The Ann Arbor Greenbelt Project and Property Rights

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In 2003, the voters of Ann Arbor, Michigan, the City of Ann Arbor approved a 30-year property tax increase to preserve open space and farmland at the City’s periphery. The mileage that funds the Greenbelt Program is expected to generate $84 million over 30 years.

The program so far has preserved 703 acres at the cost of $11.26 million. Although it is still too early to tell whether they will have had merit, the promises of greenbelt advocates are attractive.

More parkland and an end to urban “sprawl” top the list. With growth focused inside the greenbelt, the argument goes, densities will rise to a level that can efficiently support mass transit, thereby reducing every ill from air pollution to road congestion. Higher densities, too, claim supporters, also provide more opportunities to walk and bicycle.

Greenbelt detractors, on the other hand, have grave concerns about the equity of the program. They argue that reducing the acreage of land available for residential development will negatively affect the inventory of affordable housing in an area already notorious for its high housing costs.

“Anything that increases the value of real property is great if you already have a piece of the pie,” one citizen complained at a recent public forum on the progress of the Greenbelt Program. She was particularly concerned because the Greenbelt amenity will mainly abut high-income areas of the City, making already highly desirable properties even more valuable. “Same old story. The rich get richer.” More troubling to Isadore Freeman, a longtime resident of Pittsfield Township, is the inequity, as he sees it, of curtailing commercial and industrial growth just when it is arriving in Pittsfield. “We have been waiting years to benefit from that growth! The elitist swine across Ellsworth Road don’t care a nickel about us.”

Pittsfield Township, especially when compared with Ann Arbor, is not affluent and many residents struggle financially. The growth of its tax base has not kept up with its needs for services and employment opportunities have mostly been quite distant for residents of Pittsfield. “Just when we expected our roads to be fixed, they shut off the tap. How fair is that?”

The swine, as it were, contend that the City plans to purchase property and development rights for the greenbelt on the open market. “If there is demand for a Walmart way out there, then Sam Walton can buy it out from under us,” an unnamed source in the City administration explained. Of course, that assumes that the City does

what the City plans. The possibility that the City may use its eminent domain powers provides an incentive for landowners in the path of the greenbelt to sell to the City and for developers to look elsewhere for property. Also, those not wishing to sell are likely to cut the best deal now, rather than later risk the chance that the ordered selling price from condemnation will be lower. Even without the threat of condemnation, there are not many able to compete with the purchasing power of Ann Arbor’s program, Sam Walton not withstanding.

Interestingly, it is no longer just the purchasing power of Ann Arbor taxpayers that opponents of the Greenbelt must face, but also the dollars from their own pocketbooks. Recently, the US Department of Agriculture anted up $335,000 from its Farm and Ranchland Protection Program to subsidize the Greenbelt Program.

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