

GROW UP

Fayette Alliance Buildings & Bluegrass Tour highlights Smart Growth

"To promote, through education, our irreplaceable farmland in Fayette County, to protect our unique agricultural enterprises from erosive urban expansion, and to secure a better, more prosperous future for our entire community."

—Mission Statement, Fayette Alliance

Knox van Nagell, executive director of the Fayette Alliance, knows it can be an uphill battle in making sure the average Fayette County resident is aware of the "land use pressures" that face the Bluegrass. It isn't just about responsible infill and preserving the area's signature horse farms. In their Buildings & Bluegrass Tour this weekend, the Alliance will invite residents to visit those, along with working general agricultural farms. She points out, "the difference is, we don't watch cattle and sheep run every April and October at Keeneland," but those farms are just as significant in Fayette County's "responsible growth strategy."

Tour participants will get to visit infill projects downtown, along with nine thoroughbred and agricultural farms in the surrounding countryside. (Tours leave at 9:30am and 10:30am Saturday from the Cox Street Parking Lot near Rupp Arena. Tickets \$15.)

Anyone who thinks they can ignore the impact of this countryside as nothing more than scenery is in for an economic awakening. "Fayette County Agriculture and its related industries employ over 8,542 people, generate \$803 million in annual gross product, and have over a \$2 billion impact on the regional economy," according to Dr. Timothy Woods, in a 2005 agribusiness task force study.

One of the farms highlighted on the tour actively farms soy, tobacco, corn, cattle, and horses.

Van Nagell says, "The tour will give the people of Fayette County a remarkable opportunity to examine, first hand, some of the innovative ways developers are revitalizing our urban fabric, while also experiencing the beauty and diversity of our renowned rural landscape."

Van Nagell adds though that Fayette County countryside isn't just about the money, that these farms function "not only as an economic engine, but as a knowledge-

Greed. Growth. Development.

All were sold as synonymous with "progress."

Left to clean up the mess in a new millennium, today's generation is quick to apply the brakes when that particular brand of snake oil hits the shelves with a "not so fast."

When the Fayette Alliance—an organization committed to "Smart Growth"—hosts its first "Buildings and



Bluegrass Tour" this weekend, locals will get a chance to evaluate, up close, just how Lexington and Fayette County is doing on the Growth front.

While a recent Op/Ed headline in the Sunday daily paper encouraged "MAKE CITY MORE RESPONSIVE TO CITIZENS," there was no specific call to action, no "how to." The editorial concludes that what's needed is a "profound culture change" adding "that's the biggest challenge facing Newberry and the council, one that can

"Growth" is obviously something that hasn't had the most stringent oversight in Fayette County in a town where two girls can drown in the middle of Nicholasville Road because of an outdated sewer system in such bad shape that the E.P.A. has landed on Lexington like the proverbial wrath of God.

While Lexington's downtown has enjoyed some revitalization (a vibrant Farmers Market on Vine every Saturday; a new set of "Urban Lofts" on every corner; and growing arts programs at venues like the Downtown Arts Center and the Kentucky Theatre), it has a long way to go (still no grocery store in walking distance, for starters)—and the suburban sprawl still seems to model itself after mistakes larger cities (like Atlanta and Nashville) have already made.

Everyone cites Raleigh-Durham-Chapel Hill as one of the avowed models for Lexington, alongside Madison, Wisconsin (strong academic sector, strong economies, ongoing investments in arts and culture and entertainment, and revitalization of everything from their tobacco warehouses to the tobacco farming industry itself), but the path Lexington is on does not resemble the one traveled in the Triangle—and until it does, Lexington's destination will inevitably have more in common with Nashville and Atlanta than it will with Raleigh-Durham.

Lexington-Georgetown-Versailles doesn't quite roll

off the tongue the way Raleigh-Durham-Chapel Hill does. (Lexington-Richmond-Winchester-Nicholasville doesn't fare any better.)

Not yet.

Take the Buildings and Bluegrass Tour this weekend.

Van Nagell says "Currently, developers are constructing over \$500 million in infill-redevelopment projects downtown, and the equine and general agricultural farms of Fayette County support a \$3 billion agricultural and tourism

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—Knox van Nagell, executive director Fayette Alliance

based resource"—and the Alliance hopes, through tours like this one, to remind everyone in Fayette County that they have "a stake in this asset."

In a study the Fayette Alliance conducted with the Matrix Group last summer, 75 percent of respondents opposed expansion of the Urban Service boundaries. And a majority cited the scenic beauty of Fayette County as their favorite part of living here.

That's where groups like Fayette Alliance (and GreenLex, Bluegrass Pride, Kentuckians for the Commonwealth, SOIL—Save Our Irreplaceable Land, Community Farm Alliance, and others) come in.

Fayette Alliance is legally structured (like KEEP) so that they can both lobby and educate.

When Michael Douglas oozed out the 80s iconic phrase, "greed is good," in *Wall Street*, the phrase became anthemic for a generation, even though the story was clearly intended as a cautionary tale. (The hero and the anti-hero were forced to pay, at least nominally, in the movie, but in real life, Douglas ditched his starter wife and married Catherine Zeta Jones, and Charlie Sheen never seemed thoroughly domesticated away from the hookers and the blow.)

only be met by putting ordinary citizens first, loudly and publicly, every day."

OK.

Looks good on paper.

Now.

How?

Any call for accountability is worthless without a corresponding action plan. ("Call your council rep" doesn't count as a plan—what do you say when they pick up?)

At the Fayette Alliance for example, the plan is "educating the public and political leaders about the economic benefits of our unique and limited bluegrass farmland, defending key agricultural areas from further suburban encroachment, and promoting infill and redevelopment as the preferred method for new growth."

They can lobby.

And they use "newspaper, radio, television, direct mail, public presentations, and outreach programs" to create this public awareness.

Programs like this weekend's Tour are a hands-on opportunity to get involved.

industry. The Buildings and Bluegrass Tour is an exciting way to learn more about what Lexington-Fayette County has to offer, and why responsible growth makes so much sense."

Join the Fayette Alliance (859.281.1202) and make your voice heard as "loudly and publicly" as those Sunday editorials wisely advise. ■

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Visit the *Ace* archives online for 20 years of stories tracking Smart Growth, preservation, advocacy, in the bluegrass—including, most recently, "Feasts of Burden," highlighting a Kentucky "locavore movement" in the June 7, 2007 edition.

In it, Barbara Kingsolver's recent book highlighted the value of *Growing Locally and Buying Locally*, "it's a strategy that will keep grocery money in the neighborhood, where it gets recycled into your own school system and local businesses. The green spaces surrounding your town stay green, and farmers who live nearby get to grow more food next year, for you."

Founded in 1989, *Ace* is Lexington's Weekly Newspaper—Proudly providing the bluegrass with news, arts, entertainment, and community commitment for nearly two decades. Readers can reach *Ace* at editor@aceweekly.com.