SYMPOSIUM CONCLUSIONS

Mary K. Holmes, Chair

Northeast Ohio continues to lose farmland to residential, commercial, and industrial development at a rapid rate. At the same time, the region is not growing substantially in population, and so the result is what we have come to identify as “Urban Sprawl.” Second only to Texas, Ohio consumes more land per capita than any other state. Why is this so? What is the connection between this land use activity and our prosperity as a region? These are questions we desperately need to answer.

This Symposium was designed to bring together a selected group of organizations and committed citizens who are working toward finding answers to these questions and developing strategies to pursue an alternative future. There were three goals for the day:

- First, to provide an important learning opportunity as participants and presenters/panelists share their knowledge and expertise with each other.
- Secondly, to discover opportunities for collaboration and strength through cooperation.
- Finally, to engender encouragement and renewed commitment to positive change.

Several important ideas were added to the discussion of land use in the region. These ideas need to be developed and expanded into the broad dialogue about the future of the Western Reserve. One idea is the value of the land for food and fiber production. Looking at a map of the world where soils, climate, and water converge to make deciduous forests and productive farmland possible, the uniqueness of our region becomes startlingly evident.

While there is certainly a context of laws, political authorities, taxes, and public investments in which land use decisions are made, the decisions themselves are still made primarily by individual land owners, sometimes in extreme situations. Lack of knowledge of available options, or misconceptions of estate and other laws may be leading to undesirable outcomes, even for the landowner.

Decisions made by state and regional agencies to make significant public investments in roads, water, sewer, and other infrastructure have enormous impact on rural communities that may not be evident for several years. Likewise structural changes in food production and transportation which have occurred over the last 45 years have so dramatically changed farming in the nation, that a whole new notion of local foods and small scale farming must be envisioned and supported if any productive farmland is to be part of the region’s future. This vision must include tracking farm productivity as part of the region’s output and industry. It must also challenge the notion that farmland and forests are “undeveloped” and awaiting a higher or better use.
While each organization represented has its own mission, goals and agenda to pursue, there were several ideas that these groups and others might pursue as next steps:

- Initiate a “brown bag” lunch meeting of interested groups (and seek to add more like minded organizations to the mix) where ideas could be shared and initiatives supported across organizations.

- Convene a summit of elected officials from the region to present a vision of the future and highlight the initiatives underway to achieve that vision.

- Create a catalog of initiatives, perhaps using web based tools to create a “community” of efforts to be used by all groups.

- Seek opportunities for utilizing each other’s Public Education programs to reach public officials, landowners, citizens, and others interested in the issues.

- Find a way to coordinate the inventories of land such as the Portage County Open Space Stewardship Plan, the Anchor Strategy, and the proposed farmland inventory, and other efforts in the region so that these efforts can learn from each other and optimize the data gathered.

- Develop an agriculture coalition to strengthen the voice of farming and local foods in the regional economic development conversation.