

WHERE DID ALL THE CORNFIELDS GO?

by Edward Dodson, Cherry Hill, NJ
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I am consistently heartened by Philadelphia Weekly's sustained attention to the problems of urban blight and urban sprawl.

For someone like me, who has been teaching and writing about these problems for twenty-five years, I sometimes feel that hardly anyone is really looking at the long-term consequences of the measures put forward to preserve our open space and make cities liveable places (once more?).

There is tremendous opportunity for high density development to resurrect our cities if only public officials, planners, builders and bankers would work together with the goal in mind of creating places where people can live, work and place in safety and comfort.

I have attended too many conferences to count where experts gather to talk about what can be done to curtail urban sprawl, yet almost none of them understand the impact of tax policy on the land market. Tax policies at the Federal, state and local level are the culprit! The only way to turn this around is to use the tax system appropriately to encourage the development of close-in land and thereby reduce the pressure on farmland and open space to be developed. As it now stands, we foster the hoarding of land by speculators by assessing vacant land only infrequently, so that the annual carrying costs to owners is so low that they can sit on land for decades while owners of improved property carry the tax burden (i.e. are penalized for actually constructing buildings and maintaining them and creating jobs and commerce). This is ludicrous, but this is what has been the norm for so long we cannot seem to shake ourselves from the grips of an overwhelmingly destructive set of policies that benefit the few at the expense of society.

Philadelphia Weekly is serving the public interest well with this type of reporting. I wonder if the newspaper would consider helping to put together a conference on how to resurrect our cities and stem the loss of our surrounding open space. The difference would be that the speakers and panelists would come not from the usual list of people who offer nothing but failed ideas but people who are working for fundamental changes that are working where they are being tried. If so, I would volunteer to assist in the planning.

For twenty-five years I have worked in real estate finance, neighborhood revitalization and affordable housing. I am also on the faculty of the Henry George School in Philadelphia, which almost alone is championing the path that will save our cities and our open land.