FARMING
at the Fringe
Exurban areas are embracing family farms.
By Adam Regn Arvidson

Fall harvest in unincorporated Kane County, Illinois. Photo by Anna HC.
HERE IS A FAMILIAR SCENARIO: NETTIE and Gerald, an elderly farm couple, are debating what to do with the family farm. Should it be turned over to a corporate farming operation, or can they entrust it to the young couple who want to raise dairy cattle there?

“You can’t start farming these days,” Gerald says. Nettie’s response: “How are you so sure?”

According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s most recent data (through 2007), most farms are small (about 85 percent of farms in 2007 were less than 500 acres; 54 percent were less than 100 acres), and the vast majority (86.5 percent) were owned by a family or sole proprietorship. Between 1997 and 2007, the average size of farms decreased (from 431 to 418 acres), the percentage of farmers who are sole owners, as opposed to corporations or partnerships, increased (from 62.5 percent to 69 percent of all farmers), and the average farmer got older (from 54 to 57 years).

But this scene between Nettie and Gerald didn’t really happen. It is a dramatization—a play written by Doug Nopar of Minnesota’s nonprofit Land Stewardship Project. Nettie and Gerald are archetypical farmers of today: a couple near the end of their farming career with children who don’t want to farm.

The play, called Look Who’s Knockin’, has been performed more than 20 times in Minnesota and western Wisconsin as part of LSP’s “Farm Beginnings Program.” That program seeks to train new farmers through professional networks and education. About three years ago LSP did a survey to determine the greatest barriers to farming; the biggest one was access to land.

In other words, while older farmers are wondering what will become of their land, new farmers are seeking new farmsteads. “We have many long-term farmer members who are thinking about the next steps with their farms,” says LSP’s Karen Stettler.

Close to home
I had a Nettie-and-Gerald discussion recently with my father—not at a kitchen table but on an Amtrak train between Chicago and Minneapolis. As the northern Illinois suburbs gave way to southern Wisconsin farmland, we talked about his cousin Jon, who recently decided to retire. My father lives on 160 acres in northern Illinois, land he inherited from his parents and moved to about a decade ago. Kitty-corner across the rural road is another 160 acres where his sister lives. Her farm has been in the family for more than 100 years: a century farm.

My father and aunt don’t farm. Jon, who also owns 80 acres of his own, rents the family land from my father and aunt, and harvests corn and beans. But without Jon, what happens next? I live in Minneapolis, where I have made a life far removed from this land. My brother and only sibling lives in Chicago, works in telecommunications, and has no interest in farming. Just as Nettie and Gerald did, my father and I talked about who might want to rent this land, how it might remain productive. So we are like the archetypical farmers, once removed.

To bring together those that have with those that want, LSP organized an event in Plainview, Minnesota, in April 2012 that showcased stories of successful farm transitions. Joe and Rebecca Schwen told of paying off their 40-acre vegetable farm in just three years. Arlene Hershely talked about the financial and legal process of passing her dairy farm to her son.

“In my mind, land being farmed is a big hurrah,” says Stettler. “There are ways people can farm smaller acreages and provide a healthy landscape and a healthier community that contributes to a healthy downtown, a vibrant Main Street.”

Ripple effect
Farm transition takes planning, but it also becomes a planning consideration for states, counties, and cities. After all, the land may be sold or leased to a corporate farming interest, or it could be developed for housing or industry. Under either scenario, the landscape will change dramatically. Counties and municipalities will have to improve roads and utilities to serve the new developments. Food will come from farther afield.

In contrast, there are many benefits if farms stay farms. Farmers markets are popping up everywhere, providing local, often organic produce to urban and suburban residents. Community-supported agriculture programs deliver produce to doorsteps, passing some of the farming risk on to members. Grocery stores and restaurants are beginning to source locally again.

Farming also helps drive economies. The USDA, through its rural development program, last February gave out 298 “value-added producer grants” in 44 states, designed to help agricultural companies expand. Ranging from a CSA berry farm in Virginia to a specialty greens grower in the Chicago area to a Vermont dairy, all these grant recipients will receive an influx of cash to help them become more viable in the long run—that is, to remain agricultural regardless of the impediments.

The greatest impact of farmland loss, as well as the greatest benefit of farmland preservation, will be felt at the urban fringe. This is where farm transitions have always been more complex, since the proximity of a major city can draw the next generation away, and since development pressure tends to drive up the price of land.

My family’s land is just two hours south-west of Chicago, near a major U.S. highway. Stories used to circulate about developers knocking on farmhouse doors and offering large sums of cash, on the spot. My father’s farm abuts a city boundary. As long as it is actively farmed it will be taxed at agricultural rates, but its value could continue to increase, especially if it is annexed or zoned for residential uses. The county’s long-range plan shows my father’s farm as residential, with parkland along the little creek. Will the increasing land value keep this land from passing to my generation?

Hanging in there
Atina Diffley knows this story all too well. She and her husband used to work 120 acres in Eagan, Minnesota, that had been in her husband’s family for four generations. Eagan sits just south of the Twin Cities metropolitan area and, says Diffley, “the family always knew that development was inevitable.” The area used to be the green belt for the cities, and Diffley remembers that in the 1970s the major grocery stores were still buying directly from farmers at farmers markets.
Atina Diffley demonstrates tractor cultivation to beginning farmers in a class taught through her consulting business, Organic Farming Works LLC (www.organicfarmingworks.com).

For over three decades, this sign pulled in customers, and Martin and Atina Diffley used “Turn here” as an opening line for conversations about changing how our food is grown.

By the early 1980s, the combination of booming suburban development and imported produce made things difficult. In 1989, the family sold 20 acres for a school and was assessed a considerable figure for sewer and water to serve future development. Although the assessment would not be paid until the land sold, it would accrue interest.

Worried that the assessment might eventually exceed the land value, the family sold the land, and it was developed for housing. Eagan (and most suburban communities nationwide) have no provisions for preserving farmland. So the Diffleys had to move farther south. They found acreage in a township with very low-density zoning that would prevent major development projects. In 2005 they sold their vegetable business to a local co-op grocery store and now consult with other farmers on how to succeed with organic produce.

Diffley’s experience, which she details in her book Turn Here Sweet Corn (published earlier this year by the University of Minnesota Press), is a cautionary tale, but it is far from unique. The main lesson, according to Diffley, is that “there has to be some mechanism in place to keep farmland taxed at farm value.”

As a way of achieving that goal, she suggests that communities create food plans. Fruits and vegetables, in particular, could come from within cities or from very close by, since they do not require a large amount of land. “The food plan,” says Diffley, “needs to be a conscious pre-thought, not just a reaction.”

By creating such a plan, a county, municipality, or metropolitan area could put other initiatives in place, such as conservation programs that would allow owners to
sell their development rights. "This [sale of development rights] keeps the price of land more affordable so it can be transferred between farmer businesses," Diffley says.

Out of the box
Near my family's land, a semirural county has taken tangible steps that Diffley would applaud. Kane County, Illinois, on the western edge of suburban Chicago, has been working on agricultural land preservation since the 1990s. Back then it passed one of the nation's first "right-to-farm" laws, which protect farmers from nuisance lawsuits filed by new residential landowners unaccustomed to the noise and smells of active farmland.

Then in 1996 the county adopted its 2020 land resource management plan, which envisioned half of the county remaining in agricultural use permanently. "That plan clearly stated that this land is not waiting to be developed," explains Janice Hill, AICP, the county's manager of the farmland protection program. "It is for the purpose of agriculture."

Conceptually, the county has divided itself roughly in thirds. The eastern third (closest to Chicago) is the urban core, where most of the existing towns are located. The middle third is the critical growth area, where new development will occur in concert with some farmland preservation. The western third is the agriculture area, where farming will remain the dominant aspect of the economy.

In 2000 the county examined purchase of development rights programs in Pennsylvania and Ohio, then partnered with the Kane County Farm Bureau to establish an aggressive program of its own. An initial $5 million from gaming revenue (Kane County has riverboat casinos that dedicate a portion of proceeds to county initiatives) kicked the program off in 2001.

To date, the county has used nearly $20 million from the riverboat fund and $12 million in matching grants from the federal Farmland Protection Fund to buy either development rights or agricultural conservation easements over 5,132 acres. Thirty families have committed to the program, all of whom are what Hill calls "commodity growers": raising mainly corn and soybeans for the world market.

To reinforce her commitment to family farms, Hill produced a documentary film called Deep Roots that traces the histories and challenges of several northern Illinois sesquicentennial farms—those in the same family for at least 150 years. Produced by the nonprofit Bamboo River Productions, the film includes interviews with farmers of various ages from a wide range of farm sizes. Most express concern about development creeping out from the big city. One even calls rampant urban development "our Depression": a challenge to the fundamental stability of the family farm.

Profiled in the documentary is the Flanders family, who participate in Kane County's purchase of development rights program. "We can have long-term goals [now]," says Tom Flanders. "We're good to go on this high-quality ground. It will stay farmland forever." His son Ben echoes the sentiment: "We don't have to sit here and wonder if grandpa would be offended if we turned this site into a Kmart," he says.

Bottom of the cycle
The interviews in Deep Roots took place between 2003 and 2007, and so much changed just one year later. Although one farmer in Deep Roots said, "I don't think expansion or development will slow down at all," that is exactly what has happened. Development at most urban fringes has slowed significantly or ground to a halt. Outer-ring areas like Kane County have been most affected. Numerous platted subdivisions will remain fallow ground.

In response, says Hill, "We are broadening our definition of agriculture." The county's 2040 Resource Management Plan (just adopted in May) includes a chapter on community health, and its agriculture chapter goes beyond land protection to encourage local food production. Hill says the development rights program may encourage participation by smaller farms, or even agricultural lands within Kane County's municipalities. "We don't see replacing our corn and soybean farms," she says, "but the subdivisions that will never be built, maybe that land is good for smaller farms."

This idea is backed up by the commodity farmers in Deep Roots. "The idea of corn and soybeans just isn't going to be viable," says Bob Kellogg, "if there are thousands of people around us." "There's a lot more profit [in diversification]," suggests Dave Jameson, "than in selling by the semi-truckload."

Selling land for top dollar is less likely these days, even at the urban fringe, so commodity farmers are looking at their options—encouraging starter farms, for example. LSP's Karen Stettler says that in Minnesota her beginning farmer classes are always filled, often with younger farmers, many of whom don't have family land but are interested in non-commodity farming: small acreages of vegetables or free-range, pastured animals.

Stettler also notes that LSP is one of at least nine other organizations across the nation operating beginning farmer programs. LSP regularly collaborates with other nonprofits looking to start such programs.

There is no denying that farming is hot right now, especially organic farming. Total organic acreage increased by two-thirds between 2006 and 2008 and has continued to climb. According to the USDA, there were about 4.8 million acres being farmed organically across the U.S. in 2008 (up from 2.9 million just two years earlier). That's still a drop in the total farmland bucket, but an ever more noticeable one.

2040 Conceptual Land-Use Strategy
At the same time, farm transition stories abound. Atina Diffley’s multisite stint, then purchase of land, then sale to a grocery co-op is one example. LSP’s transition stories—a carefully managed passing along to a family member; a risk-taking young farm couple—are others. And what Kane County has allowed its commodity farmers to do through its purchase of development rights program is yet one more.

It’s hot

Many of these successful transitions have benefitted from policies and programs put in place by public agencies or nonprofits. It is far more likely now than even just 20 years ago that the value of farmland will be recognized and that there will be some assistance for those who want to continue to farm.

“People say farming isn’t valuable enough to trump development prices,” says Atina Diffley. “I would say the opposite is true. The money generated from development feeds a family once; then it’s gone. Farming feeds people repeatedly. Food production is priceless.”

New subdivisions gobble up farmland all over the Chicago region. The Olson farm (top) in Kane County was protected in 2010.

In my family, several things took place rather quickly after my father and I took that train ride to Minneapolis. My elderly childless great uncle took advantage of current tax law and gifted his adjacent 163 acres to his nieces and nephews (my father included), adding about 40 acres to each person’s current holdings. A local farmer, well known in the community, approached my father about taking over the lease on my father’s land. This man wants to increase his rented acreage because his son, a part-time commercial airline pilot, is interested in farming.

Our land will remain undivided. And, trying to stay open-minded about non-commodity options, my father has given me free rein on about three acres next to a small creek, on which I will consider alternate (perennial) crops—ones I can tend only occasionally from afar (or cajole my father into helping maintain, in trade for the spoils).

Near the end of *Deep Roots*, young Ben Flanders, whose father sold the family’s land development rights to Kane County, wonders aloud about his farming future. He says he’s still weighing his options. “I might never be a farmer,” he says, “but I’ll always be a farm boy.”

And that’s the key. Even if he doesn’t farm his family’s land, someone will. Someone will grow up as a farm kid.

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Kane County’s 2030 and 2040 plans: www.countyofkane.org/Documents/Quality%20of%20Kane/2040%20Plan/default.htm.

*Deep Roots* can be ordered through the Kane County Farm Bureau: 630-584-8660 or www.kanecfb.com.

Atina Diffley’s *Turn Here Sweet Corn* is available through Amazon.com, Barnes and Noble, and other major outlets.