

**Farmland on the Urban Fringe:
Lessons from Portsmouth, Rhode Island**

**by Charles N. Giller
May 1993**

**Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for
the degree of Bachelor of Arts, with Honors,
in Environmental Studies at Brown University**

Abstract

This thesis examines issues of farmland preservation in urbanizing areas. Using Portsmouth, Rhode Island, as a case study, I explore:

- why urbanizing towns want to preserve farmland
- different ways to preserve farmland
- different perspectives within towns on ways to preserve farmland
- whether efforts to preserve farmland on the urban fringe can succeed
- whether towns should undertake these efforts

My research centered on interviews with eighteen nonfarming residents who live around two Portsmouth farms, and interviews with six Portsmouth farmers representing four different farming operations.

I found that nonfarming residents value most highly the open space attributes of farmland. They express a particular interest in *worked* open space over natural open space. Few residents cite other benefits of farmland, such as reduced cost of and need for town services. Nonfarming residents are unsure of what factors make it difficult to farm on the urban fringe, and are uninformed about the operations of the neighboring farms. They focus on *farmland* preservation, not preservation of *farming*. Residents generally prefer that Portsmouth pursue inexpensive ways to preserve farmland, such as restructuring the zoning ordinance to prevent farmers from selling their land to be developed.

Portsmouth farmers have responded to what they believe to be nonfarming residents' chief motivation to preserve farmland: Farmers now market themselves as *managers of open space*. Farmers oppose restrictive policies, such as modifications to the zoning ordinance, that would limit what they can do with their land in the future.

In 1992, Portsmouth's town government approved of a land-use plan that aims to limit future farmland loss. The plan is a balanced response to the positions of nonfarming residents and farmers, but its compromising approach may prevent the town from accomplishing its goal. In the future, the town should clarify whether it wants to retain commercial farming operations or preserve open space. Although the goals of farmland retention and open space preservation are similar, they do not always overlap. If the town chose to retain farming operations, it could pursue policies and programs that increased nonfarming residents' contact with and understanding of these operations. Such policies and programs would bolster market conditions for some of the town's farmers, make nonfarming residents more aware of their inherent connections to commercial agriculture, and generally inform residents of issues important to farmers, laying the groundwork for additional policies to improve farming conditions in the town.