

Our Most Valuable Resource



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One can argue convincingly that the human mind and its ability to reason constitute our most valuable resource. There are strong arguments for identifying the energy giving source of the sun as our most valuable resource. Both air and water also occupy a place of primacy for life itself. But even air, water and sunlight could not sustain life without the most essential of all resources — our land and all its products.

Land, or the lack of it, has been a motivation shaping the destinies of nations and mankind since life, as we know it, has been recorded. It holds the minerals, metals, microbes and fossil fuels necessary for life and material wealth. It captures, stores and yields life-giving water and its essential chemical elements. It converts our wastes into useful resources. It supports and nourishes green plants, that incredible vital link to life for animals and mankind.

There is little doubt that land has been highly regarded by primitive people as well as by developed civilizations, for our recorded history is filled with conflicts between tribes and nations stemming from disputed ownership or rights to territorial areas.

Until very recently, with the advent of instant communications, rapid travel, space exploration, and the population explosion, there was a general sense that land was an unlimited resource. The population, and the land mass available to support it seemed to be in favorable balance. It could be mined, misused and despoiled without serious consequences because new and unexploited land was available elsewhere.

Now much of this fundamental resource has been carved up into public and private ownership, with little concern for its wise use or awareness of its life-giving, life-sustaining qualities. This situation has generated growing public concern, and proposals for land use planning and regulation are now on the agenda at federal, state, county and local levels. And, perhaps because of our open frontier heritage, few issues are more laden with emotion, political overtones, and potential conflict than those relating to restrictions on land use rights.

Increases in environmental concerns, population density, affluence, mobility, recreation, urban sprawl, social interaction and technology are some of the reasons for increased land use conflicts and for growing interest in land use planning and regulation. Rising demand by an affluent urban population for use based on amenity and esthetic considerations, controversy over site locations of nuclear power facilities centered on environmental and safety considerations,

and concern for our future food supply as fertile farm land continues to disappear under subdivisions, airports and shopping centers are examples of the challenge to replace market place economies with systematic planning and comprehensive land use policies.

A good deal of the recent interest in regulation stems from a new awareness of the negative impact of some land use practices on the environment and on other "quality-of-life" values. But the quality of life also includes an adequate supply of food, and until the recent food "crisis", little attention has been given to preservation of the land resources essential to our agricultural productive capacity. The annual loss of a million acres of good farm land and the proliferation of public policies and agencies regulating agricultural practices also have a negative impact on agricultural production. These results of phenomenal urban expansion and unplanned and incompatible mixes of residential, industrial, recreational and agricultural land use have already increased the costs and the difficulties of food and fiber production and diminished the possibilities for long-term intelligent use of our most productive land areas.

In a free society the problems to be faced in shaping land use policies are real, substantial, and incredibly complex. Judgements must be made to accommodate conflicting goals such as public versus private rights, conservation versus growth, and national versus local interests. There are no easy answers. In the case of agriculture, for example, there are clear cut reasons — involving humanitarianism, economics, and national purpose — for increasing our efforts to protect and enhance our productive capacity. But there are conflicting views on how this can be achieved.

An effective land use program must ensure that the beneficiaries pay for their benefits and that those penalized by controls receive compensation. Restrictions on agricultural land use reduce its market value, and urban pressures inflate land prices and tax burdens to levels unrelated to the returns of agricultural production.

Clearly, the productive potential of agricultural land cannot be preserved by zoning, moratoriums or other restrictive measures alone — the incentives and the freedom to use it effectively must also be preserved.

Agriculture's future is inextricably linked to the land use plans and policies now being shaped and if those closest to the land do not make their views known, and participate in that decision-making process, the long-run consequences for agriculture and for our most valuable resource may be painful and pervasive.