

When An Activist Group Comes To Town:

Protecting Your Community From Unwanted Division



**A guide for dealing with controversial issues in rural
community development**



**Minnesota Farm
Bureau Foundation**

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All of the excerpts from letters to the editor in this document are from letters that were actually published in rural Minnesota newspapers in 2003.

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Minnesota Farm Bureau Foundation

The purpose of this guide

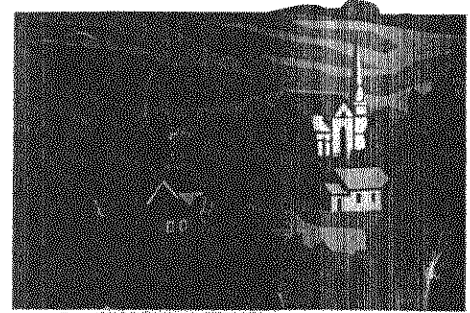
Rural communities in Minnesota and the rest of the nation are changing. This guidebook is designed to provide insight and assistance for local governments and communities in addressing controversies caused by rural economic development. It is particularly focused on the influence of activist groups who may have a much different view of what is in the best interest of each individual community. Some of the changes in rural communities include the following:

Reduction of land in agricultural use

Nationwide, the number of farms and acres of farmland is declining. From 1992 to 2002, Minnesota lost 9,000 farms and 1,400,000 acres of farmland (Minnesota Agricultural Statistics 2003). Long, difficult hours, narrow profit margins, an aging farm population, and increased property values for development are just some of the reasons for this decline. As the number of farmers has dwindled, some of the agricultural land is being sold for development and rural residential housing.

Urban expansion

Cities are expanding outward beyond suburbs into rural developments and subdivisions. Even small cities and towns are creeping out into areas that were once used solely for agriculture. More and more people are choosing to "live in the country," and are building single family residences on acreages in agricultural areas. This means county and township governments must make decisions about re-zoning or approving variances for land that is zoned for production agriculture.



Agriculture is changing

Farming in the past was based more on informal business relationships and trust, where business was done with a handshake, and deals were made based on the farmer's reputation in the community. That has changed dramatically in recent years. To succeed today, farmers must be astute businesspeople. Today's farmer must understand cash flows and balance sheets, accrual versus cash accounting, forward contracting, manure management plans, odor control plans, land use plans, and much more. Farmers must be accountable to other farmers, to non-farm neighbors, to government entities, to financial lenders and supporters, and to the agri-businesses with whom they work. Likewise, these groups must be accountable to the farmers.

The size and scope of farming operations has changed. The "Old McDonald" farms with a little bit of many agricultural commodities may be nostalgic, but they are not often economically practical in today's economy. In order to be efficient and competitive, farms have had to become more specialized. Since there are fewer farmers producing food and fiber for an increasing population, it stands to reason that some farms need to be larger. Today's "family farm" is a sophisticated business enterprise that must generate a profit level that allows the farmer to provide food, shelter, clothing, education, health care, and other needs for their family. The opportunity to expand is essential if farming is to provide a quality of life comparable to other occupations.

Advances in technology have changed agriculture significantly. Some of the things that are routine in many farm operations now were unheard of a generation ago. New technologies in odor control, manure management, and computerized tracking systems enhance farming by helping

protect air and water resources, and maintaining a safe, wholesome food supply. There is a perception that “large” farms are bad for the environment; however, it may be more economical for expanding farms to adopt new technologies to protect water and minimize odors. Consequently, an increase in animal numbers does not mean an increase in pollution potential. As long as new or expanded livestock facilities are sited properly and follow Minnesota Pollution Control Agency (MPCA) feedlot rules, there is minimal risk of pollution and odor problems.

The challenges of change

Any change brings with it challenges, and agriculture is no exception. Individuals, communities, and local units of government must be prepared to deal with controversy that often arises related to agricultural land use. Livestock expansions are a particularly contentious topic. Communities suffer when neighbors take stands against neighbors over emotional land use issues.



This dead rat and threatening sign were left on the door of the home of a rural county commissioner who supported the construction of a moderate sized hog operation in his county. It illustrates the depth of some people's feelings about changes in rural communities.

- *Fear and misperceptions.* People fear what they don't understand. Opponents of agriculture prey on their fears. Inflammatory language and half truths scare people into supporting positions they might not take if they had complete, accurate and unbiased information.
- *Resistance to change.* Some people just resist change at any cost. Education may help ease this challenge.
- *Racism.* One major argument used to create opposition to expanding farms is that they will employ non-English speaking people and thus strain local school districts and bring increased crime to communities. The assumption that the addition of immigrants who do not speak English will bring crime to communities is racist and unsupported by research and experience. Fear of different cultures is at the heart of racism. It is one of many issues that must be addressed as a part of rural community development.
- *Differences in philosophies about farming.* Some of the strongest opponents to changes in agriculture are farmers and former farmers (“large” vs. “small”, “sustainable” vs. “traditional”, etc.) Farmers need to support each other regardless of size or commodity. There has to be room in land use plans for all farms to co-exist.

What makes communities vulnerable to an activist group

There are several key factors that may make a community vulnerable to an outside special interest or activist group. Factors include:

Local officials with little experience with rural development issues

It is not an easy job to serve as elected officials in local governments. Not only are the budget challenges daunting, but with the rapid changes occurring in rural communities, it is essential that local governments be knowledgeable about the related issues that may arise. Budgets, roads, and bridges are much different issues than the emotional and social issues that can arise over growth and development. It is important that county commissioners, county staff,

township supervisors, and other elected and appointed local officials, be trained in recognizing and dealing with issues related to growth and development.

Emotional issues – such as a proposal for a new or expanded livestock facility

When a new development such as a subdivision, business operation, or a new or expanded feedlot is proposed in a rural area, it may encounter opposition. Local decision-makers must be prepared to handle controversial issues.

Some activist groups have staff who specialize in “scanning the horizon” looking for potentially controversial issues. When they learn of proposals for new or expanded agricultural operations, they create and rally opposition. Anti-“factory farm” propaganda and misinformation about odor, manure, and water quality can easily create a strong, vocal opposition that is not interested in facts. Local officials must have the courage to review proposals and judge them on facts and sound science rather than emotion.

Denial or minimizing of issues

There is a temptation sometimes for local officials and supporters of agriculture to dig in their heels and assert that “This is an agricultural area. If people want to live in areas zoned for agriculture, they will just have to deal with it.” This denial that there are challenges involved with agricultural development only serves to increase opposition. Many rural residents are several generations removed from the farm and may not understand current agricultural practices. Farmers must be good neighbors and good stewards of the land. Communication is essential.

Lack of planning for growth and development in rural communities

When local communities have and follow specific long-range plans for growth and development, controversy over these issues can be kept to a minimum. When permits and variances are approved or denied with no real support from a comprehensive land use plan, the door is open for heated debate. Land use plans developed with “grass roots” citizen input are more effective, and more readily accepted by the community.

Strategies used by activist groups to gain influence

Activist groups, particularly those concerned with stopping the development or expansion of livestock operations, typically use a number of distinctive strategies to advance their agenda. These tactics include:

1. Inflammatory Terminology

Propaganda is a powerful tool used to get people to take sides on a particular issue. Activist groups involved in land use issues use many of the following terms:

Factory Farm/Corporate Farm: Any farm that is viewed as being “too large” is labeled as a “factory farm”. “Factory farm” has very negative connotations to it. Even farmers don’t like the term. The problem is that most opponents to a new or expanded farming operation can’t clearly define what constitutes a factory farm. They may talk about wanting to save “family farms”, but their definitions of a family farm and a factory farm are likely very different from how most farmers would define the two. One website referenced in a letter to the editor is the Grace Factory Farm Project. Following is an

excerpt from their website as of August 23, 2003. Presumably these are things that characterize factory farms, in their eyes.

"There is no "official" definition of a factory farm, but they share some or all of the following characteristics:

- Hundreds or thousands of animals (cows, pigs, chickens or turkeys mainly) confined together, using as little space as possible, with little or no access to sunlight, fresh air or natural movement. In some facilities, the number of animals produced yearly is in the millions.*
- The use of antibiotics, chemicals and/or hormones to promote faster growth and ward off disease that would otherwise run rampant in factory farm conditions.*
- The use of " lagoons" to store massive amounts of raw manure.*
- Metal buildings that confine animals indoors.*
- The use of cages to restrict the natural behavior of animals.*
- Mutilation of animals such as debeaking poultry, clipping pigs' tails and teeth, and docking cows' tails, which are considered "standard" procedure.*
- The corporation that owns/controls the CAFO also owns the feed company, slaughterhouse, and final stages of production (also referred to vertical integration).*
- Separation of the ownership, management, and labor of the operation. Industrial agriculture is also moving toward contract growing where family farmers sign away ownership of their animals through a contract with a major corporation. The corporation controls all aspects of raising the animals, and the farmer is left with the risk, overhead, waste and any dead animals.*
- The owner receives price premiums and preferential access to markets or credits because of the size of the facility or the contract signed with one particular corporation.*
- The facility has the capacity to negatively impact neighboring property values.*
- Emphasizes high volume and profit with little or no regard for environmental quality, human health, safe food, humane treatment of animals, and the rural economy."*

If you were to read those bullet points and take everything as the literal truth, it is easy to see why "Factory Farms" draw so much opposition. Many of the above statements are simply untrue, and the snippets of truth that do appear are badly distorted and portrayed as negatively as possible. Those of us who know and understand agriculture realize that livestock must be provided with proper housing, nutrition, health care, and comfort in order for the farm to be profitable. However, the vast majority of the public does not understand agricultural practices and may be deceived by those statements. In reality, it is family farms that are targeted by activist groups because someone arbitrarily decides that the proposed farm has too many animals, or too many acres.

Grass Roots: By involving and using local people, activist groups disguise their efforts as 'grass roots' or 'local control'. Using fear and misinformation, they encourage local people to take sides rather than collaborate and find workable solutions. Real grassroots decision-making involves local citizens working together (not against each other) in a public forum to make policy decisions for the betterment of the community.

Family Farm: The family farm is held up by activist groups as the ideal and preferred style of agriculture. Family farms are presented as "victims" of "corporate factory farms". No clear definition is given of "family farm". The definition of "family farm" shown on the next page was published by the American Agri-Women in 1985. The producers of this document feel it is an accurate and workable definition. The image it presents of the family

farm is very different than the image portrayed by most activist groups. This definition does not include any descriptions about size or business structure. A "family farm" is defined in Minnesota state statute (§500.24) as an unincorporated farming unit owned by one or more persons residing on the farm or

actively engaging in farming. Today's family farms must have the opportunity to grow their business (just like any other occupation) in order to provide food, shelter, clothing, health care, education, and other basic needs of the family. The income potential must be at a level that would entice future generations to consider farming as a career.

"A family farm is a form of business enterprise in which the entrepreneurial decisions (What shall we produce? How much? For whom?) are made by a family engaged in the production of food, feed, fiber, forest products and/or flora for profit which provides a major source of income and capital for reinvestment."
American Agri-Women, 1985

Social and Economic Justice: These terms seek to address social and economic inequities among people, as well as environmental protection. In the context of land use and agriculture, activists use social and economic justice as a "stick" to criticize the things that they oppose. You may think that people are referring to big business when they reference social and economic justice and the evils of corporate America, but the bar has been lowered to the point that farm families wanting to expand are being targeted, demonized, and driven out of business in the name of social and economic justice.

Quality of Life: Every person has an individual view of what they desire for their own quality of life. Quality of life can include economic, social, and environmental aspects. Activist groups use "quality of life" to communicate their belief that people have a 'right' to a certain type of lifestyle not to be altered by others. People will often oppose a project and not understand how their definition of quality of life prevents communities from making decisions for the common good of all citizens. They sometimes distort the quality of life issue to fit their own needs while sacrificing quality of life and the property rights of others. How individual quality of life balances with the common good and community economic and physical infrastructures is an important consideration to be understood.

Our People: You may hear the words "our people" or "those people" at public hearings. Ask for a definition and what measures are being used to determine who 'our people' are and who are 'those people'. Although you will not likely receive an answer, it may raise awareness among the public of the labeling and bigotry going on in your community. How quickly people forget that they or their ancestors once moved to that community too. We must keep in mind that sometimes outside investment capital is needed for new farms to be viable. Sometimes people must move from suburban areas into a new community in order to establish a family farm. Shouldn't they have that opportunity?

Unwanted Development: This frequently used phrase is very subjective, and can really refer to anything someone thinks they don't want. A new neighboring home could be unwanted development, as could a wind turbine, a new farm or a new car dealership. Opponents of livestock facilities claim their property values will be lowered as a result of proximity to the farm. Statistics from an Iowa study are often misquoted as proof of this.

2. The Element of Surprise

When done properly and legally, special meetings and write-in campaigns are tools that townships are allowed to use by law. However, they are not frequently used. Unsuspecting citizens may be taken by surprise, often finding themselves unprepared when activists encourage and guide select groups of people in using these tools. The appendix includes a template for a letter addressing citizen's rights in being notified about a special meeting. It would be wise to mail this letter early in the process of any controversial situation so you can be better prepared in case there is an attempt to circumvent broad public input through the use of a special meeting.

Typically few people vote in township elections. Opponents of agriculture can control these elections with a write-in campaign, or even putting their own candidate on the ballot.

One township clerk reported:

"From a clerk's perspective, I saw a large turnout of voters who have never voted before in a township election. In a recent election, 45 ballots were cast when normally less than half that amount is cast."

3. Interim Ordinance/Moratorium

When a new or expanded livestock facility is proposed, activist groups encourage local governments to quickly install a moratorium or interim ordinance. The project is delayed until the proposal can be researched. Opponents will use this delay to hold planning and zoning discussions with the goal of stopping what is perceived as unwanted development. Some groups even provide handbooks on how to do this. Unfortunately, some groups use this tactic to delay a project with the hope that the farmer will eventually give up rather than to actually research the proposal and develop a sound local land use plan. In 2004, Minnesota state law was changed to reduce the amount of time a moratorium could be in place. Interim ordinances/moratoria are a good tool for local government when used properly; however, when they are used only to delay or stop a specific project no one benefits. Instead of stopping community development with a moratorium, consider establishing a task force to study the issues.

4. False Evidence Appearing Real (FEAR)

Quality of life is a phrase that captures people's attention. It's much easier to influence people by creating fear about their future quality of life than to educate them using accurate information and examples based on research. People are more easily moved to a decision when motivated by fear rather than critical thinking skills.

Opponents routinely spread misinformation and half-truths to enhance negative perceptions. Repeat untrue information often enough and it becomes perception, and perception becomes reality. At times, the fear can become so ingrained that people refuse to listen to facts.

Studies are cited by opponents as undisputed truth, but unless the actual study is looked up, you may never know whether it was correctly quoted, if it's merely one person's opinion, or by whom the study was conducted. There may also be other studies that contradict the one cited. If at all possible, contact the author of the cited study, and research other studies conducted by universities.

Letter to the Editor

A rural newspaper
Tuesday, April 8, 2003

To the Editor:

Dear Editor and citizens of (County X),
"The citizens of (County X) have been asked to cooperate in the building of two proposed CAFO (Concentrated Animal Feeding Operation) dairies near (small town Minnesota). This task is not unlike that given to prisoners in concentration camps during WWII, who were called upon to build the very ovens that would destroy their bodies....."

Sometimes conclusions are drawn from studies even though the study was not set up to address the situation that the conclusion is being used for. It can be a daunting task to research every study quoted by opponents of agriculture, but finding the truth can be rewarding.

Don't be surprised by the use of words that conjure up graphic thoughts of destruction and disaster. Children being poisoned, or manure running from a kitchen tap are metaphors commonly used to incite fear. The letter to the editor shown below illustrates graphic images of destruction.

*Following are excerpts from a letter to the editor from a family who farmed for at least three generations in the exact area of a proposed hog farm. The writer made these claims **BEFORE** the hog barn was built.*

Letter to the Editor

(This letter appeared September 2003 in Southeast as well as west central Minnesota newspapers even though it addresses one county and its commissioners specifically.)

".....Last year we, along with several of our neighbors, had our well water tested....Nitrate levels are considered safe to drink if the level is under 10. Our test came back with Nitrate levels of 11.4 and Coliform Bacteria was present. We were told our water wasn't safe to drink and to find other means for our drinking water. A family with small children in our group was told by their physician to cover their children's mouths during bathing due to the health risks of elevated nitrate levels. These risks include blue-baby syndrome and increased cancer risk.

We have also learned that bathing in water with elevated nitrate levels is dangerous, especially to males, as nitrates and other chemicals are absorbed through the scrotum.....Who will look out for the safety of our water?.....American troops have been sent to Iraq to liberate a people oppressed by a cruel dictator, who had no regard for the people of his nation. It appears we have the same leadership problem here in (County X)."

5. Threats and Intimidation

Public officials that uphold due process and families proposing projects may be discredited, slandered, and even threatened. In one county alone, there was a death threat to a commissioner, someone flew a helicopter spotlighting a farmer who was properly applying manure on his fields, low flying airplanes spooked cattle, and there were several anonymous calls to MPCA reporting false manure spills. Although guilt was never proven, strong language from people opposed to livestock expansions seemed to create an atmosphere where this type of behavior was encouraged.

Many area farmers were put on notice with the threat of foul play posed by this writer in her guest commentary. Law enforcement officials should be notified immediately at any sign of foul play or criminal behavior. The sooner they know and the more detail they have, the more likely they will be able to catch and stop such incidents before someone gets hurt.

Letter to the Editor

A rural newspaper

Tuesday, February 18, 2003

Large dairy operations are bad idea

Guest Commentary

"Think of the risk of over 60 million gallons of manure flowing directly into our region's water supply in the event of accident or foul play. No manure containment system is spill-proof. With any large manure containment system, it isn't a matter of "if" they leak, but only a matter of "when" they will leak."

6. Citing Disasters as the Norm

Agricultural accidents in North Carolina have been cited quite often. What people are negligent in pointing out is that Minnesota has among the strictest environmental laws in the nation. There have been many changes and lessons learned from experiences in North Carolina and other states. Furthermore, there are continual new advancements in technology for odor control, manure management, and farming in general that minimize pollution risk. Every proposal should be evaluated on an individual basis, not handed a quick, 'no' based on old technology or alleged incidents of pollution in other parts of the country.

7. Petitions

A petition to stop a proposal may be circulated to citizens in the township, then brought to a town meeting to influence the town board. The problem with petitions is that it is difficult to validate signatures, and impossible to know what was said to the people to get them to sign the petition. While they don't have legal merit, petitions can cause consternation for elected officials. Petitions are not legal documents, but only a collection of signatures expressing an opinion. It may be prudent to visit with everyone who signed a petition to answer their questions and concerns, and to let them know who to contact about having their name removed from the petition if they feel they have signed it based on misinformation.

8. Letter Writing Campaigns

Activist groups often provide local people with form letters opposing a livestock facility. Identical letters to the editor have been discovered in various parts of the state. If possible have a discussion with your local newspaper editor/owner about establishing guidelines for letters to the editor and guest commentaries. Warn them that they may get an onslaught of letters from a wide geographic area and various organizations as well as local people. Pro-agriculture citizens must be equally as diligent in writing letters to the editor in support of livestock proposals.

9. Lawsuits

Individuals and government agencies have been sued over land use issues. The main purposes of lawsuits are to delay a project and cause financial hardship. No one is the winner in a lawsuit, and the economic and social costs are tremendous.

Foes File Suit

A rural newspaper

July 1, 2003

"Thirty-six local farmers and rural residents filed a court challenge to (X County) officials' decision not to order an in-depth environmental review on a controversial large hog confinement proposed in (Township X).

They are asking that a Minnesota District Court judge overturn the County X Board of Commissioners' 3-2 decision ... not to order an Environmental Impact Statement on the 2,400 head hog operation.

'All the Commissioners heard expert testimony on how uniquely stressed this area is because (of its environmental sensitivity). We citizens have no choice but to move forward to protect ourselves and see that the law is followed,' said X, a local resident and (activist group member). 'These corporate-backed operations are moving into risky locations... With millions of gallons of manure and limited marginal land for application of waste, it's not the same ballgame as in the past. We need environmental review to ensure our safety.' "

10. Isolation

Keeping people separated minimizes communication about the real issues. When people start to talk, they begin to find common ground, and outside influences lose their effectiveness. Some groups who oppose agriculture are unwilling to sit down and discuss differences with supporters of agriculture. Avoiding positive communication helps prevent solutions. If local citizens who disagree on issues can at least keep communication lines open, there is a chance for consensus.

11. Dividing Communities

Controversial issues tend to create "sides", and people who believe strongly on an issue line up on one side or the other. Misinformation and fear accentuate and heighten differences to a point of intolerance and anger. Opponents of agriculture try to turn farmers against farmers, and longtime friends and neighbors against each other. Often retired, older, and/or smaller farmers are

encouraged to speak out against the "factory farm" in the name of protecting family farms. Farmers must stick together and support each other regardless of size or commodity. When the issue dies down, and the outside influences leave town, the damage to friendships and relationships remain and can take years to heal.

12. A Savior Complex

Activists present themselves as "doing good" for the community. They usually come with a tally of their "successes" as a source of credibility and present themselves as having the resources and experience to protect the people from what they define as unwanted development. Knowing their history of activity will be helpful in shining the truth on them. Do your homework to research the group's mission statement, and website. Sometimes checking their funding sources can provide insight on where they are coming from.

A letter sent from an activist group to its members in late 2002 had the following description of its activities:

"(X activist group's) organizers are working with members and other citizens in four (unnamed) Minnesota communities to stop proposed factory farms, including two huge 2,100 cow dairy operations in (X) County. Local citizens are using township ordinances and the state environmental review process to gain a say in whether factory farms can come in and pollute their communities and drive family farms out. We have a good chance at stopping all four proposed factory farms - adding to the 26 we have already stopped."

13. Involvement in Local Meetings

Activist groups send paid staff to local meetings. They also encourage as many local citizens as possible to show up in opposition of a project they wish to stop. It is interesting that local people sometimes complain about "outsiders" coming to an area to support a project, but seem to welcome the outside influences of those opposed to the project with open arms. Staff from activist groups have lobbied at meetings, handed out picket signs and distributed propaganda opposing a project. Activist leaders empower local citizens with concrete action plans, talking points, and a variety of tactics to delay a project. Unfortunately, their goal is not to have local citizens work towards a solution for the betterment of the community, it is only to stop the project.

Opponents may offer solutions in the form of ordinances that have severe restrictions which in effect end the opportunity for farm families to expand their business and provide a reasonable living for their family. Animal unit caps, set-backs from water bodies and residences, environmental review requirements, odor limitations and other conditions that are significantly stricter than the already stringent regulations set by MPCA are often proposed.

14. Using Local Elected Officials

Minnesotans want local control. Many land use decisions are made at the local level. Opponents of agricultural growth have targeted local elected officials to advance their agenda. Township supervisors often face extreme pressure and intimidation. Public officials are elected to make decisions, but there is a protocol they must follow in the decision-making process, and the vast majority of them do so. Occasionally, town boards have adopted moratoria at meetings purposefully scheduled when not all the members could be present; or public meeting notice requirements have been violated. It is appropriate to hold them accountable to the duties, responsibilities and public trust. These attempts to hold hearings and make decisions when only people on one side of an issue are present do not represent grass roots government. When elected officials violate the public trust, the specific infraction needs to be identified and discussed with the proper authorities. You may want to contact an attorney, a local legislator, the Association of Minnesota Townships, or commodity group leaders to learn more about legal protocol.

15. Invoking God or Religion

Some activist groups use religion or God as a basis for their actions. If religion enters into the equation, consider that the Bible calls us to be good stewards of the earth. It does not define stewardship as certain business structures, or limit the number of animals. Anything preached beyond being good stewards is human opinion and human interpretation of Biblical teachings.

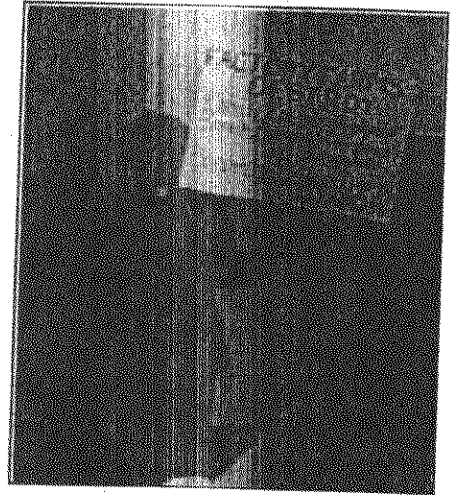
Letter to the Editor

A rural newspaper

Tuesday, April 22, 2003

To the Editor:

"As a pastor, serving a small farming community in southeastern Minnesota, I'm alarmed at the lack of wisdom and foresight and the callous mistreatment of farmers and farming communities by the 2003 session of the Minnesota Legislature."



The same pastor who wrote this letter to the editor has behaved poorly at task force meetings, carried an inflammatory picket sign at a public meeting, and been confronted about lying.

Protecting your community

It is impossible to totally prevent outside interests from being involved and having influence in your community. However, there are some steps that can be taken in advance to be sure local citizens and governments are prepared for issues that may arise over land use and other community changes. These steps may help prevent blind acceptance of extreme points of view that are based on emotion and fear rather than facts.

1. Sponsor or seek out training for elected officials and local leaders

When leaders are trying to make decisions without experience with or thorough knowledge of the topic at hand, it makes them vulnerable to outside influence. Organizations like the Minnesota Association of Townships and the Association of Minnesota Counties would be ideal to host such trainings for large groups. Training topics may include:

- Feedlot rules, current research and technology related to manure and odor management.
- Zoning and land use policies.
- Critical thinking skills. Critical thinking is the ability to hear all sides of an issue, including the benefits and drawbacks of each side, and then make an informed decision about what is best for a given situation.
- How to use and evaluate research and sources. There is considerable research available on many of the land use topics that arise. The ability to sort out what is legitimate, valid research, and what is not is very important.
- Conducting contentious or controversial meetings, understanding Roberts Rules of Order.

2. Hold community forums and open community dialogues

Regular community meetings about land use and development should be held before issues arise. Encourage citizens to be involved in these discussions. When people feel their opinions are

important and heard, they are much more likely to be open to further conversation when an issue arises. Activist groups often claim they are using "grass roots democracy." However, this is not really the case because their circle of people only includes those who agree with their position. Real grass roots democracy includes input from people on all sides of issues. There are many people trained as facilitators to conduct forums and community dialogues. The University of Minnesota Extension Service is one source, and there are other individuals and groups as well. It is important that the facilitator is a neutral party, without a stake in any specific outcomes.

3. Don't avoid controversy

Don't deny that there is controversy, and don't minimize the legitimacy of issues people raise, even if you think they are wrong. Face controversy head on, right from the start, and be as neutral and open minded as possible.

4. Establish task forces or review committees to study issues

A review committee made up of a diverse group of citizens and local officials tends to do a great job of educating themselves about all the implications of a particular issue. They can then educate the rest of the board and the citizens that attend public meetings. Task forces or study committees should be chaired by an unbiased person trained in facilitation. Their job is to research a project. They may choose to take public input as to the issues and concerns that they need to address. Most task force work is not covered by the open meeting law. However, officials should double check every situation to be sure they don't violate this law.

5. Identify leaders on both sides of an issue

When a community is thinking through an issue in a formal way, it's important that all sides of an issue be represented. Whether it's on task forces, in community forums, on appointed zoning boards, or in soliciting candidates for office, it is important to try and find balanced representation and strong leadership.

6. Be a good "critical thinker"

Because much of the information presented by activist groups is misleading or half-truths, it is important for people (citizens, elected officials, staff, and all others) to learn good critical thinking skills and practice them regularly. Good critical thinking skills helps people sort out reliable information from false information and propaganda. Also, realize that decisions made at the local township level may also have unintended county, state, and even national ramifications.

7. Listen to all sides of an issue

Although this is really a part of good critical thinking, it bears repeating as a separate recommendation. It is very important for public officials and others involved in the process to hear all sides of an issue. Try to empathize with all sides. Try to understand what's motivating them, and what they might be afraid of. If protestors feel they are not being heard, it can motivate future activism. In one county, when a controversy began to arise, county officials dismissed it at first. They made light of it, and didn't provide opportunities for people to express their opinions. The protestors were angry and felt they were not heard, and nothing that happened after that mattered to them. When one or more sides feel they are not being heard, it makes it virtually impossible to have an open dialogue and reach a consensus on what is best for the community.

8. Don't respond with emotion

Emotional responses are not helpful. Emotionalism only serves to escalate issues and further divide people. Even though an activist group may be encouraging emotionalism on the part of objectors, resist the temptation to respond in kind. Rely on facts, clear thinking, and thoughtful, respectful communication. It is likely that public officials who do not agree with the activist group will be attacked verbally (and sometimes threatened, as mentioned earlier). Resist the urge to fight back. There is nothing to be gained. Having a neutral mediator to conduct meetings may help maintain order and respect for all.

9. Public officials should maintain a neutral stance while researching the issue

Stands should only be taken after thorough study of both sides of issue and use of objective information. Don't be afraid to bring in experts. Don't rush to judgment out of fear or threat.

10. Remember that some of the issues that arise are based on valid concerns

All citizens have the right to be concerned about water quality, air quality, roads, property values, land use, and many other issues. A task force can research the issue to gather information on the validity of all concerns. Requirements can be included in a conditional use permit to be sure the proposed project does not pollute or otherwise negatively impact the community. A community should make decisions based on sound science and facts, not emotion. Again, good critical thinking skills help sort out valid concerns from fear, hysteria, or emotion-based positions. An MPCA staff person or your county feedlot officer can help answer questions about proposals.

Preparing for a Farm Expansion

If you and your family are considering expanding your farm, or may someday want the opportunity to grow your business, there are things that should be considered that may make the process easier, and may reduce the amount of controversy created by your proposal. While there are no guarantees, sometimes a little prevention can go along way.

1. Be a good steward of the land

As farmers, we must hold ourselves to the highest standards in terms of protecting soil and water resources. We must do an excellent job of manure management, and do the best we can at reducing odors. We must be a good neighbor to those who live near our farm. If we demonstrate that we can do these things with our farm at its current size, we will have more credibility with our community when we propose an expansion. The community must be able to trust you.

2. Be a good communicator

Talk with all of your neighbors before you apply for a permit. In many cases, people are concerned about odor and water quality, but they may also have concerns about property value, roads, and a variety of other things. Do your homework and learn as much as you can about any potentially controversial issues so you can discuss the steps you would take to minimize any negative effects on your neighbors. You should explain why you are interested in expanding and discuss the benefits that an expanded business would bring to the community.

It is critical, that as a livestock producer, you are able to clearly communicate how your livestock production facility will address the following legitimate concerns: offensive odor, air pollution, ground and surface water contamination, forcing small producers out of business, and

decreasing value of neighboring properties. Articulating what causes odor, and the measures you are taking to reduce and control odors will help ease concerns. Make sure your neighbors know that you are willing to notify them before you spread manure, and that you would be willing to avoid spreading manure on days when your neighbors have events (reunions, holidays, etc.) planned that could be adversely affected by short term odors.

Discuss the precautions you are taking to ensure workers in your livestock facility and your neighbors will not have health risks associated with air pollution (fecal dust, mold, bacteria, and noxious gases). In confinement buildings, illustrate the measures taken to protect livestock and workers from air pollutants.

Livestock producers must do everything they can to protect water quality. Explain the measures you are taking (and the requirements by MPCA) in terms of location of the facility, manure storage and management, and engineering of the facility to eliminate water pollution. Even though MPCA and other units of government have regulations you must follow, local residents may want further proof that your livestock facility will protect the local water supply. Explain the safeguards you will implement to ensure manure won't contaminate wells, streams, and lakes. Remind others that your family and your livestock will also be drinking the water, so you are just as concerned about water quality as everyone else.

Expanded farms are often blamed for driving "family" farms out of business. Highlight the fact that other livestock operations (of all sizes) will benefit from the growth of your business because you will be supporting local processors, feed dealers, veterinarians, and other agribusinesses that will keep prices higher and production costs lower for all producers.

Opponents will claim reduced property values as a direct result of livestock facilities. It might be wise to do some research on other livestock facilities in your area to find out what has happened to nearby property values.

Sometimes at public meetings, things get pretty heated. Keep your cool, and go the extra mile to keep an open line of communication with those that oppose you. Losing your temper or storming out of a meeting will not improve your chances of getting a permit. Arm yourself with facts, and listen to all the concerns.

3. Be a good planner

Before a bank will lend you the money to expand, they will want a detailed financial plan, and for the most part, farmers do a good job of preparing that data. However, we must remember that people who may oppose a new or expanded farming business are probably not nearly as interested in your financial potential as they are concerned about air, water, and how it may impact them. A lot of thought should be put into site location, manure storage and management, and odor reduction.

4. Take an active role in education

Many people don't know how important livestock production is to the local economy. The general public does not understand the contribution of livestock operations in terms of taxes and economic activity within the community. As the producer, you must educate them.

Even if your family has owned the farm for generations, don't assume that your neighbors will automatically support your efforts to expand. Keep them in the information loop. They will appreciate hearing it from you rather than the rumor mill, and you can provide facts and avoid misinformation. Others in your county will also have concerns, and you must communicate with them. Every community has opinion leaders. Identify them, address their concerns, and they may

become valuable allies in your effort to expand. The more people that know you are doing everything possible to address concerns about environmental issues and quality of life the better.

Perhaps you could invite the community to a pot-luck dinner or Sunday picnic. An event like this can generate positive public feelings, and give you an opportunity to talk about your farm and your family. Hosting a tour of your livestock facility gives people a way to learn first-hand what goes on at your farm. Be sure to showcase how you are protecting the environment and the excellent care you are providing for your animals.

Being active in local civic organizations puts you in contact with opinion leaders, and helps them recognize you as a concerned member of the community. Supporting community and church activities and contributing to youth organizations like 4-H and FFA also helps show your family's importance to the community. Refer to the appendix for more tips.

5. Don't be afraid to ask for help

Farmers tend to be independent people, and we don't like to ask for help. If a situation becomes controversial, it is nice to have allies. Ask for the support of other farmers in your area. Contact commodity organizations or farm groups you belong to and ask for their support. These groups along with the Minnesota Department of Agriculture and the University of Minnesota can help provide facts and information in support of your proposal. Farm groups can also help encourage their members to attend public meetings in support of your project.

Be there to support other farmers in your community if they apply for a permit for a new or expanded facility. Be a leader among farmers in your community in encouraging them to be supportive of each other regardless of size or commodity. If you are there to speak up in support of others, hopefully they will do the same for you. Make the time to get involved. We are all busy, but there are some meetings that are so important that farmers can't afford not to have representation at them. Opponents of agriculture find the time to attend and voice their opinions at public meetings. Farmers must do the same, as decisions are made by those that show up. The Association of Minnesota Counties and the Association of Minnesota Townships can also help.

6. Work to create a "farm-friendly" environment in your county and township

Vote for and support pro-agriculture candidates for county commissioner and township officer. Actively recruit farmers to serve as elected officials, and don't be afraid to take your turn serving as a township supervisor. Work with your farm groups to educate local elected officials about modern agriculture. Make sure farmers are represented in land use planning discussions in your county.



Summary

We hope this guide has given the reader some tools to assess how to handle controversial issues in your communities. Although by design, the guide has focused specifically on strategies used by activist groups to divide communities, the overall goal is to give communities some background on working together to address issues of concern and solve problems.

Appendix A: Conducting meetings on controversial issues

Conducting Meetings on Controversial Issues

It doesn't matter whether you support or oppose a proposal. These guidelines will aid in conducting a productive meeting on controversial issues. By establishing and sticking to ground rules from the beginning of an issue, and seeking assistance if needed, perhaps the board can maintain control, and keep meetings proactive and productive.

Suggestions

- At least discuss the option of having a sheriff's deputy present if it becomes necessary. This protects everyone. Even if you don't have one attend, being prepared helps you maintain control of the meeting and you'll have a contingency plan if people behave inappropriately.
- Have everyone sign in when they show up for the meeting. This establishes accountability for their presence at the onset.
- Establish ground rules, and post them up front if you feel necessary, on large sheets of paper, so everyone can read them. Then state at the beginning of the meeting that the meeting will be conducted in an orderly way, and if the ground rules are not followed, you will adjourn the meeting immediately and walk out. Then do it. If you have a sheriff's deputy present, prepare him or her for the fact that this might happen, because people may try to stop you.
- Have the strongest person in the group conduct the meeting. If the group challenges that, have the clerk appoint a chair for the meeting.
- Bring a gavel and use it immediately if things begin to escalate.
- People should be able to hear what you say, as board members. Speak up loud enough or arrange for a portable microphone.
- Other people should also be heard. Although it takes time, when necessary, restate things that people say for all to hear and then respond.

Ground Rules

- Every person has a right to speak and be listened to and respected. People will be treated in a respectful and dignified manner.
- Stand, be recognized by the chair and state your name and area where you live.
- Be respectful of positions different from your own.
- Shouting and belittling people will not be allowed.
- Only one person speaks at a time. Do not interrupt.
- Wait to be recognized before speaking.
- Address only one topic at a time. All who wish to speak on a topic will be allowed to do so.
- Participate in the spirit of collaboration and with the intent to work on the situation.
- Side conversations should be limited.

Additional Ideas for the board

- Brush up on your understanding of the open meeting law and other appropriate laws or ordinances. You may not have had a reason for concern on this in the past, but in controversial situations, violations of laws can quickly lead to a lawsuit and breach of public trust.
- Keep the best interest of your locale in mind in conjunction with the role it plays in the bigger picture of the community, county, state, and nation.
- Treat everyone in a dignified manner.
- Be concerned with "what is right," not "who is right."
- Leave personal agendas at the door.

Appendix B: Special meeting notification

Use this as a template to be notified of any special township meetings. Mail the original to your township clerk and copies to the officers.

Date

To: Township Clerk
From: Your Name and Signature
Your address
Your phone number

We are requesting a written notice of any special meetings held by township officials in accordance with Minnesota State Statute 13D.04 subdivision b which reads "The notice shall also be mailed or otherwise delivered to each person who has filed a written request for notice of special meetings with the public body. This notice shall be posted and mailed or delivered at least three days before the date of the meeting."

In regards to us being notified, please follow the due process of law as stated in the above statute.

cc: Tom, Township Supervisor
Dick, Township Supervisor
Mary, Township Supervisor
Jo, Township Treasurer

Appendix C: Livestock expansion strategies

Tactics for local producers positioning themselves as valuable contributors within their community:

1. Contact key influencers (elected officials, chamber business leaders, heads of community groups, and clergy) and invite them to participate in a roundtable meeting to discuss the benefits of livestock production in the community.
2. Join with other producers to have a display at the county fair and public events that communicates the benefits of livestock production in the community.
3. Offer to be a speaker on the benefits of livestock production to community groups.
4. Donate time to local elementary schools (either as a guest speaker in classrooms or by hosting farm tours) to educate students on the importance of livestock.
5. Open your farm to tours for community groups interested in an educational program on the food production process.
6. Provide volunteer and financial support for community youth organizations such as 4-H and FFA.
7. Get involved with local community service organizations.
8. Host a picnic or breakfast on the farm for neighbors to address issues and concerns surrounding livestock production in the community.
9. Anticipate citizen concerns about odor, air pollution, surface and ground water contamination, driving small family farms out of business, and decreased property values. Explain in detail your concern for those issues and what you are doing to reduce or eliminate the potential negative impacts in each of those areas.

Appendix D: Talking points

The following are some key points to consider covering when you talk to community groups and/or the media about plans to expand your livestock facility.

Livestock facility

- Emphasize the fact that your livestock operation is a family farm. As such, you care about the same quality of life and environmental issues as other families in the community, and you have a personal stake in making sure your community is a desirable place to live and work.
- Introduce your family and give the history of your family's involvement in the community.
- Give the history of your livestock business. Cover the struggles, successes, and changes your farm has undergone over the years.
- Provide specific past examples of how the community has supported your family farm in one way or another. When appropriate, mention and thank people by name.

Expansion plans

- Explain why an expansion of your family business is necessary. Remember, the general public will not resonate as well with "profits" as they will with "quality of life" issues.
- Provide details of the expansion. Discuss increases or changes in facilities, equipment, and livestock numbers within the context of the current operation.
- Explain how the expansion might affect the community. If there are potential negative effects, describe what you will do to address them.
- Provide examples of how the expansion will benefit the community (tax money means more money for local schools, quality of life, etc.).
- Give a timeframe for the project, pointing out key dates when people can expect and recognize changes.
- If you have received support from your neighbors to expand, say so.
- Invite community members to contact you directly about their concerns.
- Anticipate citizen concerns about odor, air pollution, surface and ground water contamination, driving small family farms out of business, and decreased property values. Explain in detail your concern for those issues and what you are doing to reduce or eliminate the potential negative impacts in each of those areas.

Appendix E: Media relations

Livestock producer media relations strategies

The local media can play an important role in informing and influencing community opinion on a livestock expansion proposal. As you plan your project, consider contacting your local newspaper editor, and asking him or her to meet with you in order for you to provide details and facts about the proposed expansion of your family farm.

What reporters will want to know:

- Size of current operation
- Scope of expansion (costs, increases in facilities, equipment, and livestock numbers)
- Reason for expansion and timeframe for implementation
- Environmental controls and safeguards

What you will want them to know:

- Economic benefit your farm brings to the community
- Your interest in community concerns and what you are doing to address them
- Facts (not myths or rumors) about environmental issues

Tips to help you prepare for interviews:

- Put together a one-page fact sheet on the key points you want them to understand that you can send with them after the meeting.
- Anticipate tough questions about environmental concerns and vocal opposition to your plans, so you may prepare thoughtful answers or notes in advance.
- Remember a reporter should report both sides of an issue, so realize the article that appears in the paper will likely include interviews of some people who are opposed to your project. However, you are the strongest advocate for your operation, and the media is the best chance for getting the word out.
- State your most important points at the beginning of your responses so they will have greater impact, and be less likely to get edited out.
- Keep your answers and comments simple and do not go off on tangents.
- Be relaxed and friendly, even if you feel some of the questions are negative or confrontational. Use facts to respond to hostile questions.
- Don't let a reporter put words in your mouth.
- Don't be afraid to say "I'll have to check on that and get back to you. When is your deadline?"
- Never lie.
- Do not answer a question with "no comment" as that only creates hostility. Find a way to answer difficult questions.
- Do not answer hypothetical questions.
- Use anecdotes to humanize and illustrate your points.
- Nothing is ever "off the record". Anything you say before, during, or after an interview may be used.
- Ask when the interview will be printed or broadcast.
- Do not ask to review the story in advance. The reporter is not obligated to do that.

If you are contacted by a reporter wanting to do a story on your farm, try to establish a relationship with that reporter ahead of time to learn more about where that person is coming from and why they are doing the story. There have been a few occasions where farmers thought they did a positive interview, yet when the story aired it portrayed the farm very negatively. Getting to know your reporters will help avoid that.

Appendix F: One family's story

THE AUTUMN OF FARMING is a story about what happened to my family when we tried to expand our dairy operation. Although characters, names, and some minor details have been changed, the story itself is grounded in truth. However, unlike in this story, my family actually sued our city (and lost) when we were denied a conditional use permit needed for our expansion. The district judge didn't go against the city's decision, just like our lawyer and the lawyer in this story warned. Jan Lefebvre

The Autumn of Farming

By Jan Lefebvre

It would be the last load of corn for the day. They were quitting early since they would finish the big field on the north side of the farm. Robert was plenty tired from pushing the harvest so hard, and he looked forward to the extra rest. He had been getting up two or three times a night to check the corn dryer and keep the wet bin full. But they had to use the good weather while they could. The auction was set for November 17, and in bad-weather years, they sometimes weren't finished by then.

Robert reached over and readjusted his son, Henry, who was bobbing along and sliding sideways next to him, trying to balance himself on an arm rest in the dusty tractor cab. Only two years old, Henry could walk into any farm shed and identify all the equipment--choppers, hay mowers, manure spreaders, gravity boxes--that was parked there. He knew his crops and could even tell a barley field from wheat, which most adults around Stockdale couldn't do. Robert was proud of his serious boy. Even while they were doing what Henry loved best, driving the big John Deere, his face, with its strong cheekbones and grape juice-stained upper lip, held a frown of concentration. He never said much when he rode, because, to Henry, this was not play. He was helping daddy with important work. This time it was hauling corn.

The tractor reached the end of a wind break of pine trees, trees Robert's great-grandfather Henry Volkner had planted, so that the big field was visible to their right. Robert took in the familiar scene. The sun, low on the horizon, lit the field like a wide-angle spotlight, making the leftover cornstalks a shimmering white-gold. The combine was almost glowing green against the darkening sky as it sucked in the last row of corn. Robert sighed. Henry sighed in imitation.

"Pretty sight, isn't it, bud?"

"Ya, Dad. Pitty sight. Combine almost done."

"Let's hook up."

They drove to the gravity box, made a tight U-turn, and backed up to the hitch. Robert climbed out the tractor door and jumped to the ground. He smiled as the tires began to turn slowly one way then the other. As usual, Henry had taken over the steering wheel. Robert wondered how they would tell his son that his farm would soon be gone. Henry would stay at his aunt's house the day of the auction so he wouldn't see everything go, but soon after he would start wondering where the tractors were. He had endured the sale of the cows, but the rest of the farm, especially the tractors, would be a different story. At least they would live in the house awhile longer. Robert trembled as once again a dose of bitterness ran through him.

Just last spring, he and his father were still clinging to hope that the Stockdale City Council would be sensible and listen to its own planning commission, which had narrowly approved their plans to build a 300-cow milking parlor and an adjoining manure basin. It should have been a no-brainer. He and his father had the full support of the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency, and even though several years ago Stockdale had incorporated itself as a city, it still consisted of many areas zoned for agriculture, the Volkner farm being in one of those areas. The cow parlor and basin were going to help the farm stay financially sound as cropland they rented was sold to developers. However, it was news of the basin that caused problems. People hear the word *manure* and start to panic. Robert had known there would be some opposition, but he had been unprepared for the strength and size of it at the planning commission meeting.

Several neighbors, people who over the past 15 years had bought five-acre lots so they could live in the country, had distributed propaganda for miles, drawing at least 40 worried citizens to the meeting.

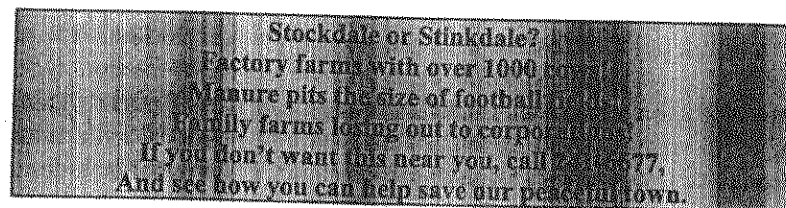
Vest Johnson, a neighbor who always sported heavily embroidered western shirts and sometimes bought hay from the Volkners for his two horses, spoke first with his gravelly, cigarette voice. "We don't want feedlots by our house. Think of the flies! We like farms, but this is ridiculous."

A woman in a brown business suit said, "It isn't fair. I just built my dream house in the Wooded Acres development, and now it'll be ruined by the smell of a manure pit. The resale value will tumble." Robert rolled his eyes. She couldn't be serious. Wooded Acres was over three miles from the farm.

Agnes Hessing, a 50ish woman for whom he had once seeded some grass, practically yelled at the commission members, "We moved here to be near *family* farms, not *factory* farms."

Others voiced similar complaints. Some simply asked questions, which Robert and his father tried to answer in terms non-farmers could understand. Both spoke at length explaining how they were simply trying to improve and progress like any other small business would. The manure basin would only smell strongly twice a year when it was pumped as opposed to now when they caused a ripe odor every day while hauling and spreading manure. Plus, the bigger herd would be completely enclosed. Other than seeing a new barn off in the distance, the lives of their neighbors would hardly change at all, maybe even improve. But they could tell their points were not penetrating. These people moved out from the city to enjoy the rural setting. Now no one was supposed to alter *their* country view one iota.

Luckily three farmers sat on the commission board, and they understood the proposal. It passed three to two. However, it still had to get by the city council, and only one farmer sat on that. Robert caught his father's worried eyes. They would have to prepare for battle. On the way out of city hall, Robert found a flier on the floor. It read:



No wonder people were upset. If the flier had not been about his own farm, Robert could have laughed at the melodramatic exaggerations. Robert turned to see his father who also held a flier. He stepped closer to Robert and said in a low voice, "Good thing I slicked my hair and cleaned the shit out of my shoes, or I might have made a bad impression around all these *geniuses*."

Robert laughed with him and said, "Some of those geniuses are supposed to be our neighbors, but you'd never know it tonight." He slowly crumpled his flier and tossed it into a nearby wastebasket.

His father folded his and tucked it in his shirt pocket. "Hell, a neighbor's a guy who borrows your axe, then uses it to cut down your favorite tree. It's not like it used to be. Neighbors today don't think they need each other so they just think of themselves. When our farm's gone and folks nearby are up to their eyeballs in housing developments and traffic, they'll realize they needed us as much as we needed them."

"It sounds like you assume we'll lose and sell out."

"I hope not, but I don't want you to get sucker punched. People don't want farms around them anymore. You either have to stay small and work your tail off to break even or else go super big with corporate backing so no one can stop you. Shoot for the middle, and you usually lose."

"Well, thanks for the optimism, Dad," said Robert, a little irritated.

The combine's rumbling as it pulled alongside the gravity box brought Robert out of his dark memories. From the cab, his father swung the auger into place and released the corn from the combine's hold. Robert never tired of seeing and hearing corn shoot into a gravity box. "The sound of money," Grandpa Clem used to say. The yellow kernels showered down like a waterfall. Robert knew his son and his father were watching it too, three generations of Volkner farmers appreciating the fruits of their labor.

"How could this ever *not* be a family farm?" Robert thought. His great-grandfather had cleared much of the land himself. Both he and Grandpa Clem had died in the very house Robert now lived in with his family. Right next door was the smaller rambler in which Robert grew up, where his father and mother still lived. Through the years as the steering wheel of the farm passed from Volkner fathers to Volkner sons, they had upgraded and thrived. From horse-pulled plows to mow board plowing, then from chisel plowing to no-till farming, each had added his own imprint on the soil of their farm. Just because a farm progressed, should it no longer be considered a family farm? Schmegel's Hardware Store in Deer Creek added on several times and was now almost the size of a Walmart, and they still advertised it as a family business. But farmers had always been held to higher standards, being collectively blamed for everything from animal cruelty to overusing pesticides. Yet Schmegel's Hardware, which sold bags and bags of dandelion killer to the lush lawn keepers of suburbia, was praised for being a family-run pillar of society.

Robert was aware that bad farmers existed. Those who were irresponsible with their animals and land or didn't care how sloppy their farmyards and farming practices were. Those who accumulated rusty trucks, tractors, and other junk around their places like decaying corpses on a battlefield. As his father always said, "A few rotten farmers give all of us a bad name." It was that farmer stereotype that used to make Robert cringe when he dated during his college years, and it came time to explain that he was majoring in agronomy and would be taking over the family farm. It didn't matter that he was a fairly well-mannered, friendly guy or that, as his mother often said, "All Volkner men have tall frames and strong, bright smiles." It didn't matter that if Robert kept on his T-shirt and jeans, hiding his sun-deprived, stark-white torso and legs, he always looked fit and tan as if he'd been a life guard in Hawaii. It didn't matter. Once he dropped the *farm bomb* most girls weren't interested anymore. It was that same prejudice that brought his wife, Jenny, to tears at the city council meeting last May.

Jenny was a Minneapolis girl when Robert met her six years ago at a financial firm. The firm, which was half an hour away from Stockdale in a suburb of Minneapolis, had done the Volkner's taxes for years. Robert had stopped in to pick up a finished tax report and had been surprised to find that a new employee had done it. He was more surprised by how attracted he was to her. He instantly spotted the intelligence in her green eyes. They chatted easily as she went over the report with him. Robert was aware she now knew how little money a family farm made, but when he asked if she wanted to have lunch, she enthusiastically accepted. Eight months later, they were married. She continued to work part time at the firm and began handling all the bookkeeping for the farm. Before meeting Robert, she had never been on a farm, but she was determined to love it, and Robert was pretty sure she now did.

At the council meeting Robert watched Jenny, who along with Robert's mother and sister, decided to attend the meeting as a show of family unity. He could tell by her closed eyes and moving lips that Jenny was mentally rehearsing the short speech she had prepared for tonight (either that or praying). Then he glanced around the room. Some of their farmer and non-farmer friends had come to show support. A few farmers were in attendance for other reasons--jealous types--some of whom had scoffed five years ago when Robert began using his new drill, no-tilling instead of plowing. Erosion or not, they liked clean, black earth to plant each spring. These were the farmers who believed in the status quo. They were at the meeting as spectators to see the Volkners put in their place, taken down a few notches. Robert resented them most because they should have known better. They should have realized that a Volkner defeat would eventually lead to their own downfall.

And what a defeat it was. The meeting room, with its low ceiling and buzzing fluorescent lights, was packed with wound-tight citizens. The original organizers had hired a perspiring, freckled lawyer with golden hair styled in a much-too-calculated tousled look, and he now preened and strutted around at the front of the flock. Already the air was stifling hot when Robert's family was given the first chance to speak. Robert and his father repeated much of what they had said at the commission meeting. Robert felt like he couldn't get the words out the way he wanted, but his father seemed composed. Jenny spoke next, emotionally but articulately defending that the Volkners were indeed a family farm. A few farmer friends attested to what great farm managers the Volkners had always been. Finally an MPCA official spoke about how efficient and sound their expansion plan was. It all made perfect sense, but it did absolutely no good.

The opposing stampede began and lasted for over an hour as angry face after angry face took the