



Balancing Act

Fayette Alliance Seeks to Preserve and Promote

By Jacalyn Carfagno

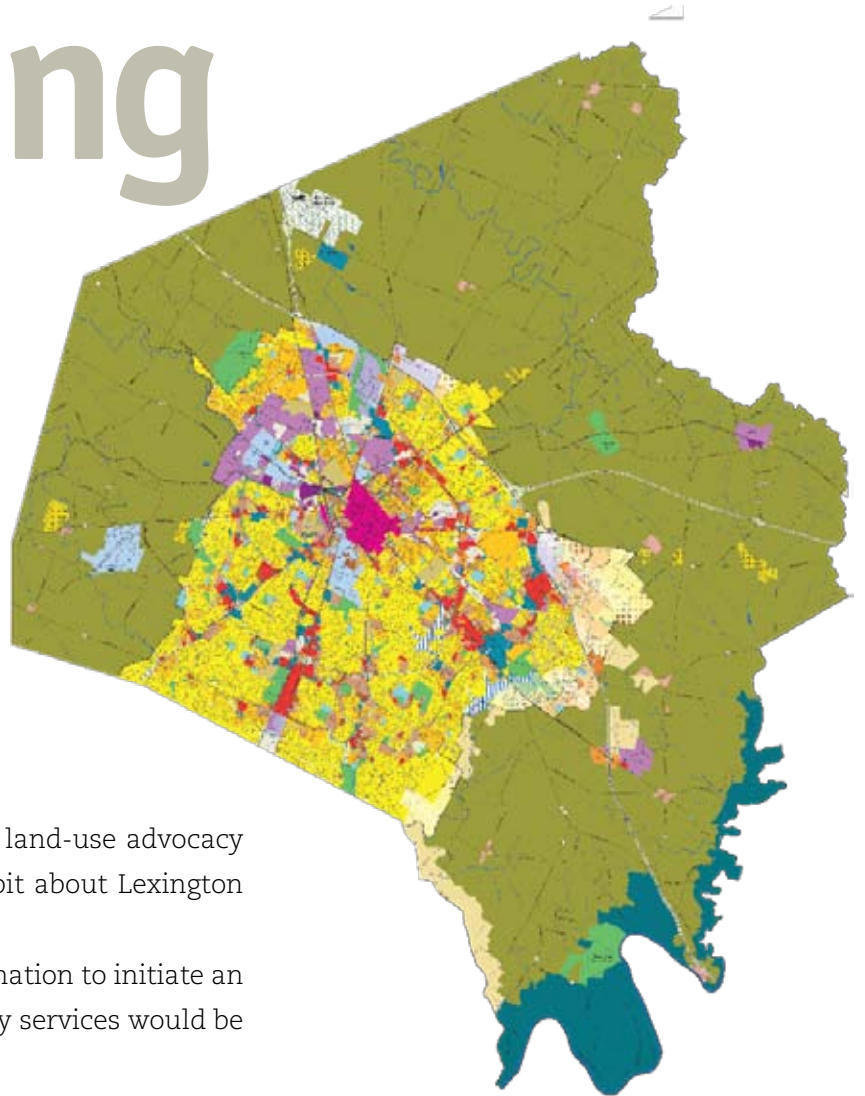
To understand the Fayette Alliance and its land-use advocacy mission, you need to understand a little bit about Lexington and Fayette County, Ky.

In 1958 Lexington became the first city in the nation to initiate an urban service boundary, a line limiting where city services would be provided.

In 1974 the governments of Fayette County and Lexington combined to become the first merged city and county in Kentucky, taking on the jaw-breaking name of Lexington Fayette Urban County Government, or LFUCG.

The union of the sleepy but pleasant small university city and the surrounding farmland often reflected the awkwardness of the name. With plenty of space for each, the urban and rural worlds rarely intersected. The farmland offered a nice Sunday afternoon drive for city dwellers; the city provided a convenient if crowded service center for those who lived outside the boundary.

When city and country began bumping up against each other in the 1980s and early '90s, that cool but cordial relationship was sorely tested. Noise, light, and pet dogs bothered valuable Thoroughbreds when subdivisions were built



Fayette County's comprehensive plan establishes a boundary for urban services. The green area signifies land zoned for agricultural use.



Alliance board member Don Robinson maintains saving farms requires advocating for the inner city.

up to their fences. Quiet neighborhoods that had overlooked scenic pastures suddenly began dealing with traffic congestion and run-off from driveways and roofs of houses that had replaced farmland.

In 1996 LFUCG planners went to work examining the comprehensive plan that sets the urban service boundary, as state law requires every five years. Since the previous review, demand had grown for subdivisions and shopping centers, and

a proposal by the city planning staff, backed by developers, to extend the boundary split the community into two camps. Their slogans resounded with the debate's take-no-prisoners positions: "Growth is Good" and "Growth Destroys Bluegrass Forever."

In the end, 5,400 acres were added to the urban service area. Rooftops and parking lots became the norm in parts of the county that had seen only rolling fields and board fences.

That was the background five years ago when a group of farm owners met with council members at Greg Goodman's Mt. Brilliant Farm to express concerns about a proposal to build a subdivision in their area.

They got a sympathetic ear and a piece of advice: Get organized.

Developers, homebuilders, and neighborhoods are regulars at city hall, but the farm owners only show up when they have a problem. "We started thinking about that," Goodman said. "We

FAYETTE ALLIANCE

What: A nonprofit land-use advocacy organization that through research, advocacy, and education seeks to preserve farmland while encouraging sustainable economic growth.

How started: In 2005 a group of mostly farm owners realized that in order to have an impact on planning and zoning in Fayette County they needed to have a constant, professional presence in decision-making rather than address issues on a case-by-case basis. Recognizing that a "global" approach was essential, they reached out to developers, neighborhood advocates, and other civic leaders to form the Alliance the following year.

Mission: A sustainable, livable Lexington.

Accomplishments: Worked with city hall to get more than 40 major land-use policies passed into law in Lexington-Fayette County, including the 2006 decision to stop expansion of the Urban Service Boundary, the ongoing funding of the Purchase of Development Rights program, and fees to support efforts to improve water quality. The Alliance has also provided critical support for zoning to enable several infill projects.





WELL-QUALIFIED

When Knox van Nagell's daughter Caldwell was born in 2009 she became the eighth generation of the family to live in Fayette County.

Van Nagell's roots here go back to the late 18th century when her family was given a Virginia land grant near what is now the Fayette-Clark county line.

Today her parents continue to raise cattle, soybeans, and other crops on Brookfield Farm.

The cattle are still managed on horseback and drink from spring-fed streams, but the family business has adapted: leaner meat, artificial insemination, and Internet auctions are all part of Brookfield's modern operations.



JEFF ROGERS PHOTOS

Executive director Knox van Nagell is a seventh-generation Fayette Countian.

As executive director of the Fayette Alliance since its founding, van Nagell has helped Fayette County find a similar path to preserve the best of the past while charting a strategy to thrive in the modern world.

She may be uniquely qualified for her role, said Don Robinson, a member of the committee that considered candidates and settled on van Nagell. Her training and experience as a lawyer have been critical to establishing the organization's credibility, he said. "Every position we take is taken carefully and taken legally, and that's important."

That's not to say she's legalistic in her approach to Lexington's challenges and opportunities, Robinson said. "She's the most passionate executive director we could ever have hired."

Sitting in her office in an historic downtown building, with photos and articles about the family farm on the wall, pictures of her family on her desk, and her yellow Lab on the floor, van Nagell, 32, summed up the conviction behind her passion:

"I think Lexington really has the potential to be one of the coolest cities in the world."

needed to form this organization that would stay on top of these things and be prepared."

But prepared to do what?

They wanted to preserve farmland, thinking that's critical to Fayette County's economic future, but they weren't anti-growth and certainly didn't want to return to the bitter debate of 1996. Many in the group, such as Texas native Goodman, were successful business people. They believed in economic growth and in saving the Bluegrass. And they didn't think the two were incompatible.

"We wanted Lexington to grow in the right way," he said.

That's the conclusion that Don Robinson had come to after years of serving on the LFUCG planning commission. Robinson, owner of Winter Quarter Farm, where champion Zenyatta was raised, has deep roots in Fayette County as a third-generation Thoroughbred breeder. He'd sat through countless hours of arguments before the commission, seen sprawl take its toll on farmland, and watched the urban core shrink.

"You can say 'save our farms' but that doesn't get anywhere," he concluded. To protect farmland, "you must advocate for the inner city; it's absolutely essential."

As president of Keeneland, Nick Nicholson understands the issues and became an early supporter. "Land use advocacy is tricky," he said. "You can fall in the trap of opposing every idea, but the community needs a vibrant economy; it needs jobs, and it also needs to protect this beautiful, unique land."

The initial group recruited neighborhood and downtown advocates, farmers who grew other crops, business people, and even developers. Reflecting the broad base and comprehensive approach to planning, the organization named itself The Fayette Alliance.

Depending on how you look at it, the timing was either perfect or impossible.

The founders hired Knox van Nagell, a young lawyer, as executive director, and hung out its shingle just as LFUCG was again updating the comprehensive plan. Developers were pushing hard to convert more farmland into subdivisions. The political and economic forces at play were powerful, and, as the earlier debate had shown, emotions ran high.

"The Fayette Alliance got it out of the no growth/all growth debate and spoke rationally," Robinson said, presenting data on vacant and underused land inside the urban service boundary, the outlook for the real estate market, and the costs of loading overextended sewer and storm water systems with additional development.

The planning commission decided not to extend the boundary, and Robinson, who served on that body for almost a decade, is convinced that without the Alliance the outcome would have been different.

Van Nagell had the benefit of sound advice from board members who had been through these debates before, Robinson said, but her cool, logical, fact-based presentations carried weight and gave the Alliance credibility. That, he said, has allowed the Alliance to carve out a role in the debate about growth in Fayette County.

Goodman puts it a little differently: "She comes in there fully informed of issues and presents the facts. There's not a lot of BS to it." And, despite all the passion that van Nagell and her board have for Fayette County's future, there's not a lot of drama. "We're not jumping up and down, screaming and yelling," he said.

They are all excited, though, about a future Fayette County that, in addition to Thoroughbreds, produces food for the region. Essential to their vision is a vibrant downtown with all the services people need to live there and plenty of amenities to entertain visitors. Goodman, fellow board member Antony Beck, and other investors recently backed



The opening of Shorty's, a downtown market, put the alliance's philosophy into practice.



MATHEA KELLEY PHOTOS

Shorty's, a deli and grocery that caters to downtown residents. From his perch at Keeneland, Nicholson sees people travel from 50 or more countries annually attracted by the beautiful countryside and the horses it produces. "They're hoping that Lexington will be different than just anywhere else," he said. They want a community that is as unique and exciting as the landscape.

Van Nagell looks at the data and sees an exciting future for Lexington. Household sizes are shrinking and oil prices are climbing, a combination that points to people wanting smaller homes, closer to where they work and play. But she knows that development in a settled area is often harder, more time consuming, and expensive than building on farmland.

The Alliance advocates lowering the barriers to development inside the Urban Service Boundary while protecting existing neighborhoods. "We have to make it easier for developers to do the

right thing."

That's the key to relieving the pressure to take over more farmland for residential developments.

If successful in striking a balance among many interests that both compete and are intricately linked, Van Nagell believes the Alliance will have achieved a true win/win.

"Doing tract housing on the perimeter with very little mass transportation not only degrades the environment but economically doesn't make very much sense for the city or, frankly, the people living in those houses."

Facts ever at hand, she points out that the cost of owning and operating a car today is equivalent to the cost of carrying a \$100,000 mortgage.

"This organization is extremely constructive," said Robinson. The entire focus is on "how we can have the precious landscape and survive and thrive."

"I'm convinced we can do that," he said. "We've got to do it." 🐾