Farmland Access via Community Development: The Case of Prairie Crossing

Community development projects represent a new opportunity for farm focused entrepreneurs to gain access to land and potentially high quality markets. Increasingly across the country, there are land development projects that are incorporating significant farmland in their design.

Well within the suburban influence of the city of Chicago, Prairie Crossing (www.prairiecrossing.com) is a critically-acclaimed conservation community designed to combine responsible development, the preservation of open land and easy commuting by rail. The community offers a variety of housing options, including 359 single family homes and 36 condominiums, all designed in Midwestern vernacular architecture and built to the highest standards of energy efficiency. In addition to housing, the community includes shops and restaurants, METRA commuter rail service, K-9 Charter School, and protected open space over 60% of the site. The protected open space is a combination of recreation areas, restored native ecosystems and productive farmland.

The 125 acres of farmland includes 25 acres of pasture for horse owners and just over 100 acres of certified organic land primarily in for fresh produce. The certified land includes a commercial family farm, Sandhill Organics (www.sandhillorganics.com) on a long term lease, a business incubator for beginning farmers, the Prairie Crossing Farm Business Development Center (www.prairiecrossingfarms.com), and a small community supported Learning Farm (www.prairiecrossing.com/pc/site/organic-farm3.html). The relationship of the farm and the new community provides benefits for both the developer and the farmer. For the developer, this set aside of farmland with a successful farm business producing locally available food provides a unique market identity and creates a very significant community amenity that is able to be monetized through increased sales pace and price. For the farmer, the relationship provides affordable, secure access to land with a significant market right at the farm gate.

The project has been a catalyst for additional farmland protection on adjacent land. The Liberty Prairie Conservancy (www.libertyprairie.org) has now facilitated easements on over 5,000 acres of farmland and natural areas owned by non-farming landowners. Eventually much of the farmland will be converted to high value organic local food production, farmed by “graduates” of the FBDC.

Looking ahead, we envision the development of a dense community of small highly profitable entrepreneurs farming well within the suburban influence of Chicago.