

JFAN Editorial

REMEMBERING WHAT IT MEANS TO BE A GOOD NEIGHBOR

By Diane Rosenberg, Executive Director
Jefferson County Farmers & Neighbors, Inc.

Here's a scenario I see unfold time and time again. A CAFO is proposed for a community, and neighbors are distressed. Someone contacts JFAN, we advise on how to organize, and the neighbor takes steps to gather community members to fight the confinement. But the organizing frequently goes nowhere, and one more CAFO is added to the growing hog tally in Jefferson County, now numbering nearly 139,000 hogs.

It's unfortunate to see organizing efforts flounder and resignation creep in – even though neighbors are adamantly opposed to an unwanted factory farm. JFAN provides information, organizational support, and options to address a CAFO, but ultimately it's up to the community to rise up and take action if they want to try to stop a confinement.

In working with communities, I see several mind sets emerge that paralyze neighbors:

1. "This is farming, and Iowa is an agricultural state.
2. "Our laws are weak. I am powerless."
3. Mostly, though, "I want to be a **Good Neighbor.**"

Before we focus on the subject of Good Neighbors, let me be very clear about the first two points.

1. **CAFOs are NOT farms.** They are industrial agricultural operations that are allowed to inflict enormous environmental, quality of life, and public health damage because they are exempt from meaningful regulations. Agricultural exemptions were initially instituted and accepted to protect small, independent farms that, until fairly recently, produced our nation's food.

But small, diversified farms don't pollute the way large, industrial operations do. Traditional, independent farms foster responsible husbandry and environmental practices and historically contributed to the rich social fabric that nourished rural Iowa. Opposing CAFOs is not opposing agriculture. It's opposing an unregulated industry that pollutes our water and air, frequently sickens people, and unravels rural relationships. CAFOs destroy communities, and they destroy lives.

2. Yes, Iowa laws are weak, and there isn't much to work with when trying to address a CAFO. Regardless, until laws are strengthened, there are other options to deal with infringing hog confinements well worth exploring. **Weak laws are not a dead end, and communities are not powerless.**

3. However, in my experience, and far too frequently, neighbors allow CAFOs to be built without a fight because they want to be **Good Neighbors.**

To Iowa's credit, being a good neighbor is an important and integral part of being an Iowan. Rural relationships run deep and long, in many cases over generations, and include extended family members. Iowans have a long tradition of supporting and caring for each other.

Most Iowans know that being a good neighbor is essential to living harmoniously, respectfully, and responsibly. It's what people do when they care for the well-being of their communities. But constructing an unwanted CAFO is anything but acting in a harmonious, respectful, or responsible manner to one's neighbors.

To be fair, CAFO owners hear many supportive claims from the corporate livestock industry and even government agencies or agricultural universities. Some may honestly

believe that they are not causing harm or that the detrimental effects are only "opinions." Others may feel this is the only way they can continue to "farm."

However if one were to open one's mind and review even a small fraction of all the studies conducted over the last 50 years on the destructive health, environmental, economic, and quality of life impacts of CAFOs, it would be impossible to deny the harm CAFOs cause, regardless of what the corporate livestock industry claims or current regulations allow.

Neighbors often reluctantly accept a proposed confinement because they feel they should be a good neighbor to the CAFO owner. This is understandable because of personal or professional bonds that may exist. A family member or long-time friend may be building the confinement, and deep ties are challenged.

Others may be hesitant to oppose a factory farm because they, too, work in agriculture, even though they may not raise livestock. The CAFO owner might be a well-liked, respected community member.

Regardless, these sticky situations don't negate the destructive impact the CAFO will have on the entire community, and it

begs the question, "Is this person truly being a good friend/responsible neighbor/loving relative to me?" These are hard questions, but ones that the corporate livestock industry forces community members to face.

Given the detrimental impact of factory farms on families and communities all across Iowa, given the continued degradation of our precious air and water resources, is it even a valid consideration anymore to grudgingly accept a confinement in order to be a good neighbor to someone who is not being a good neighbor in return?

Times have changed with the advent of industrial agriculture, and it's time to change how the concept of Good Neighbor is applied. Now it's time to courageously be a Good Neighbor to all the other members of the community – the children, elderly, families, sick and infirm, men and women – who would be harmed by a factory farm.

It's time to be a Good Neighbor to all residents who will lose the freedom to open their windows, enjoy their yards, garden, or entertain outdoors. It's time to be a Good Neighbor to all the neighborhood children who will lose the ability to play outdoors in the fresh air and who will be more at risk for developing asthma from a nearby confinement.

It's time to be a Good Neighbor to those who will now be at risk for developing respiratory ailments, experience nausea, headaches, and confusion, or contract an antibiotic resistant infection. It's time to be a Good Neighbor to the aged, sick and infirm residents whose precarious health may be further damaged.

It's time to be a Good Neighbor to those who may lose a lifetime of hard-earned equity in their homes, often their retirement nest egg, battle fly or mice infestations, or wear out cars from driving on rutted roads that become damaged from heavy truck traffic.

It's time to ask, "Who really needs me to be their Good Neighbor?"

If a CAFO owner is violating your basic rights to the peaceful enjoyment of your home, property, and neighborhood, you have the right and responsibility to yourself, your family, and to all those in your community to stand up and take legitimate action to protect your family and neighbors.

That's who needs you to be a "Good Neighbor."

