

EDITOR'S PICK

ON THE FARM: PULL OF THE LAND STILL STRONG

ON THE FARM: Father, son represent different faces of decline in Stafford farmland

By VANESSA REMMERS | THE FREE LANCE-STAR

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Robert Greenlaw's grandfather and father sold most of the thousands of acres his family once owned in Stafford Co
Dave Ellis

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The Greenlaws are a family straddling two worlds within Stafford County.

There is the father who left the farm to pursue a career in development. And there is the son, who has returned to the farming world of his grandfather's time, one that has all but disappeared in Stafford.

The grandfather—Hunter Greenlaw Sr.—often picked up dirt from his fields, sifted it in his palm, watched it run through his fingers.

“He loved the land. He loved the dirt. He was just a good farmer,” said his son Hunter Greenlaw Jr.

Over the years, Greenlaw Sr. acquired thousands of acres, mostly in southern Stafford, including land with ties to George Washington's family. Some of the property remains in the family, but much is in the hands of developers, including the 1,200-acre Sherwood Forest. Walton International, a real estate company with headquarters in Canada, hasn't submitted formal development plans for Sherwood but likely will propose homes on at least part of the parcel.

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“I think it would be a crime to see a piece of property like that turned into homes,” Robert Greenlaw, his grandson, said about the open fields on State Route 3 east of Fredericksburg.

He wishes his grandfather had placed Sherwood in a conservation easement to protect it from development. But it seemed the elder Greenlaw saw no other option.

“When he sold Sherwood Forest, he didn’t know what they were going to do. He just knew his body was worn out and it was time for him to retire,” said Hunter Greenlaw Jr. His father died about 10 years after retiring.

Theirs is not an unusual story in Stafford County, which has seen the most dramatic decrease in farmland in the region. Between 1987 and 2012, farm acreage dropped by 12 percent regionally, but Stafford’s farmland plummeted by 44 percent, according to the 2012 Census of Agriculture.

Greenlaw Jr. is like many children who opted out of the farming life of their parents in favor of more lucrative careers.

“I didn’t want to do that every day. That’s a hard, hard life,” he said. “You’re up early and you go to bed late. And it is seven days a week.”

Greenlaw Jr., 71, became one of the most well-known developers in the Fredericksburg area, and his ventures have both succeeded and failed.

This world is his calling, he said. He gets to work with people and be a part of growing something, even if it is buildings instead of crops. But he still wrestles with what his occupation means for the world he grew up in.

“When you grow up on the land, you feel a part of the land,” he said, adding it would be sad to see Sherwood developed. “When you go up there, you want to see the fields and the crops, not the houses. On the other hand, you understand population, growth and all that.”

He helped sell about 300 acres, adjoining Sherwood Forest, to Walton for potential development. In the end, he said it was the right business decision for the group of investors to whom he answered.

“On the one hand, I don’t want to see it developed. On the other hand, I’ve got to protect the rights of my investors,” he said. “It was a business decision.”

He said his love of farmland is one of the reasons his company concentrates on commercial or industrial projects that slice up less land than residential projects. If he does support a residential project, it usually includes a commercial component or clusters homes together while retaining open space. Most of his projects have been in Fredericksburg and Spotsylvania County.

“I don’t like subdivisions. If it isn’t cookie cutter, it is close together,” Greenlaw Jr. said. “You know development is coming. So the best way is to try and manage it the best you can.”

TURNING BACK TIME

On a recent Monday, Robert Greenlaw cradled his 2-year-old son Graeme in his lap as he drove along fields of alfalfa and clover on his 146-acre farm. It was time to feed his chickens, readjust their cages and collect their eggs.

He looked out his window, across Kings Highway, to see the green fields of Sherwood Forest, the land his grandfather once owned.

He had been living in Harrisonburg and working for the State Department of Environmental Quality. But he wanted a purer life, one that depended on natural processes and also respected the land.

He quit his well-paying job to live off land he inherited from his grandfather while his wife, Gini, got a job teaching in Spotsylvania schools. They planned to support themselves through her job, vegetables sales and income from the chickens and, eventually, cattle.

When he quit his job, some family members looked at the father-to-be like he was crazy.

“I got a lot of, ‘What are you thinking?’” he said. “But I wanted to live by my own example.”

Four years later, he sees signs that the plan is working.

He points to what looks like a thin stick poking out of the land, something only he notices. It is a new type of tree he has planted.

By the afternoon, butterflies and bees flutter over the fields, fields that used to be cropland or mined for minerals. The biodiversity excites the James Madison University geology major.

“I look at it as we are healing the land,” Robert Greenlaw said. “I could have sold the land and walked away a millionaire, but I don’t think I could have slept at night.”

The couple named the land “Earth’s Echo Farm” and placed it under a conservation easement.

He watches YouTube videos to educate himself on growing vegetables and raising free-range chickens without chemicals.

His grandfather’s 1963 John Deere tractor and 1979 Ford sit near vegetable patches, waiting for repairs that he’ll eventually get to.

He has taught Graeme how to stand tall and wave his hands to protect himself from the hissing geese that guard the laying hens. That way, the toddler can join his father and 5-year-old brother, Cullen, in collecting five to six dozen eggs each day.

In many ways, Robert Greenlaw is the exception in Stafford. At 38, he’s considerably younger than 60, the average age of farmers in the Fredericksburg area—and the state. And he has ample land for livestock. His property is twice the size of the average farm in Stafford.

Not only has farmland decreased the most in Stafford, but its farms, on average, are the smallest in the region.

NO SILVER BULLET

Stafford County is the closest locality in the Fredericksburg region to the nation's capital. In 2015, its population was 140,176, according to the University of Virginia's Weldon Cooper Center for Public Service, making it one of Virginia's fastest growing counties.

County leaders bemoan the loss Stafford farmland. But they have no plans to change the zoning regulation that some consider a driving force behind residential sprawl.

Under an agricultural zoning that covers almost half the county, a developer can build a house on every three acres without needing public hearings or formal approvals by county supervisors. By comparison, Loudoun County—Virginia's fastest growing county in 2015—established more agricultural districts with lots ranging from one house every three acres to one house every 40 acres.

Robert Greenlaw called Stafford's three-acre lots "glorified yards" and an "absurd waste" of rural land.

There isn't a silver bullet solution to preserving the remaining farmland, he said, but changing that rule would go a long way. Tying that change to more preservation incentives, support for farmers markets and less red tape for conservation easements would also have an impact, he said.

"I don't think people really see the value of farmland until it's gone," he said.

Stafford County Board of Supervisors Chairman Bob Thomas thinks such a change would hurt some landowners, not help them.

He said that changing the one-house-every-three-acre rule would be done "on the backs of farmers" who depend on profits from selling their land to developers.

"We would basically be devaluing their land," he said. "And some of these elderly farmers or families struggle with paying their taxes. We don't want to see three-acre lots, but also there is a value to that property."

He proposes that farmers take matters into their own hands.

“I might suggest that those farmers who want to preserve that farmland go buy the property and farm it,” Thomas said.

The county has ramped up some efforts to preserve farmland. One program compensates property owners for placing a conservation easement on their land. It has protected 347 acres in Stafford since its establishment in 2007, according to a county report.

That program does not include Robert Greenlaw’s land; his easement is through the state.

Another pilot program allows property owners to voluntarily exchange development rights from so-called sending areas to receiving areas. It is designed to move development from rural areas to more urban areas suited for growth.

There are also proposals to designate targeted growth areas in the county, signaling to developers that Stafford doesn’t consider land outside those areas suitable for dense growth. A current proposal—which supervisors will consider in August—puts Sherwood Forest outside a targeted growth area and states that water and sewer infrastructure isn’t appropriate on that land. Walton opposes that proposal.

The farmland debates aren’t likely to end anytime soon.

Meanwhile, Robert Greenlaw plans to continue farming the land like his grandfather did. Perhaps, he said, one of his sons will be interested in farming one day.

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ON THE FARM

Part 1: Searching far and wide for farmland to rent