

Farmland Restoration

By Stewart Truelsen

Who hasn't driven by a suburban shopping mall with empty stores or through a big city with abandoned warehouses, boarded-up factories and vacant office space?

Lately, a lot of foreclosed homes and half-finished condo developments also have been dumped on the market by the Great Recession.

The same cannot be said for farmland. It's hard to find anyone today who thinks we have too much farmland, or too many farms and farmers. Surplus production in some commodities occasionally occurs but nothing like the chronic surpluses of decades ago.

Farm real-estate values declined only 3.2 percent in the latest year, according to the Agriculture Department's annual report released in August. It was the first yearly decrease in farmland values in 20 years, and nothing like the declines experienced by other real estate.

Nevertheless, farmland continues to be converted to urban uses at a rate of less than 0.1 percent of U.S. farmland per year. The total loss may not seem great, but local farmland losses can be alarming and have led over the years to public support for farmland protection laws, agricultural easements and other programs.

Farmland preservation—saving the valuable farmland we have—is a familiar concept, but farmland restoration or the notion of reversing urbanization is a new idea for most folks. Yet, that's exactly what is being talked about for the city of Detroit, Mich.

A *New York Times* article referred to the idea as the “shrinking cities” movement, and several articles also have appeared in magazines proposing an urban farm concept. Ironically, the idea is reminiscent of one auto pioneer Henry Ford had in the 1920s. Ford proposed developing the South in a way so farms and manufacturing centers would co-exist.

This time around, the idea involves cities in the Rust Belt, especially Detroit. One plan has Detroit shrinking back to its core with smaller urban villages and farms radiating from it. Detroit's appeal is that it has plenty of land, more than Manhattan, Boston and San Francisco combined.

Detroit's population peaked around 1950 at 1.85 million people. Less than half that many people live there today. The median selling price for a home was just \$7,100 last summer, less than the cost of an acre of good farmland in some places.

If the idea of plowing up abandoned homes and factories for cropland seems wildly far-fetched, remember that Detroit was once a small French fort and missionary outpost. No one then could have imagined it becoming the Motor City. If this blighted city has become “a massive failure” as the *Times* suggests, then maybe it is time to change direction.

In the decades ahead, perhaps the Rust Belt will refer to fields of rusty-colored, ripe grain sorghum instead of cities with old steel plants. One thing is for certain, America needs to keep its productive agricultural land. Whatever the next new economy looks like, a high value should be placed on farmland.