



Setting the PACE

by Susan Rhode, director of communications and public relations

Harvesting friends for AGRICULTURE

I've seen articles about urban sprawl in just about every farm magazine lately. Most of these stories focus on farm families who are being edged out of their livelihood by rising land prices and the aggravations they impose on their new city neighbors. The stories are usually accompanied by a photo of a new subdivision butting up against a farmer's field or pasture, with kids playing in the backyard just feet from a farmer working in his field.

While these photos and situations are very real to some of you, many farmers and ranchers haven't felt the pressures of urban sprawl. Nevertheless, it is a serious issue for farm families who live near growing metropolitan areas or highways that link the city to nearby bedroom communities.

The issues surrounding urban sprawl can be a hot button for both parties involved. Each side has rights and principles for which they will fight to the bitter end. I know it's hard to watch land that has been productive agricultural property transform into a field of curbs, pavement and building sites. Change is never easy, especially when it hits so close to your heritage. Even though these changes offer many negatives for the farmer or rancher, I've spent some time trying to find the positive side.

My husband's family lives near the core of classic urban sprawl. Their farm is less than an hour from Chicago's O'Hare International Airport and just minutes from Interstate 90, one of the major arteries to Chicago and its suburbs. Needless to say, urban sprawl is starting to be a problem for farmers in their area. Development of both commercial and residential properties is driving up land prices, assessed values and property taxes to the point landowners can

no longer afford to invest their properties in agriculture.

My father-in-law, Dale Rhode, farms several acres of cropland that lie near the city limits. One of those fields sits just south of a strip mall that contains a large grocery store and some other businesses, including a Laundromat. One morning last fall, he was harvesting beans in that field. He pulled up to the truck to unload a full hopper and was approached by a man he didn't know.

"Is this your combine?" the man asked.

"Yes," Dale said. "I'm trying to get these beans out before it rains again. I think they're calling for it tonight."

"Wow! I've never seen one of these machines up close," the man said. "I was just over here at the Laundromat and saw you out here working. Hope you don't mind

that I came out to get a closer look at how this thing works."

"Well," Dale said, "I need to go dump this load at the elevator, but I'll be back in about 15 minutes. If you'll still be around, I'd be glad to take you for a round."

The man was beside himself. For years he had watched the local farmers running their combines every fall, but he never dreamed he'd get a bird's-eye view of production agriculture. Riding with a farmer on a combine during harvest was truly a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for him.

Dale returned to find the man waiting at the edge of the field. He invited him into the cab, and they took off. The man was full of questions that ranged from how the

beans were planted to what the dials told him on the control panel. Dale was stunned by the man's curiosity about the things he takes for granted every day. Sometimes it's easy for us to forget how amazing agriculture can be.

They completed the round, and Dale pulled to the edge of the field to drop off his passenger. Before he climbed from the cab, the man pulled out his wallet and offered Dale \$10 for the ride. Dale refused to take the offer, but the man insisted, saying, "No, go buy yourself lunch, my treat. I would have never had this experience if you hadn't offered it to me. Thank you so much."

My father-in-law harvested more than soybeans that day. His willingness to share a little part of his world with someone else made a new friend for agriculture. That man will remember his round in that combine for the rest of his life. Most of all, he'll remember one farmer's act of kindness even more.

As farmers and ranchers, we have to remember how amazing the world of agriculture can be to those who don't live in it everyday. Sure, there always will be consumers who couldn't care less about the way their food is produced and the issues that surround agriculture. But others are in awe of the abundance and prosperity that American farmers and ranchers deliver to our society every day, as well as to others around the world. We must remember always that it's our job to share that amazing story with them.

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The last WORD...

A man's true wealth is the good he does in this world.

—Muhammad

