

TOO FEW UNDERSTAND REFORMS NEEDED

Conservation lobby must not ignore key battle over land tax

A RECENT conference in Baltimore – “Land Use or Abuse?” – sponsored by Maryland’s Department of State Planning (DSP) revealed the current confusion over conservation and the desperate need for new economic insights.

Some facts. Maryland’s total area is 6.3m acres. From 1970 to 1980 its population grew 7.5%. Rural land conversion increased twice as rapidly, 16.5%. During the decade, development (90% residential, 10% commercial-industrial) wiped out 52,220 acres of farms, 45,900 of forests, 1,380 of wetlands.

Three dozen speakers – city and state officials, planners, developers, consultants, professors – focused less on how to halt runaway growth than on how to accommodate it. They offered these “solutions”: first, fencing out development where it is not wanted; second, paying people to develop where it is wanted; third, accepting growth in new forms.

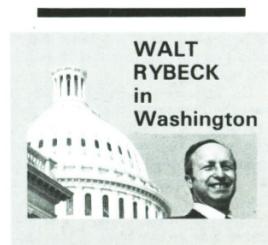
FENCING out growth involves regulations, such as rural zones to prohibit farmland invasion, or acreage limits allowing no more than one house per five acres, for example.

The second way amounts to bribing folk to do what officials want. Transferrable development rights, compensation and bonus zones are among the gimmicks for paying off landholders and developers to build one place instead of another.

The third approach gives planners and officials a bigger hand in shaping the new growth. They want it more compact, with housing clusters, more parks, fewer roads, nicer amenities.

The fences do not hold. Acreage limits magnify land waste. Nobody adds up the public expense of the pay-offs. And this era of designer jeans gives us designer growth which spawns designer sprawl. In sum, the costs and red tape of these “solutions” are pushing leapfrog growth farther out than before.

The DSP blames *development* for “unnecessarily threatening” the state’s land resources. Developers,



who want more profit per unit of land, blame planners and their regulations. Planners blame citizens, especially those who displaced the last farms and who now want to halt growth. Citizens tend to blame developers.

DSP Secretary Constance Lieder pointed to vacant land in existing communities as an opportunity “to redirect growth and reduce sprawl”. But she eroded this point by claiming there is “a shortage of developable land with infrastructure in place”.

Actually, cities and towns have vast areas well-served with schools, streets, sewer and water facilities – enough to accommodate virtually all housing, commerce and industry for generations without destroying one more farm or woodland.

Vacant private land comprised 22% of the area of our 130 largest cities, the Douglas Commission found in 1968. The rate is higher now due to the continuing exodus to rural areas.

Surrounding towns are even more sparsely settled.

Land economists have their job cut out for them. They need to let the public know we cannot save rural areas without first saving cities. They need to clarify how current tax policies favor idle land *holding* while penalizing land *usage* thus deriving development from cities and suburbs to exurbia.

It is past time to relate how failing to collect a far greater share of land values feeds the land speculation that is at the root of much urban decay and abandonment.

FORTUNATELY, a majority of Americans now strongly support conservation, representing a constituency for reform. A small, persistent group deserves much of the credit for this reshaping of public sentiment.

For more than a century, plunder of resources accompanied the “conquest” of our continent. A tiny band of naturalist-philosophers decried soil erosion, deforestation and other abuses until voters and officials have finally awoken to their concerns.

At best, America’s desecration has been slowed, not reversed. Despite awareness that the future is at risk, too few understand the tax reforms needed to safeguard our land.

Conservationists must move from purely environmental issues to underlying economic issues. Efforts to save the land will be lost if the larger land tax battle is ignored.