

CHAPTER II: THE SETTING



It may be surprising that despite four decades of extensive urbanization in Montgomery County, much of the land in the Study Area remains essentially unchanged. Beyond the suburbs stretch the country roads and highways, bordered with operating farms and small rural settlements. Some of these country towns have their own suburban sprawl, such as Poolesville or Damascus, but many other rural communities have changed little from earlier days. The countryside reflects an important agricultural heritage of cultural, economic, and aesthetic significance to the rest of the County and the region.

Over the years, the wedge areas of Montgomery County have become highly attractive to families who find appealing the idea of living on a country estate of 5-10 acres in a home with a panoramic view of Sugarloaf Mountain, fields, or piedmont hills. Single lots and small subdivisions of custom homes are creeping along rural road frontages throughout the County. "An extensive market exists for small farms despite relatively high per acre prices. Most active farmers are thereby excluded from the market. Hence, in most instances small acreages are purchased by those with little intention of contributing to the farm product market."⁸ This type of development combined with the weakening of farm oriented services and markets, increase the pressure to further subdivide the wedge. As more people seek suburban and rural environments in Montgomery County, land prices increase beyond their use value in agriculture. The environment that was so enticing is destroyed, and the fields lie untilled, awaiting development. Meanwhile, those already living there voice a strong desire to preserve the County's rural character.

⁸ Rene Johnson, "The Consequences of No Preservation Effort," Montgomery County Office of Economic and Agricultural Development, April 1979, page 3.

This pressure seriously threatens the primary land use element of the Study Area, farmland, and creates a climate identified by the New Jersey Commission on Agriculture as the Impermanence Syndrome--the feeling by farmers that farming is doomed in their area. This psychology is seen as a key factor, perhaps more so than direct economic conditions, for the decline of agriculture in the wedge areas of Montgomery County.

The Impermanence Syndrome results from the convergence of many factors--development pressures, rising taxes, departure of support industry for stronger markets, loss of political influence, laws that inhibit necessary agricultural practices, rising labor costs in the face of urban employment opportunities, suburban neighbor nuisances, and land speculation.

The Syndrome is manifested in an agricultural community that increasingly sees no future for itself and its children; that regards eventual over-running by the suburbs as inevitable. Soon, the critical mass of farms and services necessary to sustain a viable agricultural community crumbles. The unique characteristics inherent in the a viable agricultural community is eroded. General store and farm-oriented hardware and machinery dealers decline as development encroaches. In Dickerson, for example, the past 20 years have seen the loss of a large farm supply store, a gas station, and a market. Where once there were four retail establishments, there is now one with a new antique store recently added. Similar stories could be told about Beallsville and Barnesville.

During the next decade, towns such as Boyds, Dickerson, and Hyattstown will need to fight strongly to retain their community identity as large lot subdivisions continue their growth. The County is at a point where hard decisions must be made if commercial agriculture and rural communities are to survive. Although 40 percent of the land in the County remains in farmland, pivotal decisions must be made soon if appreciable farm acreage is to be preserved and the Impermanence Syndrome is changed into a Permanence Syndrome.