

The Fayette Alliance seeks to preserve farmland while advocating for sustainable urban growth.

FRIENDS *of* FARMLAND

*Fayette Alliance Advocates for Smart Land Use
in Lexington's Urban and Rural Corridors*

By Robin Roenker

Making a Difference

FAYETTE ALLIANCE

While undeniably beautiful and iconic, Fayette County's famed horse farms aren't valuable merely for their scenery or even for their key role in the Thoroughbred industry.

These farms — and Fayette County agriculture as a whole — are also crucial economic engines for the region, helping fuel the city's economy and improving the quality of life for all citizens here.

Understanding the farms' deep importance, Fayette Alliance — a nonprofit land-use advocacy group celebrating its 15th anniversary this year — was founded to preserve and protect Fayette County's farmland while advocating for smart, sustainable



Brittany Roethemeier
heads the Fayette
Alliance.



Don Robinson, a founder of the Fayette Alliance, says the quality of life in Lexington "is pretty extraordinary."



Greg Goodman, with wife Becky, is another alliance cofounder who understands a vibrant urban center is key to protecting farmland.

growth within Lexington's urban center.

"Fayette Alliance was really born out of this desire to ensure that Lexington grows in a responsible and sustainable way," said Brittany Roethemeier, the group's executive director. "And that means connecting our vibrant city with our beautiful and productive farmland. It's the balance between the two that's so critical to our future."

Preserving what makes Lexington unique

Fayette Alliance was founded in 2006 by several citizens — including Don Robinson of Winter Quarter Farm, Greg Goodman of Mt. Brilliant Farm, John Phillips of Darby Dan Farm, Jimmy Bell with Godolphin, Helen Alexander of Middlebrook Farm, and others — who were concerned about plans for a proposed large-scale subdivision development on a horse farm along the Russell Cave Road corridor.

At a time when local government leaders and planning commission members were facing mounting pressure from certain sectors to expand land use in the county for housing, farm

preservation advocates felt the need to band together in the form of Fayette Alliance. They hoped that by using a unified voice informed by a data-driven approach to smart land use, they could help educate citizens and county leadership alike about the value of agriculture to the area and get a seat at the table of the decision makers.

"I got really compelled by how we treat farmland in Fayette County. I recognized agriculture as our signature economic driver — and that the farms also drive tourism here and are why people want to live here," said Robinson, a former member of the Lexington-Fayette Urban County Government's Planning Commission who helped found Fayette Alliance and still serves on its foundation's board of directors.

"Everyone agreed that the quality of life in Lexington is pretty extraordinary. You can travel from the center of downtown to a horse farm in the countryside within 15

The protection of horse farms from urban development initially galvanized Fayette Alliance founders, but the mission changed to include all farmland.



minutes here, which is unique nationwide, really," Robinson said.

"The Thoroughbred industry employs thousands of people at all levels and allows for beautiful nature to characterize the region as its brand," agreed Chauncey Morris, a Fayette Alliance board member and executive director of the Kentucky Thoroughbred Association and Kentucky Thoroughbred Owners & Breeders (KTA/KTOB).

But while a large part of Fayette Alliance's initial mission was — and remains — farmland preservation, it has expanded over its 15 years of operation to include advocacy for all agricultural operations in the county as well as "smart growth" for the city's inner urban core.

"We may have started by talking about [preserving] horse farms, but our mission quickly changed to include all agriculture as we educated ourselves," said Greg Goodman, a Fayette Alliance board member and founder. "And, eventually, we figured out that the better downtown is, the less people are going to come and tear up the farms. So, it's ended up that we've worked on more things that are inside the urban service area than outside."

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— DON ROBINSON, COFOUNDER



Developing urban Lexington in a way that benefits the community is a key objective.

Roethemeier agreed: "What began as a focus on protecting and promoting land for equine purposes and agricultural industries turned into this more holistic focus on not only our farmland, but the other side of the coin — how best to grow and develop the city to meet our needs as a community."

Encouraging smart growth to benefit everyone

Since its founding, Fayette Alliance has worked diligently to proactively inform local planning and zoning policy with research-based data on the value of agriculture as well as sustainable land use.

Fayette Alliance's work, in Roethemeier's words, is "different but complementary" to the land conservation work being done by the Bluegrass Land Conservancy (BLC), a local nonprofit land trust, and the Purchase of Development Rights (PDR) Program, a conservation program launched in 2000 that is overseen by the Lexington-Fayette Urban County Government's Rural Land Management Board.

"The work of the BLC and the PDR Program laid the foundation for a more comprehensive approach to smart land-use policy and advocacy around those issues, which is how Fayette



Roethemeier says helping decision makers understand the economics of the local agriculture industry has been a "turning point."



Above and opposite, an Evening in the Garden and the Keeneland Bluegrass International Cup, both held at Mt. Brilliant Farm, are important fundraisers for the alliance.



Alliance came to be," Roethemeier said.

While the three programs might have a similar broad goal — farmland conservation — their specific approach to preserving farmland is different. "Our advocacy and educational programming around that work is what differentiates us, but we all work together toward a responsible and sustainable future for Lexington-Fayette County and Central Kentucky overall," said Roethemeier.

For its part, Fayette Alliance focuses on a three-pronged approach: prioritizing public education, research, and public policy advocacy about responsible land use.

Through partnerships with researchers at the University of Kentucky's College of Agriculture, for example, Fayette Alliance has helped fund studies that illustrate agriculture's key role in the economy of the region.

"Agriculture has a \$2.3 billion economic impact on an annual basis here in Lexington," said Roethemeier. "Even more tangibly, one in 12 jobs in Lexington is

supported by agriculture. And helping policy makers and decision makers understand the economics of our local agriculture industry — that farms aren't just beautiful unused greenspace — has really been a turning point for us."

Since 2006 the group has helped usher in more than 130 major local land-use policies through advocacy with the Lexington-Fayette Urban County Government and its Planning Commission, according to Roethemeier.

"Planning and zoning policy shapes the way we live, work, and play in our community," she said. "Our goal from the beginning was to create an organized presence to impact and inform conversation and decisions around those issues. And our track record shows we've been extremely successful in doing so."

Fayette Alliance has also funded research by nationally recognized urban planning firms to better understand existing areas for development within Lexington's urban core. One study by Lord Aeck Sargent found that Lexington currently has more than 17,000

acres of vacant or underutilized land within its urban services boundary with the opportunity for development.

With that knowledge in hand, "we can then advocate for policies that work to maximize this land and promote a responsible use of our resources," Roethemeier said.

"We've never been anti-development," agreed Goodman.

In its work, Fayette Alliance has partnered with groups such as the Coalition for a Livable Lexington, CivicLex, Fayette County Farm Bureau, KTA/KTOB, Seedleaf, the Fayette County Neighborhood Council, Black Soil, and others, to promote the development of and funding for affordable housing, improved access to public transportation, investment in local infrastructure, urban agriculture, local election education, and other essential services within the city's urban center.

To help educate residents about smart growth, the group hosts a free four-week educational program called Grow Smart Academy, which offers workshops on economic development, environmental sus-

tainability, affordable housing, addressing infrastructure challenges, and the way all of these issues are related to land-use policy.

During local election years they also host candidate forums, compile candidate questionnaires, and do more to educate community members about where their local candidates stand on important land-use issues that impact Lexington residents' daily lives.

"Fayette Alliance was formed to be an ongoing advocate for how we are going to grow," said Robinson. "We know we will grow. But how do we grow? Let's be intelligent about it. Let's be data-driven, and let's consider the needs of the community."

"We are dedicated to achieving sustainable and equitable growth here in Lexington," agreed Roethemeier. "Through our work, we have found that preserving our unique and productive farmland, advancing innovative development, and improving our community infrastructure are all interrelated. All of these goals are essential to our collective success as a community." **KM**