controversial, because they involve fundamental values and perceptions about private property rights, quality of life, community character, how change should be controlled, and who should control it. Overall, the farmland preservation education initiative was widely viewed as a major success for Extension, although this success varied at the local level. This paper reports the results of this evaluation and the lessons that can be learned for public education for growth management.

In 1992, 18 semi-structured interviews were conducted with Extension county-based agents and campus-based specialists, state agency personnel and others instrumental in the educational efforts for the farmland preservation program. Interviewees included personnel from areas where growth management concerns had been identified as immediately relevant, individuals involved in both successful and unsuccessful local farmland preservation educational efforts, and those who had expressed reservation about Extension's decision to provide programming in growth management.

### **Strengths and weaknesses of the farmland preservation education program**

County-based agents' own definitions of an effective program provided the criteria for evaluation of the farmland preservation education effort. Agents identified the three most important elements in an effective public policy education program as (a) relevance to real or perceived needs, (b) presentation of accurate and objective information, and (c) adoption of a politically neutral stance by the educator. The first two criteria illustrate the strengths of the farmland preservation program education effort; the third, its weaknesses.

Farmland owners had a need to learn about farmland preservation issues, especially about the details of how to qualify for state tax benefits. Citizen interest in the mechanics of the farmland preservation program, therefore, was one of the primary reasons agents became involved in the education effort. To some extent, the initial complexity of the program and the need for assistance in qualifying for its benefits greatly helped in establishing a public education role for Extension.

The second strength, the provision of accurate and objective information, was evident by the strong emphasis agents put on the value of the research base provided by campus-based specialists and others. Data on rates of farmland conversion to non-farm uses, projections on market pressures on farmland, and detailed analysis on the potential impacts of entering into the program increased greatly the credibility of individual educators and the education effort.

The "politically neutral" criterion was the most difficult to achieve, in part because the farmland preservation program itself was so highly charged politically. The main problems stemmed from three interrelated phenomena: complexity of the policy program (often just to explain adequately gave the appearance that the educator was "pushing" the program), general citizen opposition to government involvement in the restriction of private property rights, and educators who were perceived as advocates or were, in fact, advocates of the program.

When educators were asked what they would do differently based on their experiences, most indicated they would provide for more broad-based involvement of local citizens, officials and organizations on general issues, rather than focusing on the particular legislative program, and would be more careful not to stray into an advocacy role.



## **Lessons for public education for growth management**

The lessons learned by evaluating the farmland preservation education effort support existing knowledge and procedures of public education, address ongoing issues, and suggest new directions for public education efforts.

### **(1) Public education is successful when it responds to a real or perceived need.**

**Education of this type cannot be pushed upon citizens and communities that do not believe they need it.**

An important factor in the local context of the farmland preservation education effort in the early 1970s was that the general public was aware of the problem of disappearing farmland and wanted to find solutions. Urban sprawl and its impact on farmland and rural communities had been on the national agenda for several years, as evidenced by its coverage in the popular media. As expected, there was substantial interest in learning about the farmland preservation program among citizens who might be affected by the program personally. Their salient interest was one of the main reasons county-based Extension agents became involved in the educational effort. Passage of the Farmland Preservation Act in 1977 then provided a "hook" on which to hang a full-blown public education effort.

Similarly, a hook has to be found for growth management education. Where there is no legislated growth management program, public need for information on the social and economic externalities, or spillover effects, associated with unmanaged growth in part could provide that hook. Early educational efforts would increase awareness of these issues among those potentially affected and establish need for education on problems, opportunities and options for limiting sprawl and its associated costs. The same desire for higher quality lifestyle that prompted urban sprawl following World War II can now be a rallying point for managing growth. By highlighting the opportunities for quality living, educators in virtually every community would have some kind of local angle. For example, quality of life, drinking water quality, wildlife, and scenic vistas all are land-use issues related to growth, and all are issues the public may perceive a need to learn about.

### **(2) In order to facilitate education, educators need to know their communities well, and identify and work with supporters and opponents of the substantive issue early in the education effort.**

Government involvement in private property rights was clearly the "hottest" topic in the farmland preservation education effort. In some areas there were small but vocal groups who vigorously opposed the program because of fundamental objections to government involvement in property rights issues. These groups often disrupted public education meetings, charging that the farmland preservation program was a communist plot to gain control of private property. Some agents were caught unaware of the strength and dedication of these organizations, and their educational efforts were hampered as a result. More community analysis prior to beginning the education program would have helped these agents better understand the wants and needs of community members and the normal pace of change within the community. During this period of political homework, educators must identify opponents as well as supporters, and include both in early education efforts.

While some problems might be avoided with good stakeholder identification and other preliminary fact-finding and consensus-building efforts, it is important to note that value differences are a basic source of social conflict. When two or more parties are diametrically opposed in their goals or means, it is difficult or impossible for the desired values of both to be realized (1). This is increasingly evident as environmentalists and members of the so-called "wise use" movement lock horns over private and public rights in land-use issues.

### **(3) The availability of accurate, objective information is critical to the credibility of the education effort.**

One of the reasons farmland preservation education was successful was that it was based on accurate and objective research on issues such as trends and pressures in land-use changes and farmland-owner tax burdens. Because of national concerns about farmland loss, a large amount of data was available on farmland use relative to other land use or environmental issues. This information provided the foundation for many of



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 and 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-



trated the importance of a demonstrated commitment by the state. Agents agreed that Extension program planning committee support was key to implementation of the program, especially in communities where the topic was particularly contentious. This support was critical because it justified involvement in a controversial project requiring large amounts of time for educational efforts. The farmland preservation program education effort was complex in part because the program has two goals: tax relief for farmers and land use planning to preserve farmland. Education efforts were complicated by this dual purpose, and the complications were exacerbated because each of the two elements is in itself complicated. Agent efforts to inform and to correct misunderstandings were time consuming and, as in any public policy education effort, the amount of time devoted to the effort could have been construed as advocating the program. It appears that the "hotter" the topic, the greater the need to justify educator involvement and the more crucial the support. A growth management program would surely be similarly time consuming and require extensive administrative support.

The financial resources committed by the state were very important to the success of the farmland preservation education effort both symbolically and from a practical standpoint. A unique element of the program is that the state provided grants as incentives for local governments to adopt agricultural preservation plans and exclusive agricultural zoning ordinances. These state funds made possible the only county-wide planning a few counties have ever done. The planning process was especially important because citizen education and involvement was built in, providing education that definitely did not advocate the farmland preservation program.

Because financial support for planning and mapping played such an important role in farmland preservation education, its role in the emerging growth management education effort must be carefully assessed. Apparently many states understand this; a recent comparison of eight state-sponsored growth management programs indicated that all but one state provided funding for planning assistance, generally in the form of grants (6).

**(8) Locally elected officials are the key constituency for public education, and are among the most difficult to reach if there is community controversy about the issue.**

Local elected officials carried the most influence with their communities and were often key to the success of educational efforts. This finding supports the focus that Extension already places on the education of these individuals. However, while local elected officials wielded the most influence in determining responsiveness to educational efforts, ironically, their support often came only behind the scenes. County agents believed this was largely because officials did not want to be perceived as advocates of the program while there were conflicting opinions about it in their community. This is consistent with early studies that indicate that local policy makers are likely to sympathize with those who stress the impact of negative externalities in development and favor broader review of land use decisions, but that they will be constrained by apprehensions about public reaction (5). Therefore, their support of growth management is less likely to happen if the topic is highly contentious in the community and more likely to happen if there is a strong and successful consensus-building effort for it at the local level.

**(9) These issues require long-term education efforts, and will not respond well to demands for short-term results.**

The process of diffusing information and adopting new ideas involves many stages and must be allowed to take place over time (13). The high rate of withdrawal of farmland from agricultural uses during the 1970s not only captured public attention but also created a near-crisis mentality in some areas. In response, some agents moved too quickly and the public was not allowed sufficient time to digest information and make decisions at a "normal" pace. Long-term education efforts proved the most successful. One agent who was very successful in building consensus for the farmland preservation program described land-use planning and policy as an evolutionary process where planning efforts during the farmland preservation era were simply more focused than at other times. Repetition was key to success for this agent, who discussed farmland preservation at more than 550 meetings over a seven-year period.

## Conclusion

The value of public education in growth management issues becomes increasingly clear as more and more state and local governments wrestle with land-use planning and other issues related to growth. Wisconsin



sin's experiences with farmland preservation education suggest several factors that may increase the likelihood of a successful education effort in growth management.

*The process of educating is as important as the substance of the education program.* The educator should conduct a community analysis prior to beginning an education effort. The information gained from this exercise will enable the educator to respond better to the real needs and, often more importantly, to the perceived needs of the community. The political homework exercise will also identify supporters and detractors, both of whom should be included from the beginning to increase the possibility for building consensus. Community consensus on an issue will, in turn, increase the likelihood of gaining visible support from the most critical key players — local officials. Critical process skills include an understanding of basic communication models, attitude and behavior theories and conflict resolution techniques.

*Be aware of the indistinct boundary between educating and advocating.* This line will vary with each individual, but the educator who steps over it, intentionally or unintentionally, risks losing credibility and thus, effectiveness, for the issue at hand and possibly for future issues. This is especially important in controversial issues. One of the most critical means for "educating without advocating" is use of educational materials that are based on strong research-based information. If this information is not already available, financial and administrative support from higher levels will be especially important in generating it.

*Emphasize local elements of control.* To encourage greater receptiveness to educational programs, growth management efforts should respond to local grassroots concerns and strive to place decision making and administration at the local or county level. Emphasis of the local dimensions of the issue may not only lessen resistance, but also increase feelings of ownership in the program.

Demonstrated commitment from appropriate administrative levels is critical to the success of the educational efforts. The more controversial the issue, the more critical it is that local educators have the demonstrated support of higher level administrative officials. Higher-level support justifies the educator's involvement, reducing the possibility that he or she will be perceived as an advocate. Financial support is extremely valuable not only for the obvious benefit of providing planning and other assistance, but because it is a strong symbol of institutional commitment. At the community level, visible support from local officials can "make or break"

a program since they are often the most influential members of a community.

*Educators must plan to be in it for the long haul.* Growth management issues are multifaceted, often involve new ways of thinking and are controversial. Education in this area, therefore, requires long-term commitment. Education and consensus-building efforts over a long period of time increase the likelihood that a community will be successful in determining its own future.

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