

## SENATOR PIPKIN: FIGHTING THE WRONG WAR

Last week, during a symposium on the pervasive use of septic systems in Maryland's countryside, Upper Shore State Senator E.J. Pipkin castigated Governor O'Malley's effort to protect the future of Maryland's farmlands as a "War On Rural Maryland".

The Senator must be looking at the battlefield through binoculars with the lens caps still on. He should be directing his assault, not against the Statehouse in Annapolis, but rather against those rural counties (such as Queen Anne's County) with weak zoning that does not protect farmland. These counties, again like Queen Anne's, become magnets to sprawl developers who pay farmland prices, destroy the farms, and replace the crops with plastic houses and McMansions.

If Senator Pipken were truly concerned about rural Maryland, and not just playing politics, he should be up in arms over the fact that our State is on track to lose 560,000 more acres to development over the next 20 years – the equivalent of all Prince George's and Anne Arundel counties combined. Already, we have that much developed land sitting outside of the State's municipalities and other growth areas, instead of inside them where the infrastructure is. Since 1997, nearly four-fifths of the statewide acreage associated with residential development has been located outside of the growth areas, where open spaces once were.

Major subdivision development in Maryland's rural areas consumes lands that can and should be used for continued food production. Most of Maryland's productive farming lands are in close proximity to major markets, like Washington, Richmond, Philadelphia, Wilmington, and New York, and three of those metro areas have ports in which Maryland's produce can be shipped overseas. It makes no economic sense to allow productive lands, engaged in feeding the world, to be consumed by housing developments.

But there are more, and arguably more serious, economic consequences of sprawl-on-septic than just the loss of agricultural production. If he had looked at the reports from the field, Senator Pipkin, who serves on the Finance Committee, would know something about the enormous costs imposed on taxpayers by "cornfield villages":

- Data from an authoritative American Farmland Trust study indicate that the sprawl development on septic projected for the next 25 years will impose on Maryland taxpayers an extra \$1/2 billion per year in schools/roads/utilities costs beyond what the costs would be if the development were inside growth areas.

- A Maryland Department of Planning study from last year projects that for the six “exurban” Maryland counties (Queen Anne’s, Washington, Carroll, Cecil, Charles, and St. Mary’s) aggregate road costs alone over the next 20 years will be approximately \$6.9 billion greater if rural sprawl on septic is allowed to continue.
- The respected Victoria Transport Policy Institute last June summarized the many studies in these words: “Smart growth” – which is what Governor O’Malley is fighting for – “can provide public cost savings ranging from \$500 to nearly \$10,000 annually per [residential] unit.”
- In Queen Anne’s County, twenty years of uncontrolled sprawl are now adding \$14 million per year in extra government services costs – a number that will rise toward \$35 million over the next 20 years if sprawl continues at its business-as-usual rate.

Of course, the developers and farmland-speculators, who have captured the Maryland Farm Bureau and who oppose the Governor’s septic bill, try to cover up the economic burden that they are saddling onto taxpayers. But the costs are real, and they’re big. Senator Pipkin, lost in the fog of war, does not see a plain truth: Maryland can no longer afford rural sprawl – quite apart from the environmental damage that sprawl-on-septic does to the (economically irreplaceable) Bay and other natural resources.

Senator Pipkin tries to call in reinforcements from the “property rights” army, but there is no reason for them to answer his call. Limiting sprawl-on-septic will not devalue farmland, as numerous studies show (including one my organization commissioned that can be read at [www.qaca.org/what\\_we\\_do/](http://www.qaca.org/what_we_do/)).

And if one wants to talk about “rights”, where does the “right” come from for a farmland owner to radically change the use of his land to something that damages everyone else (taxpayers and his neighbors) -- especially when, if he wants to exit farming, there are buyers out there, at the same price the developer will pay, who want to keep on farming his land? A suburban homeowner doesn’t have the “right” to change his home into a night club – what’s the difference with farmland owners?

It took three centuries to develop the first 650,000 acres in Maryland, but it has taken only three decades to develop the next 650,000 acres. Given the magnitude of the accelerating challenge to rural Maryland and the State’s fiscal well-being, Governor O’Malley should be applauded, and supported, for standing up on the issue of preserving Maryland farms. Senator Pipkin, pretending that there’s no

problem and that counties captured by developer interests can go on with sprawl development as usual, is marching off in exactly the wrong direction.

*Jay Falstad is Executive Director of Queen Anne's Conservation Association, and a grower of specialty crops in Queen Anne's County.*