

House Bill 80 Proponent Testimony
Gregg Sparks - Sparks Springs Farm, Spring Valley, OH
April 28, 2015

I'm a retired Air Force Colonel and my family made a decision to settle in Greene County, Ohio and establish a farm. My wife and I are from central Illinois farm country, my Mom's family have been farmers for three generations and my wife is a farmer's daughter. After 24 years of moving with the Air Force, Spring Valley, Ohio had the perfect location to establish a farm. When I say establish, I mean we built the entire farm from reclaimed ground that had been abandon in the 70's as farm land. During the past 12 years we have cleared the land, developed pastures, fought back all the ills of land neglect and today it is absolutely gorgeous. My model is a farmstead of the early 1900's, but all new. We have folks drive out to just see the farm scene, we have artist parked at the road side painting pictures. Just to describe what we have built.

We do grass-fed beef, pork, pasture-raised chickens and turkeys, plus hay. All direct market and we have a hard time keeping up with demand . We show off our farm on every customer visit and encourage people to bring the kids and grandkids. With visits from the customers, we have had several requests to do a farm wedding on our property In 2013, we had a local girl, may wife knew through the school district, ask if we would consider her wedding, as her future in-laws were all farm folks. We said, yes and held the wedding on our property. It was wonderful and my wife loved conducting the event and showing off the farm. We did research on what it would take and the likely demand. We were shocked at the number of couples interested in being married on an authentic farm. Not a sterile showplace, but a working farm.

That fall, we started pursuing how to work with my township on zoning and nothing fit, they wanted me to be commercial, but we couldn't have our farm, so we applied on what appeared to fit, agri-business. Although it wasn't an exact match, we applied for the proper hearing and at the hearing had 14 neighbors show up in support, but one who threatened the township with a law suit, if we were approved. Problem was the hearing board wanted to approve us, but unknown in all the zoning records a position was filed in 1991, well before we purchased, the land owner was trying to break-up the property and rezoned the surrounding area to A-5 and agri-business was only allowed on A-10, which is what all the records indicated. We are eligible to reestablish our property to A-10, but will be denied, due to the threat of the law suit the township would not approve.

Since that time, we have had nothing but problems as the neighbor felt she had won and tried to influence the country auditor and township trustees to stop us.. They have assured me that the farm is protected by State law, but not the agritourism venue we would like to establish. The Township trustees want us to sue them, so they can be protected, but we do not want to waste the money on a ever delayed court suit. Lawyer told me most zoning suits take over 2 years and can be delayed. The amazing part is

that for 17 years a farm very similar to ours operated a similar venue until the owner was stricken with cancer. Same Township, same rule set and he never applied for any zoning to conduct business successfully for all those years.

I am recognized throughout the community as trying to bring back small farms by currently working with 5 families, establish similar farm operations on properties sized 12 to 28 acres. But the issues of trying to do simple things like bringing people onto our property for a wedding is met with great resistance. By the way, we do hold personal events on our farm with up to 120 people and many of the neighbors don't even know they happened. We have tested and plan to comply with noise and traffic standards for our events, outlined by rural communities who have allowed agritourism opportunities, my cattle make more noise than those standards.

Just another point on the disparity of zoning rules that welcome and inhibit agritourism. We live 3/4 mile from the Warren County boarder, if our farm was 1 mile south, they would welcome our opportunity. Only 25 miles away the City of Miamisburg has opened agritourism to their city in 2010, with a simple change in zoning for agriculture properties (14) Organized meeting space for use by groups for entertainment, educational, corporate and/or public functions.