



CHEBOYGAN COUNTY MASTER PLAN

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Cheboygan County Master Plan Special Topics Meeting Summary

AGRICULTURE & FARMING

The Cheboygan County Planning Commission invited stakeholders in the areas of farming and forestry to a discussion on the future of farming in Cheboygan County. The meeting took place on Tuesday, January 24th at 7 PM at the Cheboygan County Building, Board of Commissioners Room.

Stakeholders who were invited to the meeting were representatives of: Farm Bureau, Individual Farmers, MSU Extension, Northern Lakes Economic Alliance (NLEA), Michigan Forests Association. Those who attended: Ann Chastain, Bill Beethem, Keith Martell, Dave Wellman, Matthew Bonnett, Carl Reimann, Steve Crusoe, John Wahnke, Wendy Wieland. Planning Commissioners who attended were Stuart Bartlett, Mike Kavanaugh, Harold Borowicz, and Chuck Freese. County staff in attendance were Steve Schnell and Scott McNeil.

Format of the Meeting

In the Master Plan visioning sessions people commented that farming needs more attention by the community in the form of more understanding of the needs of farming, economic development efforts and more appropriate land use measures. This was reflected in the comments at the Planning Commission meeting following the Visioning Sessions.

The discussion for the evening was framed with these questions:

1. What are the characteristics of successful farms?
2. What keeps us from having more successful farms?
3. What are various agricultural land protection measures that might be useful here?
4. Showing a map of **existing** agricultural areas in the county:
Are these the areas where **agricultural land protection measures** should be applied?
Are there other areas that should be designated agricultural area to ensure appropriate land use measures?
5. What is the biggest threat to our farmland?
6. How does the purchase or transfer of development rights help protect agricultural land?
7. What are the options to fund this initiative? Should county tax dollars be used?

Summary of discussion

The following is a summary of the comments received by the stakeholders.

What are the characteristics of successful farms?

Initial comments stressed the importance of farms in any community and that we absolutely need to do everything we can to keep farming as a viable enterprise in the community.

There are many factors that impact farms. Diversity of product line is important. Therefore, there is a need to understand the market before a farmer puts any particular crop into production. The farmer needs to be able to change course quickly and regulations for farming operations must be appropriate for all types of farming.

Successful farms aren't necessarily dependent on their size. A farm can have grow a successful crop on 1 acre whereas other crops may need many more acres. Ability to put farmland back into production after being fallow is very costly but very important.

Farms must be able to withstand development pressures and there needs to remain a sufficient supply of large tracts of land for farming. The serious danger to farming is that no land is going from residential development use back to farming. Once land is developed to something other than farming, it is not returning to farming use.

Local food movements help reduce transportation costs, increase residents understanding of local farming and the food chain. Integration of farmers, farming, and all aspects of the food chain must be understood and valued by the local community to keep farming successful.

Tax incentives that share the cost of providing farming are important. This is a method of recognizing the public good that is provided by having farmers in the local community. Tax incentives through the Michigan Department of Agriculture (MDA) and the State of Michigan are currently very important.

Along with government incentives, there are increasing government regulations. Understanding how to comply with those regulations in the most efficient and cost effective way is very important.

Successful farms require adequate flow of capital through loans and income. Farmers need access to market information and a knowledge of how to take advantage of the growing demand for food. Also, successful farms create very little waste by using all output from the farm as a sellable product.

Farmers need to maximize the use of the very expensive equipment. Many tractors cost more than \$100,000 not including attachments. These could be shared with others since they are not used for parts of the year.

Farms that are run by families are often more successful since there are few alternative methods for youth to get involved in farming. Comments were also made that youth today are not being raised with the work ethic that is required for successful farming.

What keeps us from having more successful farms?

In Cheboygan County, the factors that influence this market and create a challenge to creating successful farms here are:

- Weather challenges and the ability to overcome severe weather.
- High cost of transportation due to a lack of rail or shipping.

- Fewer larger farms in this area do not allow for farmers to take advantage of the economies of scale that are afforded other areas where there are many large farms. For example, the very high cost of each piece of necessary equipment cannot be shared with other farmers.
- Bovine TB-free certification is expensive for smaller farmers. Going without certification results in approximately 2/3rd reduction in value of cattle at auction.
- People demand healthy produce that also looks perfect. Reality is that healthier produce with less processing does not look as good on the shelf and is less attractive to some shoppers.
- The child labor law changes that do not allow people under the age of 18 to work farm machinery make sustainable family farms impossible.
- EPA regulations regarding dust and particulate pollution pose threats to efficient farming.
- There is a lack of understanding by local communities of the importance and value to farming. Farming needs to be recognized by the community as critical to a community's health.
- There is a lack of understanding of the value of timber resulting in many timber stand owners getting less than they should for their timber harvest.
- There is a need for a forester working in the county or at least the region.
- The youth of the community need to be taught basics of farming, instruction on natural resources, and land production sciences.
- There is a lack of funding for county-based support for agriculture.

What agricultural land protection measures might be useful here?

All agreed that the tax incentives currently offered, at a minimum, are necessary to support farming. Public Act 378, the Qualified Forest Act and the PA 237 for Qualified Agricultural Exemption are very important to protect agricultural land in Michigan.

Some stakeholders in attendance mentioned the possibility of providing conservation easements that prohibits future development on the land and brings income to the farmland owner.

Since there is no money available currently for the purchase of development rights by the state, the stakeholders suggested that Transferable Development Rights might be the best option for this county. More exploration on how this would happen would take some time but may be worth exploring, it was said. But the stakeholders emphasized that conversion of agricultural land to residential use should not be made easy with local regulations. In fact, incentives should be explored that aid in combining smaller parcels into larger, farmable parcels.

Some discussion focused on providing more options for farmers to use their land such as wind turbine installation and gas pipeline and drilling options. Both of these would provide additional and steady income for farmers to support their agricultural operations. It was mentioned that wind and gas should be viewed by the community as crops that these farmers can produce and corresponding regulations should seek to recognize these as viable crops.

What is the biggest threat to our farmland?

The stakeholders mentioned that tax laws and government regulations are the biggest threat, citing as examples the child labor laws, restrictions on wind turbine and gas-related facility installations.

It was also discussed that the youth of today are not well prepared for the lifestyle that is required to do successful farming. Not only do they not have the work ethic required, they will not be able to afford the investment and unstable returns on that investment. The land they would need to farm is too expensive to acquire and too difficult to finance. It was reiterated that family farms are of utmost importance.

Small scale production of niche agricultural products could be very viable and must be accommodated in local land use laws.

Transportation options for large scale farms such as rail and deepwater port access would assist in growing local farming viability. There is also a need for local sawmills to handle the timber production.

Would Purchase of Development Rights (PDR) or Transfer of Development Rights (TDR) be feasible in our County?

Those in attendance believed that a TDR program would be the feasible option in this area but recognize that this would take a lot of study and consideration. It was mentioned that a TDR program funded by the developer of property would be most feasible. The questions to study would be where to and where from would this transfer occur. This meeting did not get into that topic.

Are there areas where agricultural land protection measures should be applied such as areas with larger existing tracts of land?

The consensus was that there should be no additional land use regulations that required large minimum lot sizes should be implemented. They cited the importance of leaving land use regulations flexible in agricultural areas to accommodate small lot farming of niche-market produce and large lot farming operations. An increase of minimum lot size to protect farming operations would have more of a negative impact on farming.

Other Comments

Other questions and comments that came up during the meeting that need more thought and attention were noted by the facilitator.

- How do people in the county take advantage of new markets that impact land production such as timber products and the need for more timber stands?
- How do we make sure landowners understand that conservation easements prevent future sales of property?
- How do we mitigate the taxation issues specific to farmland that arise when property is sold and the taxable value is uncapped?
- How do we share the cost of viewshed protection with the general public that benefits from this viewshed?

- Make sure that land use laws do not dictate how to use large parcels of farmable land.
- How do we educate the public on meeting their “wants” while understanding the impacts of their choices regarding impact on farm land and farming?
- Improve the land use regulations for wind turbines, gas & oil drilling, and oil pipeline development insofar as how these could support farmers’ income.
- Recognize and take advantage of the knowledge that timber harvest has very significant value and income potential for land owners.

Land Use Implications

Obviously no single organization at any government level could address and resolve the issues raised at this meeting. This raised awareness of their concerns and established communications with the farming community. For the Cheboygan County Master Plan, the land use implications of what was discuss are most important to highlight. The following land use matters will be suggested as land use goals in the Cheboygan County Master Plan:

- **Do not increase minimum required lot sizes to protect large farms.** Use incentives to keep land in agricultural uses and research Transferable Development Rights (TDR) programs.
- **Increase land area in Future Land Use map determined to be Agriculture and decrease area for Rural Character Country Living.** Deemphasize hobby farms, recognize need for actual working farms of all sizes and communicate this appropriately in the Master Plan and Future Land Use map.
- **Revisit certain aspects of wind turbine, gas and oil regulations to address farmers’ needs.** This could include reviewing regulations on minimum lot sizes, possibly allowing for neighboring lots to be considered one zoning lot for proposed projects. Requirements of the permit application itself could be eased by providing samples or suggesting educational institutions or non-profits who may be able to assist with required environmental studies.
- **Provide for production of niche agricultural crops in more areas.** This requires constant research by land use planners and ability to anticipate new agricultural practices that may require appropriate accommodations in land use laws. Acknowledge in land use laws the importance and appropriateness of agri-tourism operations and the many associated activities, small farm markets, and farm product sales on the farm where it is produced.
- **Provide for transportation choices that include modes for moving large quantities of agricultural product in an efficient and cost-effective manner.** Rail and deepwater ports can increase efficiency and income for farmers by broadening their viable market area.
- **Make appropriate land use accommodations for forestland and timber production including large timber stands, sawmills, and lumber grading services.** A county forester and/or lumber grader could assist in landowner knowledge of the value of timber stands and increase the market area for local sawmill production.
- **Recognize that the Master Plan can be a method of raising the awareness of importance of farming in the community. When considering land use law changes, consider the bigger picture which is the value to the community of farming.**