

Certification of County Agricultural Land Preservation Programs
Re-Certification Request – Cecil County
(Summary of Certification Letter dated April 15, 2005)

The Maryland Department of Planning and the Maryland Agricultural Land Preservation Foundation would like to thank you for submitting Cecil County's FY 2004 annual report for the Agricultural Certification Program. We are pleased to say that the County's agricultural land preservation program has been recertified for the period from July 1, 2005 through June 30, 2007.

However, we still have serious concerns about the long-term prospects for farmland preservation in the County and the ability of the County program to remain certified in the future. Subdivision and development continue to accelerate in the County's conservation zoning districts (RPD and RCD), and the County's zoning and other land use management tools have not kept pace. To continue to merit recertification as an effective program, these tools must, in conjunction with preservation tools, stabilize the rural land base and provide time for easement acquisition to achieve State and County preservation goals. Our objective is to ensure that the County program remains eligible for certification, and we would like to meet with you and other County officials to that end (discussed further below following "Major Areas of Concern").

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

- In FY 2004, MALPF acquired 913 acres of easements, and 582 acres were preserved through Rural Legacy. The pace of easement acquisition greatly exceeded the pace of rural land conversion.
- The County committed \$130,000 in general funds to MALPF and received \$397,400 in Federal farmland protection funds.
- The County has approved new PDR and TDR programs, hopefully to take effect in 2005.

Major Areas of Concern

Of greatest concern is the inability of zoning and other land-use management tools to protect preservation investments in the RPD and RCD. This may make the program ineffective over the long run, despite a possible large increase in spending for easements. The experience of Howard County illustrates what happens when a fast growing county acquires a lot of easements without protective zoning. Even a large concentration of preserved farmland can be fragmented by excessive development when the zoning allows it. In addition to skyrocketing easement costs, the residential development creates conflicts with farming and raises obstacles to the continuation of many forms of agriculture. Eventually, preservation cannot compete with development, and it becomes impossible to protect previous and continued public investment in rural and resource conservation.

The consequence is that easement farms become small clusters of publicly inaccessible open space, preserved at high public cost, surrounded by residential development, and capable of supporting only a very limited range of farm operations. These are not the goals of either the State's preservation programs or county comprehensive plans, including Cecil's. The demand for exurban development is likely to continue to rise, due to Cecil's location and access to Interstate 95, high real estate prices in the Baltimore metropolitan area, and development pressure spilling over from Delaware and Pennsylvania.

We raised these and other issues in our review of the FY 2002 certification report, but they have not been addressed and still remain concerns.

Recommendation

Clearly, the County's farmland preservation program is approaching a crossroads. We would like to ensure that the County continues to merit the benefits of certification, and would like to meet with you and the county commissioners, planning board, and agricultural advisory board to that end. At those

meetings, we would explain certification goals, eligibility criteria, and evaluation procedures; review the certification statutes of the County program; and discuss with County officials ways the County program could merit continued certification and achieve its own preservation goals, without compromising farmers' interest in their land.