

Effective Agricultural Zoning

What is Effective Ag Zoning (EAZ)?

Local governments often use zoning to dedicate certain lands for open space and recreation and to preserve farmland. It is important to note that agricultural land preservation is not the same thing as open space preservation, nor is it a way to stop growth. Rather, Effective Agricultural Zoning, or EAZ, is a way to preserve productive farmland.

EAZ limits the number of dwellings and sizes of lots for non-agricultural use to a true rural density, such as one dwelling per 20 acres. It also avoids fragmenting farmland for uses such as airports, golf courses and large residential subdivisions.

Many characteristics that make land desirable for farming — such as well-drained soils, slight-to-moderate slopes and cleared land — are the same qualities developers find desirable in land development.



How Does Effective Agricultural Zoning Work?

A well-designed agricultural zoning program combines several approaches described below. Municipalities can combine techniques to address their individual farmland production and preservation needs.

🏡 Exclusive Agricultural Zoning

The agricultural zone(s) designate agriculture as the primary use permitted in the area. Some non-agricultural uses are set up as special exceptions or conditional uses. This method of zoning allows greater control over the location of non-agricultural uses where they will not interfere with farming.

🏡 Agriculture Industry Zoning

This method of zoning treats agriculture as a specialized industry. Various forms of agriculture production, farm dwellings and buildings and farm-related businesses — such as roadside stands — are permitted as part of an overall agricultural production unit.

🏡 Fixed Area Ratio Zoning

This EAZ method simply dictates a building density formula, such as “X number of acres required per dwelling.” The ratio in most Pennsylvania communities is generally one unit per 25–50 acres. This acreage typically represents a productive farm. It is thought that zoning allowances of one unit for anything less than 10 acres will lead to suburban sprawl and permanent loss of farmland. Clustering the homes permitted under this approach further reduces the impact of development.

🏡 Sliding Scale Zoning

This type of EAZ varies the number of permitted dwellings based on the size of the agricultural tract. For example, it might allow the first dwelling on the basis of the first two acres, the second on the basis of the next five acres, the third on the basis of the next 10 acres, the fourth on the basis of the next 20 acres and so on, until the ultimate plateau is reached. Thereafter, the zoning reverts to the fixed-rate mode (described above), so that for each additional 20 acres (assuming 20 represents the plateau), one additional dwelling is permitted. Sliding-scale zoning allows some non-farm development to occur without overuse of valuable farmland. As with the Fixed Area Ratio tool, clustering of homes, when using this approach, further reduces the impact of development.

