

TDR program could revitalize Vineland's downtown and preserve fourteen thousand acres

As Mayor-elect Bob Romano and incoming City Council members review Vineland's proposed Master Plan, they should make a special effort to learn more about one of the key growth management and land preservation tools being recommended by numerous residents, city planners and others.

According to the plan's Executive Summary, "for Vineland to remain an attractive and healthy place to live and work, the city must protect its natural environment and resources from degradation – that its open spaces and farmland are being consumed and compromised by land development practices that clear-cut forests, aggravate flooding, impair water quality, fragment and reduce wildlife habitat."

What happens to Vineland's green infrastructure and enormous agricultural land base is important. Much of the Wild and Scenic Maurice River and its tributaries are contained within city limits and, while large expanses of these waterways have been preserved, there remain critical gaps – especially along Menantico Creek and its branches. Not only are the river corridors themselves still vulnerable to damaging development, but so are the City's incredible forest resources, which blanket them.

While more than 23,000 acres of the City are developed, its land area is enormous - comprising over 69 square miles – including almost 10,000 acres of productive farmland as well as over 4,000 acres of critical forested watershed lands.

Although residential sprawl is rapidly undermining these resources, they are far from lost and remarkably still intact. For a city of over 58,300 people in a state which paves over more than 16,000 acres of unprotected open space each year, it is amazing that Vineland's agricultural land base has not only survived, but remains economically viable.

The future of this asset, however, depends on the City embracing new tools that not only make preservation more attractive to farmers, but the downtown more attractive to future residents.

While the county's farmland preservation program enjoys continued success in certain parts of the county, the program has historically not had the level of participation among Vineland's farmers as it has elsewhere. For example, of the 11,384 acres of farmland preserved through the county program, only 315 acres of that resides within Vineland's vast agricultural area.

The reasons for this are varied. However, if the standard tool of farmland preservation via the county's easement purchase program were enough, then far more of Vineland farms would have already been preserved.

In order to entice more of Vineland's farmers to embrace preservation, the City should follow a key recommendation made in the draft Master Plan, and aggressively pursue a Transfer of Development Rights program (TDR).

A TDR program in Vineland could do what no other growth-management and preservation tool could ever hope to accomplish – it could protect the city's massive agricultural and fragile natural resources at a landscape-level without impacting landowner equity or requiring sizeable public expenditure.

For the price of one nice house the city could effectively prevent thousands of houses from ever being built across its prime agricultural areas and forests. TDR preservation is actually funded by accommodating development pressure in those areas of a town where growth makes the most sense in terms of existing infrastructure, necessity for redevelopment and infill.

TDR is not about limiting growth potential, but about using the open market and smart growth principles to redirect it into designated growth areas, where proper planning can create highly attractive, functional and environmentally responsible development patterns.

By implementing a TDR program, Vineland could give landowners within identified preservation zones the option to voluntarily sell and retire the building rights to their land while retaining ownership and use.

In TDR, a property's buildable lots are quantified into development credits, which can then be purchased by developers for use in identified growth, or "receiving areas", allowing developers to build at a higher density or for uses not otherwise permitted by the underlying base zoning. This not only provides a greater incentive and return for their investment, but does so in a manner facilitating significant and permanent preservation elsewhere. In short, it leverages willing private capital to finance preservation.

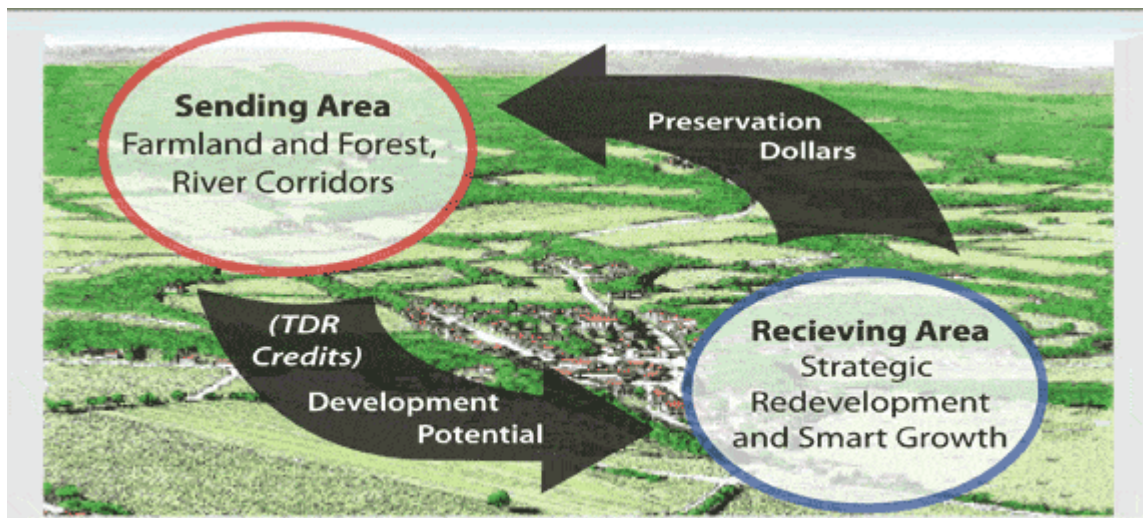
TDR credits could easily entice more landowners to preserve because TDR credits are proving more valuable than traditional state and county farmland preservation easement payments. Take Chesterfield Township in Burlington County for example. Like Vineland, Chesterfield Township has both a land base worth preserving as well as growing development pressure. In 2004, Chesterfield implemented a TDR program, which has thus far resulted in the preservation of 2,300 acres and counting. The program has been so successful that farmers have abandoned traditional farmland preservation in favor of the TDR credit program – which has now climbed above \$65,000 per credit.

TDR has proven so successful in enhancing landowner equity, preserving land and attracting smart development that even rural Hopewell Township has embarked on a TDR program. Once implemented, Hopewell's TDR program would leverage the development of 1,500 acres as a catalyst to preserving approximately 9,200 acres of farmland and areas important to the Cohansy River.

Towns like Vineland will never succeed in preserving the best of what remains unless they can make their downtowns more livable. Robert F. Kennedy Jr. recently said that "the best cure for destructive sprawl is to build cities people don't want to abandon with gravity sufficient to draw back our creeping suburbs."

TDR is a tool that can make such goals attainable, and it is one that cities like Vineland and Millville couldn't be better positioned to take advantage of – especially now that the current downturn in the housing market has provided some breathing room to take a step back and plan ahead for the next building boom.

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Vineland's 2008 Draft Master Plan Recommends Transfer of Development Rights Program