

Certification of County Agricultural Land Preservation Programs
Re-Certification Request – Cecil County
(Summary of Certification Letter dated January 9, 2003)

The Maryland Department of Planning and the Maryland Agricultural Land Preservation Foundation would like to thank you for submitting Cecil County's 2002 annual report for the Agricultural Certification Program. The County's report also served as its application for recertification. We are pleased to say that the County's agricultural land preservation program has been recertified for the period from July 1, 2003 through June 30, 2005. However, please note our concerns about the long-term prospects for farmland preservation in the County.

Cecil County's annual report indicated that its farmland preservation program continues to make strides:

- Over 1,147 acres of easements were acquired by MALPF and 1,164 through Rural Legacy. The pace of easement acquisition has expanded rapidly in the County.
- The rate of land preservation far exceeded the rate of conversion, both for the year and for the past decade.
- The County has committed \$50,000 in general funds to MALPF matching in FY 2002 and will again in FY 2003. The County also received a federal farmland protection grant.
- The rate of land conversion declined by almost half from the spike of 2001.
- A new TDR program is being drafted. It should help to direct growth to the growth areas, as should the new Smart Codes that are being developed and the upcoming revisions to the sewer and water plan.

Two matters raised in the FY 2002 report concern us in particular:

- Changing the easement prioritization formula for the reasons you cited makes sense, and, as your map demonstrates, has resulted in new clusters of easements. However, we wonder if the pace of easement acquisition and rate of farmland conversion will allow these concentrations to coalesce into large contiguous areas of preserved land, which would support the County's goals for agriculture. We see six discrete concentrations of easements that are all worthy of attention: a wide semi-circle below Rising Sun, the Fair Hill Rural Legacy area, the peninsula between the North East and Elk Rivers, the area south of the C & D Canal, the concentration north of Cecilton, and the Sassafras Rural Legacy Area. Does the County intend to meet its 55,000-acre goal in such a dispersed fashion? If so, how will such a preservation pattern support the County's goals for agriculture?
- The rate of land conversion is still relatively high, and 39% of approved building lots were in the Rural Conservation and Resource Protection districts during the certification period. In the next two certification reports, we would hope to see a decline in both these figures, or at least an evaluation of how the program improvements summarized above will effect a decline in the future.

An ongoing concern of ours is how well the County's Priority Funding Areas are absorbing growth. We know that providing adequate infrastructure for growth has been a struggle. Because it is also fundamental to the success of County preservation goals, we suggest that you address the issue directly in the second annual report of the next certification period.

The County, at present, is performing better than the State average on a number of measures we use to gauge the effectiveness of preservation programs; specifically, these measures are the rate of fragmentation of agricultural land (the number of small parcels per 1,000 acres of agriculturally zoned land), the percentage of agriculturally zoned land lost to development in the recent decade 1990-2000, and the percentage of unprotected agriculturally zoned land that remains in large parcels. On the other hand, it doesn't fare well compared to other Eastern Shore Counties, and its percentage of agriculturally zoned land converted 1990-2000 is higher than the metropolitan Counties of Baltimore, Prince George's Montgomery,

and Frederick, which have been subject to higher development pressure, and for a longer time. Cecil's easement costs per acre are relatively high, and the percentage of agriculturally-zoned land already protected is fairly low.

These data, in conjunction with your own findings, indicate some specific needs if the County's preservation program is going to be likely to succeed in the long-term. Specifically, given the cost and pace of acquiring easements, the County's land use tools must do a better job of holding the line against development. As development pressure increases, the degree to which Cecil uses its zoning and subdivision processes to control subdivision and development will perhaps be the major measure of the County's support for the investments made in preservation. In your next certification report, please address the matter of how the County will implement these priorities for improving its preservation program. Such a program improvement strategy is an integral part of the requirements for certification.