

“The Other “Saints” ... Triply Blessed?” [9]

The UNO build-out analysis projects that population could double and even triple in St. Charles and St. John the Baptist parishes (see Tables 10 and 11). With only 80% of buildable land developed, St. Charles’ population would jump from 47,700 (1997 estimate) to 124,640. If all buildable land were developed, St. Charles population would more than triple to 155,800 (that is, one-third of Orleans or Jefferson parish’s current populations).

St. John’s growth would be hardly less spectacular, expanding from its current population of 42,000 (1997 estimate) to 94,575 (at 80% build-out) or 118,220 (at 100% build-out).

By contrast, with so little dry land left to develop, St. Bernard Parish’s population, at best, would grow from 66,267 residents (1997 estimate) to around 70,000. So much of St. Bernard’s 465 square miles is under water that only about 12 square miles are zoned, and less than 10,000 residents live scattered throughout the wetlands.

Though endowed with major oil and gas reserves, the Belle Chase Naval Air Station, and potential for being the “Port of the 21st Century,” Plaquemines Parish has minimal potential for new residential development.

During a visit to St. Charles Parish, I saw the only large farms I encountered in the New Orleans region. The Census of Agriculture reports that the six-parish area had 81,000 acres of farmland, which produced \$24 million in farm income in 1997. As the different parishes (in particular, St. Tammany) grapple with planning better for the future, what importance should be placed on protecting farmland from further development? (During the 1980s, 10,000 acres of the region's farmland was converted for urban development.)

An early question is to what degree farmers themselves (the landowners) want to protect their farmland rather than sub-divide it? Their land is typically a farm family's greatest asset. Selling off some lots helps farmers through hard times. As retirement age approaches, many farmers have no family members who want to continue working the family farm. Selling the farm for development (at prices several times the land's value as farmland) is many farmers' retirement plan.

Of course, from an urban perspective, farmland does more than produce food and fiber. For many urban areas, farmland implicitly is the greatest proportion of the regions' open space. However, that is a less significant factor for the New Orleans area. Lake Pontchartrain, the Mississippi River, bayous and wetlands are over half of the region's "land" area. South Louisianans are surrounded by open space (though much is not accessible to the average resident).

Nevertheless, preserving farmland is a tool that citizens and officials should evaluate in developing a comprehensive land use strategy for the New Orleans region. There are two basic ways of preserving farmland: through agricultural zoning and through purchasing farmlands' development rights.

Effective Agricultural Zoning

Requiring minimum lot sizes of one, two, five or even 10 acres for every housing unit is *not* effective agricultural zoning. That simply promotes low-density sprawl. If land prices are high, large minimum lots will result in mansions. If land is cheap, the result will be mobile homes with a lot of land.

Effective agricultural zoning is at least 25 acres for each housing unit (Montgomery County, Maryland), or 40 acres per housing unit (Baltimore County, Maryland), or 67 acres per housing unit (Oregon's Willamette Valley outside the Portland area).

Oregon has the most effective system for protecting farmland by regulation. Through state-wide planning and zoning (see page 11), Oregon has protected more acreage for exclusive farm and forest industry use than all acreage protected by donation, transfer, or purchase of development rights in all of the United States east of the Mississippi.

Development Rights

The concept of development rights arises when local zoning confers the right to subdivide for housing development on current farmland. Like sub-surface mineral rights, that development right can be donated or sold while maintaining ownership and use of the land as farmland.

In some circumstances Federal and state income and estate tax laws make donating development rights to private non-profit organizations that qualify as charitable land trusts economically attractive. By the end of 1997, there were more than 1,400 land trusts nationwide. The Nature Conservancy, for example, has protected nearly 7 million acres of natural lands.

Purchase of development rights (PDR) involves using taxpayer funds to buy development rights. The development rights are typically “retired” from the development scene. Lancaster County, the heart of Pennsylvania Dutch country, has one of the country’s largest PDR programs. With about \$1.5 million a year in county appropriations, matched by state bond funds, Lancaster County has purchased over 25,000 acres worth of development rights for about \$35 million. Such a program is feasible in Louisiana if state or local governments (or their citizens) are prepared to vote for the money.

Transfer of development rights (TDR) looks to private developers to buy the development rights from farmers to allow higher-density development in urban areas. Montgomery County, Maryland has had the country's most extensive TDR program. Under the county's agricultural zoning, a 100-acre farm can have four houses built on-site, but also retains 16 units for off-site use. Builders seeking higher-density development of urban lands negotiate with farmers to purchase their develop rights to transfer from farmland to urban sub-divisions. Over the last two decades, developers have paid over \$60 million to farmers for development rights affecting 38,000 acres. (The average cost has been about \$12,000 per development right.)

TDR can only work effectively when 1) local government rigorously controls zoning in both sending (rural) area and receiving (urban) area, and 2) when a hot housing market exists where it is more profitable for a builder to develop land more intensively. Such conditions might be created in St. Tammany Parish if the community can achieve a strong growth management plan, cutting back on sprawl, while promoting high-density development of selective areas, like residential areas around town centers and transportation nodes.

[981 words]