

# INTRODUCTION

Lancaster County's extensive, productive agricultural soils, widely considered to support some of the best non-irrigated farmland in the world, are perhaps its most valuable natural resource. More than 50% of the County has soils classified as prime farmland by the U.S. Natural Resources Conservation Service and 75% is classified as prime farmland or soils of statewide importance. These soils provide the basis for the County's agricultural industry and rural way of life. At the same time, the soil qualities that define prime farmland are also highly suitable for development, creating an important growth management issue (*Balance*, the Growth Management Element of the Lancaster County Comprehensive Plan). These productive soils, combined with our temperate climate, cultural heritage, market proximity, work ethic, stewardship, and infrastructure for agriculture, have allowed the agricultural economy and farming as a way of life to thrive in Lancaster County.

Lancaster County's agricultural infrastructure multiplies the value of farm products to our local economy. A network of services, from feed sales, to fertilizer and crop care, to food manufacturing and distribution, to custom planting and harvesting and farm machinery sales, boost every \$1 of farm product by four times, resulting in a \$4 billion annual economic impact. Our farmland and the industry it supports provide more than 50,000 jobs (one of every five), and as the heart of Pennsylvania Dutch Country, Lancaster County's farmland and farming culture are the primary reasons that 7 million tourists spend \$1.6 billion dollars here each year.

Lancaster County is one of the leading counties in the nation in direct sales of farm products to consumers. Our farmers provide a fresh, reliable, safe and secure food source for our residents and our neighbors all along the East Coast. Our farmland absorbs rainfall to recharge underground aquifers for water supplies and provides habitat for a variety of wildlife. Our farmland is an irreplaceable natural resource that provides a unique sense of place and contributes to a high quality of life and a community that is attractive to lifelong as well as new residents.

Lancaster County's high quality of life makes it a desirable place to live, and much of the development to meet the demands of an expanding population has occurred on what was once our best farmland. This conversion of farmland has occurred most extensively in the fertile limestone valley surrounding Lancaster City, but has also occurred in scattered development across the County. Lancaster County's population has grown to 519,445 residents, and to accommodate these additional residents, townships and boroughs have established Designated Growth Areas; areas appropriate for future development that include a core, such as a city, borough or village, and existing or planned public infrastructure services with capacity to support additional development. To reduce sprawl, maintain and enhance agriculture, and protect soil in areas best suited for agricultural uses, 39 townships have adopted some form of effective agricultural zoning ordinance, covering almost 325,000 acres in the County.

In 1980 the Lancaster County Board of Commissioners appointed a nine member Agricultural Preserve Board to develop and administer a voluntary farmland preservation program to preserve selected areas of the County's best agricultural land under the authorization of the Pennsylvania Open Spaces Act. On May 10, 1989, the County Commissioners re-established the Agricultural Preserve Board to administer a program to purchase agricultural conservation easements and advise the County Commissioners on other matters involving farmland preservation, according to the provisions of the Pennsylvania Agricultural Area Security Law.