

Agricultural Land Use

Agriculture is by far the largest land use category in the county and is a vital part of the regional economy. The industry has experienced significant changes over the past few decades, resulting in the consolidation of land into larger farming units. In 1964, 1,876 farms were operating in the county. By 1992, this figure had dropped to 1,262 farms. Yet this trend has not diminished the economic importance of agriculture.

The character and identity of the rural area has been lost or dramatically altered with the influx of nonfarm uses. Agricultural land in close proximity to the Sioux Falls metropolitan area has experienced pressure for conversion to residential, commercial, industrial and recreational uses. Recent trends suggest that nonfarm development is pushing even further into traditional rural areas because of an expanding regional population and the willingness of workers to commute greater distances. Another contributing factor is that people are searching for more isolated sites where scattered nonfarm development has not occurred. They are also seeking some assurance or “peace of mind” that this rural identity will not be jeopardized by others who want to move to the country. The county’s density zoning requirements will assist in preserving the rural character to the mutual benefit of the residents, farmers and local governments.

This rural development phenomenon has also made it more challenging for farmers to continue operating on the remaining land. Farmers must deal with complaints from their nonfarm neighbors ranging from livestock odors and the application of animal waste to dust from farm fields and the late night operation of equipment. As farmers implement new agricultural technologies and adjust to market conditions, conflicts with neighbors are likely to increase.

The growing nonfarm population will make it increasingly difficult for farmers to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of agricultural operations. Farming does not need a high level of public services. But such services are demanded by other residents, especially road improvements, better maintenance and repair, and faster snow removal. These services must be financed by an increase in property taxes, most notably at the township level. This has a negative impact on farmers because they are not capable of increasing income to offset the added cost of doing business.

When farm land is converted to other uses, the land is generally assessed at a higher level which tends to artificially inflate the value of surrounding agricultural land, translating into higher property taxes. The lower the profitability of farming, the greater the potential for land conversion. The immediate cash profit resulting from higher urban land values also has a powerful influence over a farmer’s decision whether to maintain the land in agricultural use.

There are some areas of the county where farming is no longer a long term option. Contributing to this trend are land use conflicts, parcels too small to support farming, constraints on implementation of new technology and economies of scale, and artificially inflated land values and urban service costs leading to higher property taxes.