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Industrial Expansion Without Ecological Protection: Avon's Land Use Policy

*By: Phyllis A. Thompson with end note by Herman s. Forest
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Summary

The question at issue in Avon today is "Should Avon permit industrial expansion onto land which lies immediately adjacent to Horsehoe Lake on the Genesee River floodplain in the northwest corner of the Town of Avon. This land is currently zoned for agricultural uses. Consequently, a zone variance is necessary to legalize a change to industrial use.

The land involved in the zone variance lies to the west of the present Stirling-Homex plant on Rochester Street. Housing units now are being stored in an area reaching from the plant almost to the margins of the pond.

There is no question that Avon needs and wants Stirling-Homex. Agricultural activities and associated processing activities are declining within the Town limits; Stirling-Homex, producing prefabricated housing, is a desirable substitute activity with a long-term potential. In view of the expected benefits to the community, no one seriously objects to expansion of the plant. However, the precise location of such expansion is becoming a matter of local controversy. For background, refer to R.C.S.I. Bulletin, Rural Zoning in Western New York: Introductory Report and Case Study of Town of Avon, March 1970.

Specific Problems Requiring Community Education, Discussion and Decision

1. The Horsehoe pond area is in itself a unique meeting ground of dry-land, wet-land and pond communities as well as being a desirable parcel of 'natural' area which is an asset to future open-space needs of the community. It would be desirable to protect the pond and its adjacent area from impinging uses which destroy the ecological balance and the natural character of the area.
2. In the past, there has been considerable use made of the recreational potential of the pond area, especially by the young boys of the community. Fishing has been especially popular. The loss of any area with a recognized recreational potential is perhaps more costly, especially in social values, than would appear from the Town and Village balance sheets. Who can put a monetary value on the benefits to the community of an afternoon's fishing for a group of boys? Lack of a precise dollar and cents figure does not mean that no community benefits are derived.

Even now, access to the pond has been severely restricted due to the location of the plant. Hopefully, whatever the final outcome of the present controversy, guaranteed access to the area can be made available.

3. At present, the area lying west and north of the pond and extending to the river is one of the few parcels of Class I agricultural land which is free of urban encroachments. If farming is to continue for the present on this land, the water table characteristics of the area must remain relatively undisturbed. For example, any considerable increase in run-off from storage areas west of the railroad tracks would tend to raise the water table of the fields along the river, thereby impeding the drainage characteristics of the soils.

Part of the area in question is presently covered by grass, scattered brush and woodland. Some of it is very low-lying and marshy in character, therefore might require land filling, with attendant complications. Removal of this vegetation and replacement by a considerable expanse of roofing will inevitably increase run-off with the consequences discussed above.

For absolute minimum protection of the high quality farm land, the storage areas lying above this area should not be covered with an impermeable surface. The most satisfactory treatment of the surface would be a 3-4" layer of gravel which would permit relatively slow but steady infiltration of moisture falling upon the area and would protect the normal water table of the area in so far as possible.

4. Furthermore, once the area is stripped of vegetation, sediment will wash off the higher land to the east. Such sediment, moving into the pond area, will greatly shorten the life of the pond. Here again, a thick gravel surface under the stored units would decrease probable damage to the pond area.
5. Although the possibilities of flood dangers along the lower Genesee seem remote, thanks to the efficient operation of the Mount Morris dam, it is worth remembering that Canaseraga Creek joins the river below the dam. Any expansion onto a well-developed flood plain has some dangers. Although any damage done to housing units stored on the flood plain would not be a major threat to Avon (it might, however, increase downstream hazards in Monroe County), a flood could cause substantial losses to the company itself. The company should be aware of the risk, however small, and take it into account as an assessable cost in any benefit-cost estimates they may make.

Preliminary Recommendations

If Stirling-Homex should not be permitted to expand into the Horseshoe pond area, where could they go? From the viewpoint of long-range planning, the most desirable area would be west and south of their present unit in the Village itself. A part of this land adjacent to the sewer plant has been rezoned industrial. The remaining agricultural land will soon be surrounded by urban uses. When this happens, farming here will almost certainly become uneconomic. If this land is unobtainable at the present time, some sort of compromise decision involving as little damage as possible to the environment - perhaps in the form of a fairly substantial buffer zone between the storage areas and the pond and bottom land farm fields - should be worked out.

End Note

The environmental issues which are coming to a focus in Avon may lead to tragic waste of resources which cannot be recovered; in human terms, bitterness, community division, and disappointment can easily occur.

Here, also, is still an opportunity for the community, including Stirling-Homex, to seize rapidly the educational opportunity to learn how to make an environmental decision in 1970. Other communities could greatly benefit from Avon's example.

Obviously, there is a major lack of effectiveness in the community mechanisms which exist for environmental protection. Perhaps the mechanisms must be changed? However, no mechanism is effective without understanding of its part in the larger environment. Even when its management has the best of will, an industry pollutes, demands space and requires services of the community.

A generation ago, the renowned scientist and writer, Paul Sears, made a prophetic recommendation, that there ought to be COMMUNITY ECOLOGISTS. Avon and all of metropolitan Rochester needs them immediately.