

WHAT ONE MAINE TOWN HAS DONE

Unity's land use ordinance contains several provisions that help protect farmland and farmers.

Defining the Right Growth District

Unity's Growth District is the existing village center and the surrounding area that is served by public sewer. It was purposely made small, but it is large enough to accommodate future growth, primarily through in-fill development. Though the district includes some working farmland, the amount is tiny compared to the overall amount of farmland in the community.

Channeling Development into the Growth District

Unity's ordinance encourages new development to locate in the Growth District rather than on the farmland found throughout the Rural District. It does this by allowing significantly higher densities and smaller lots downtown. (Lots can be as small as 10,000 square feet if connected to public sewer.) The ordinance also requires most new commercial activity to be located downtown, including all new retail businesses except farm-related and small home-based businesses.

Providing Flexibility in Rural Lot Size

Unity's ordinance allows rural land to be developed in creative ways that can lessen negative impacts on farmland. In the Rural District, Unity requires an average lot density of 120,000 square feet (about 2¾ acres) per unit, but it does not require that all new lots be that size. Big lots can be interspersed with small lots (as small as 20,000 square feet where soil conditions allow), as long as the average density is maintained.

This approach allows farmers wishing to sell a few house lots to do so without giving up as much of their farmland. It also allows developers to create site plans that retain large tracts of open space (including farmland) under a single ownership, without reducing the number of lots they can create.

Protecting Existing Farms through Setbacks on New Development

Unity's ordinance includes setbacks designed to minimize the impacts that farm operations may have on new development, such as the spreading of manure. It does not allow new residential wells to be drilled within 300 feet of commercial farmland, or new houses to be built within 100 feet of farmland.

Limiting Development on Farmland

Unity's ordinance requires that all new developments be configured in ways that protect farmland to the maximum extent practical. New structures and roads may be built on farmland, but the applicant must seek ways to creatively minimize development that:

- 1) occurs on productive farmland;
- 2) divides a single field; or
- 3) otherwise reduces the ease with which a parcel of farmland can be farmed in the future.

Such measures may include interspersing small and large lots to maximize the size of a field in a single ownership, or locating some or all structures in woodland abutting fields.

Beyond this, Unity's ordinance requires "larger" developments (construction totaling over 20,000 square feet and any subdivision including five or more lots) occurring on parcels of land containing 5 or more acres of farmland to adhere to the following standards:

- 1) no more than 15% of the farmland may be used for non-agricultural structures, roads, or other impervious surfaces; and
- 2) the remaining farmland shall be retained in a manner that facilitates agricultural use.

Encouraging Developers to Protect Farmland

Unity's ordinance allows landowners who are subdividing land to create more lots than otherwise allowed if they take extra steps to:

- 1) locate new structures away from productive farmland; and
- 2) protect farmland through permanent deed restriction.