

A RACE AGAINST
TIME FOR
KENTUCKY'S

2006 WATCH SITE

Bluegrass Country

Say “Kentucky Bluegrass” during Derby season, and people’s visions run to rolling meadows, plank fences, and legendary horses like Seattle Slew—winner of the 1977 Triple Crown. As one drives the old turnpikes around Lexington, seat of Fayette County and de facto capital of the 1.2-million-acre Inner Bluegrass, one passes gate after gate marked with brass plates quietly announcing some of the most famous names in the thoroughbred world—Calumet, Claiborne Farm, and Airdrie Stud among them. Through these gates have passed numerous Kentucky Derby winners and six of the 11 Triple Crown winners in history.

by ANDREW SLAYMAN

With more than 450 horse farms, Bluegrass is justly known as the “horse capital of the world.” It is a befitting moniker for a region that is to host the World Equestrian Games in 2010. By the time of the games, however, the Bluegrass may well be significantly



smaller than it is today. Despite having some of the oldest and most ambitious land preservation programs in the country, this iconic American landscape has lost more than 80,000 acres of farmland to development during the past decade, an alarming trend that landed the Inner Bluegrass on WMF's 2006 List of 100 Most Endangered Sites, and which has left many wondering how such a storied region could fall prey to subdivisions and strip malls.

The bulk of the development has been centered on Lexington, whose population has doubled in recent years. As Lexington has expanded, the ten surrounding counties—which, together with Fayette, make up the Inner Bluegrass—have come under increasing development pressure. “I’ve lived in Lexington off and on for the last 35 years, and the city has ballooned over that period,” says Rachel Kennedy of the Kentucky Heritage Council, which joined forces with the University of Kentucky’s College of Design, the Bluegrass Conservancy, and the Blue Grass Trust for Historic Preservation in nominating the region to the Watch List. Their hope is that the listing will help foster cooperation among the counties and encourage a sorely needed regional approach to planning.

“Horses do so well in the Bluegrass because of the bluegrass itself,” says WMF’s Marty Hylton, a Kentucky native. “The whole region rests on a limestone plateau, so the grass is rich in calcium and phosphorus. Horses that eat the grass develop stronger bones and muscles.” This grass and the horses raised upon it are one of the region’s main economic engines. In addition to the farms themselves, which bring in some \$250 million a year in stud fees, there is Keeneland—the second-oldest thoroughbred track in the country after Saratoga—which together with the auction firm Fasig-Tipton

books as much as \$850 million a year in horse sales. Statewide, the thoroughbred industry—with its unofficial headquarters at the Kentucky Horse Park in Lexington—brings in an estimated \$4 billion a year and is responsible for 80,000 to 100,000 jobs, according to the Kentucky Equine Education Project (KEEP). And visitors to the Bluegrass—drawn by its splendid natural beauty and many historic sites as well as its horse farms—spend another \$1 billion a year.

In addition to its horse farms, the Inner Bluegrass has at least four working bourbon distilleries, including Woodford Reserve, established in 1838 and completely restored in the mid-1990s. Woodford Reserve still buys all its grain from local farmers, draws its water from a limestone well beneath the distillery, and distills its whiskey in old-fashioned copper-pot stills up to 28 feet tall. Scattered among the pastures, a number of farms grow tobacco and air-cure it in the open-sided “Kentucky tobacco barns” that dot the landscape. County seats, including Paris and Winchester, offer historic downtowns, many of them preserved thanks to the state’s Main Street Program. Lexington itself has numerous historic sites, including Gratz Park, several preserved nineteenth-century African-American hamlets, the Mary Todd Lincoln house, and Ashland, the elegant estate of Kentucky senator Henry Clay. All in all, the Inner Bluegrass boasts 865 sites on the National Register of Historic Places and 12 National Historic Landmarks, including Keeneland, Woodford Reserve, Ashland, and the Shaker village at Pleasant Hill.

Most of these properties have been preserved through private efforts. “I’ve come to believe that most Lexingtonians get their identity from the Bluegrass landscape,” says David Mohney, dean

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FOALS STAY CLOSE TO THEIR MOTHERS
AS THEY EXPLORE OPEN PADDOCKS IN BLUEGRASS COUNTRY.



URBAN SPRAWL ABUTS A FAMILY FARM, ABOVE. THE WATERS OF SOUTH ELKHORN CREEK HAVE POWERED THE TWIN TURBINES OF WEISENBERGER MILL, BELOW, SINCE THE EARLY 1800S.



of the University of Kentucky’s College of Design. “But the irony of that is that it’s a private landscape, and the sense of public identity comes from the good will and grace of a series of private owners.” KEEP estimates that the thoroughbred industry preserves some 140,000 acres statewide, mostly in the form of working, private horse farms, many of whose owners have given conservation easements protecting their land from development to organizations like the Bluegrass Conservancy. “The conservancy was formed in 1995 to preserve agricultural resources through the use of conservation easements,” says former executive director Tim DeWitt. “Currently we hold 23 easements on 3,656 acres and are in the process of finalizing two additional easements containing more than 800 additional acres.”

Founded in 1955, the Blue Grass Trust for Historic Preservation owns two properties in Lexington—the 1811 Pope Villa and the 1815 Hunt-Morgan House—and holds restrictive covenants on 15 more. Three years after the Blue Grass Trust was established, the county put in place the first urban service area in the county, primarily as a response to groundwater pollution that was causing elevated hepatitis rates. Within the urban service area, the county would provide sewer services, but except in designated historic districts new building was only lightly regulated. Outside the urban service area, the county provided no sewer service, but set a minimum lot size of ten acres to minimize water contamination from septic systems. (Water quality remains a problem in the area, and last fall the U.S. Environmental Preservation Agency filed suit against the city of Lexington for violations of the Clean Water Act.)

While the urban service area was originally established for health reasons, it has proved an effective tool for containing growth in Fayette County. Since 1958, the county’s population has grown from about 130,000 to 270,000, an increase of more than 100 percent. But over the same period, the urban service area has grown by only 23 percent—from 69 to 85 square miles out of a total of 285. “The urban services area has worked really well at a macro scale,” says Mohney, “but not as well at a smaller scale. Outside the boundary it’s working well to preserve the rural character of the land, but the county hasn’t managed what’s happened inside the boundary.”

Inevitably, with the population growing faster than the urban service area, undeveloped parcels within the area are coming under increasingly intensive development pressure. Of the old farms that have given way to shopping malls and subdivisions,

Hamburg Place may be the most prominent. Originally a 2,000-acre horse farm on the northern outskirts of Lexington, Hamburg Place produced seven Kentucky Derby winners, the last being Alysheba in 1987. But over the past five years, a large retail complex has taken shape in what was once pristine fields, and thousands of houses have been built, are under construction, or are planned for the future. Developer Patrick Madden, whose great-grandfather bought Hamburg Place in 1898 and whose family still owns the property, says, "It became impractical to farm it as a horse farm with the Interstate, three sewers, two water lines, and an electric station running through the place. When the city grew up against it, it became silly from an economic standpoint to raise horses on it."

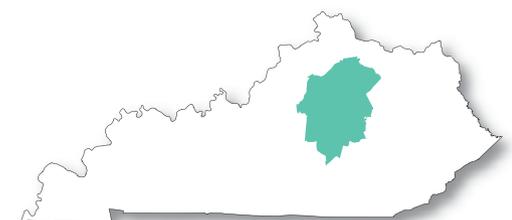
Population growth has also driven the demolition or redevelopment of a number of buildings in Lexington proper, many of which owe their fate to neglect. "This usually occurs when absentee landlords do the absolute minimum in terms of maintenance and allow buildings to deteriorate, often to the point where the city assesses fines and the threat of condemnation becomes a possibility," says Zanne Jefferies of the Blue Grass Trust. The trust has worked with owners to save a number of buildings, including several houses dating from the 1830s, a barber shop dating from 1875, and an apartment building built in the 1920s. But sometimes even well-intentioned owners are unable to preserve historic structures. In 2004, a vacant Woolworth's store dating from 1946 and listed in the National Register of Historic Places was demolished to make way for a parking lot after the owner—widely praised for his effort to save the building—failed to find tenants willing to foot the bill for a badly needed \$5 million renovation.

While some grumbling about the county's strict land-use policies in the rural zone is inevitable, there does seem to be a public recognition that much of the area's identity derives from its beautiful rural landscape, and that this is something worth conserving. In 1999, the minimum lot size in the rural area was increased to 40 acres, a move that was lauded by conservationists but criticized by some property owners. The following year the county initiated its Purchase of Development Rights (PDR) program, which sought to preserve 50,000 acres of privately owned rural land in Fayette County—out of a total of 128,000 acres—by buying development rights from the owners. So far, the PDR program has protected more than 151 farms (including 84 horse farms) comprising at least 17,000 acres, at a cost of some \$44 million—including \$20 million from the county, \$15 million from the state, and \$9 million in federal grants. Billy van Pelt, the PDR program manager, is optimistic about its future. "We have 72 applications on 6,000 acres for 2007," he says, and Lexington's newly elected mayor strongly supports continued funding of the program.

Last fall, a proposed expansion of the urban services area by 7,700 acres spilled over into Lexington's mayoral campaign. In a poll sponsored by a coalition of horse farmers, 74 percent of voters said they did not think more farmland should be offered up for development, and 71 percent said they would be unlikely to vote for a candidate who wanted to expand the urban



THE CRIMSON RED TRIM AND FLOORS OF A TRAINING BARN ON HISTORIC CALUMET FARM IN LEXINGTON, ABOVE, REFLECT THE AFTERNOON SUN. DOWNTOWN WINCHESTER, A TOWN OF 17,000 PEOPLE 30 KM EAST OF LEXINGTON, IS A SHOWPIECE FOR THE KENTUCKY MAIN STREET PROGRAM, WHICH PROVIDES TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE AND FUNDING TO REVITALIZE SMALL TOWN CENTERS.



Kentucky's Bluegrass region



MARC MANNING

THE NUTRIENTS IN KENTUCKY BLUEGRASS PROMOTE STRONG BONES AND RAPID GROWTH IN YOUNG FOALS, SUCH AS THE ONE ABOVE, STRETCHING TO GET A GLIMPSE OF LIFE OVER THE TOP RAIL

OPEN-SIDED KENTUCKY TOBACCO BARNs LIKE THIS ONE, BELOW, ARE DISAPPEARING AS THE INNER BLUEGRASS MOVES AWAY FROM TOBACCO FARMING.

service area. In the end, the anti-expansion camp won the election, and the proposal to increase the urban service area was defeated—at least for the time being. But even the staunchest conservationists admit that growth is necessary; developers, for their part, seldom deny the value of conservation—but, they say, it should be balanced against the need for new jobs and new places for people to live. “If we want to protect all the old horse farms up and down Old Frankfort Pike and Paris Pike, then let’s protect them,” says Patrick Madden. “But Lexington still does not have enough jobs and opportunities for kids coming out of college, and that’s one area I’d like to see improvement. Does that mean we have to destroy all the horse farms? I don’t think so.”

While Fayette County has largely succeeded in containing growth to the core of Lexington, the very lack of developable land in the county and the high prices it commands have driven growth in the outer counties. “Many [of those counties] don’t have the same planning and zoning approach as Fayette,” says David Mohney. Zoning regulations vary enormously from county to county, with minimum lot sizes ranging from one to five acres—tiny compared to Fayette’s 40-acre minimum. Rachel Kennedy points to Jessamine County, “border[ing] Lexington on the south, [which] has expanded its urban service area all the way to the Fayette line along U.S. Route 27. There has been urban sprawl-type growth, with significant losses of historic structures and cultural landscape.” Among the projects under development: A shopping center with almost 300 acres of retail and office space, planned for construction in phases through 2010.

The decline of tobacco farming over the past ten years, as the federal government has purchased farmers’ quotas to encourage them to convert to other crops, has had the effect of bringing more farmland onto the market. In 1997 almost 49,000 acres of tobacco were harvested in the 11-county region, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture; by 2005 the number had declined to just over 11,000 acres. When farmers stop growing tobacco, they must find alternative uses for their land. “One of the ugly alternatives is the continuation of exurban development patterns,” according to Tim DeWitt. Additionally, with the decline of farming has come the deterioration of farm structures such as tobacco barns and warehouses—both of which are included on the Blue Grass Trust’s 2005 lists of endangered sites. Beyond buildings, other landscape features such as dry-stone walls are also disappearing. As of 1967, 50 miles of stone fences survived in Fayette County; by 1990, only 39 miles remained. Since then the pace of destruction of the fences has slowed, at least in Fayette County, thanks in large part to the passage of regulations barring developers from destroying stone fences along roads. Legislation recently proposed at the state level would offer owners tax credits for restoring dry-stone fences.

While the 11 counties in the region are all tackling the challenge of planning for growth, there has been little coordination among them—yet there is a consensus among conservationists and devel-

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HORSE BARN ON THE PARIS PIKE

opers alike that regional coordination is exactly what is needed. “Planning in the Inner Bluegrass will only be successful if there’s a state mandate and if all the county governments work together to take a regional approach,” says Marty Hylton. Rachel Kennedy agrees: “It’s urgent to look at planning on a regional scale, as the Bluegrass region as a whole. What happens in Fayette has an impact on Jessamine, Washington, Montgomery, and the other surrounding counties. When we’re not thinking about that, we’re not adequately addressing the question—and there is no government organization charged with looking at it overall.” But whether regional planning can move from drawing board to reality is an open question. “I believe in regional development and planning,” says Patrick Madden, “but as a practical matter I’m not sure how you could do it when politics are involved and the [individual] counties have been run the way they’re run for a long time.”

One obstacle to regional planning is the availability of information on which to base planning decisions. “Right now much of the information about the area—its natural, agricultural, scenic, cultural, and historical resources—is dispersed through different organizations and sources,” says Dana Cox of the University of Kentucky’s College of Design, “so when policy makers look at land use and planning issues, there’s no one resource that says ‘Look what you’ve got here.’” The four groups that together submitted the World Monuments Watch nomination hope to help foster a regional approach to planning by surmounting this obstacle. “We are currently attempting to secure funding for a pilot computer modeling project that would inventory biodiversity, agricultural resources, cultural and historic resources, and scenic landscape quality across the region,” says Tim DeWitt. “We are putting together a work program for this pilot project that will cover a minimum of 20 square miles, the epicenter of which will be at the Kentucky Horse Park. We believe that once the pilot model is up and running it will generate considerable interest in preserving the Bluegrass, and ultimately provide the methodology for modeling the entire region.” But such an ambitious project does not come cheap: In their application to WMF, the coalition estimated that it would cost \$4 million over five years—a funding mandate that remains, so far, unfulfilled.

Nonetheless, all participants view the listing as an important first step. “Of all the sites on the 2006 Watch List, the Inner Bluegrass has received the most press next to Iraq and the U.S. Gulf Coast/New Orleans,” says Hylton. “The listing has helped galvanize interest in the Inner Bluegrass as a region,” says Cox. “It has given everyone something to point to.” Building on the publicity generated by the Watch, the group has put together a museum exhibition entitled *Vanishing Bluegrass*, which “explore[s] the importance of balance in urban development and land preservation and the impact [development] has on the future of the land, its wildlife, and people.” The exhibition will be on view at the Kentucky Derby Museum in Louisville through December 31, 2007. But Fayette County’s population is projected to grow by another 60,000 by 2030, and what happens both inside the urban services area—where such legendary properties as Calumet Farm remain undeveloped—and in the surrounding counties will be the truest measure of the listing’s success. And if the coalition can bring about a regional planning process that successfully balances the competing needs of growth and preservation, it will have learned many lessons of value to communities across the country—and around the world—that are experiencing similar pressures. ■