

Hood, Community, Village

The Three Generations of Agricultural Placemaking

Featuring Hickory Run Agrivillage

Judith Horvath, MBA, CPD

Regenerative Ag Design

regenerativeagdesign.com

Authored in collaboration with Ohio Sustainable Farm Development

The Most Famous Agrihood in America Isn't One

Ask most people to name a farm-centered community and, sooner or later, they land on Serenbe. The wooded development on the edge of Atlanta has become shorthand for the whole idea: the place the press points to, the model developers cite, the name that surfaces first when anyone researches the category.

There is only one problem. Serenbe does not call itself an agrihood, and never has.

Its founder, Steve Nygren, describes the place as *biophilic*, designed around human connection to nature.¹ Serenbe's own website opens not with a field or a barn but with a line across the hero image: "A wellness community connected to nature on the edge of Atlanta," and calls itself "a neighborhood focused on wellbeing."² The farm is real and excellent, twenty-five organic acres and three hundred varieties of produce, but on Serenbe's own terms it is one amenity among several, alongside the inn, the restaurants, the school, and the Biophilic Institute.³ When I spent time with Nygren on-site, he confirmed it directly: Serenbe is a biophilic community. The farm serves it. It does not drive it.⁴

The founder says biophilic; the website says wellness community; and yet the market has filed Serenbe, almost universally, as the definitive American agrihood. That gap between what a place is and what an industry believes it to be is the reason this paper exists. If the most-cited example in the category is miscategorized by nearly everyone who cites it, the category has no working definition. "Agrihood" has come to mean any pleasant place with a farm somewhere on the property, which is to say nothing at all.

So begin with the question a working farm designer asks on first walking one of these properties: what is the role of the farm here? Well, it depends. And the answers vary wildly. This paper examines those structural differences and identifies the evolutionary generations of thinking that have emerged in this new realm of placemaking. It also shows how those choices carry heavily downstream, shaping a community's financial performance, its social and community life, and its ecological consequences. Sorting the field is not an academic exercise. The structure determines the outcomes.

A Note on Scope

Before the framework, a word on which communities this paper compares, and why the list is deliberately limited.

The generational comparisons that follow are drawn almost entirely from projects east of the Mississippi. That is a considered choice. In agriculture, climate is the master variable: it governs what can be grown, which governs the mix of enterprises a farm can run, which governs the financial model and the regenerative practices woven into the operation. A farm-centered community in Mediterranean California or the arid Southwest runs on fundamentally different agronomic and economic assumptions than one in the humid, four-season climate Hickory Run shares with the eastern half of the country. Holding climate roughly constant is what makes the financial and practical lessons genuinely transferable from one project to the next.

Where this paper reaches outside that region, it does so only for lessons climate does not touch. A farm's labor structure and the ergonomics of how a crew works a field are human questions, not agronomic ones, and they transfer anywhere people grow food by hand; so does the human sociology of how a community governs itself. When a West Coast operation or an Australian ecovillage appears in these pages, it appears for exactly those reasons, a staffing model or a cultural insight, never as a climate-dependent farm-economic comparison.

Three Generations: Hood, Community, Village

Spend enough time inside this world, visiting the projects, walking the farms, talking with the developers and the growers who actually run them, and a pattern emerges that the industry has, without quite realizing it, already named for itself.

The names are the argument. Look at what these communities call themselves, and notice the noun each one reaches for.

Some call themselves an **agrihood*. *The operative word is hood**, a neighborhood, a subdivision, a residential product with agriculture attached. The house is the noun; the farm is the modifier.

Others call themselves an **agricommunity*, or a *conservation community*, or some near cousin of the phrase. *The modifier shifts, but the noun that matters is community**: a place of shared identity and belonging, with a working farm woven into its fabric and its sense of itself.

And a small number are beginning to call themselves something else again, an **agrivillage**. A village is not a subdivision and not merely a community. By definition a village has an economy. It has commerce, trades, a marketplace, employment, and exchange with the region around it. It is a place where people live, belong, and trade.

Hood, community, village. Three nouns, and, as this paper will argue, three generations of a single evolving idea. The distinction between them is not size, not polish, and not marketing budget. It is structural, and it turns on the role the farm actually plays: whether it is carried, protected, or generative, and in which direction its value flows.

- In the **first generation, the agrihood**, the farm competes with the rest of the development for dollars and for attention, and it loses. It is an amenity, carried as a cost, and many residents are indifferent to whether it thrives. A simple diagnostic reveals the type: ask what happens to the farm when budgets tighten. In the first generation, the farm is what gets cut. Its farm is *starvable*.
- In the **second generation, the agricommmunity**, the farm is woven structurally into the life of the place, often protected by design so that it cannot easily be defunded. It provides real food and real identity. But the residential and lifestyle purpose still dominates; the farm is secure, yet it remains in service to the community rather than driving it. Its farm is *protected, but subordinate*.
- In the **third generation, the agrivillage**, the farm is neither a starvable amenity nor a protected but secondary asset. It is the engine. A farm-driven commercial economy grows out of it and reaches outward, generating food, jobs, and enterprise not only for the residents but for the surrounding region. The farm cannot be starved because it is the source of the whole system's value. Its farm is *generative, and outward-facing*.

Starvable, protected, generative. That is the ladder, and it is the spine of everything that follows.

A Progression, Not a Timeline

One clarification prevents a natural misreading. These generations describe a progression in *sophistication*, in how the farm is structured and where its value flows, not a sequence in time.

A generation is not an era. First-generation agrihoods are being planned and built right now, today, in large numbers; the model is very much alive. Meanwhile some of the most structurally advanced farm-centered communities in the country were built decades ago, well ahead of their time. A project's generation describes its design logic, not its build date. An early community can embody a later generation, and a brand-new one can embody the earliest.

This matters for more than accuracy. If the least sophisticated model, the starvable amenity farm, is still the default that developers reach for today, then this is not a story about how the past gave way to the present. It is a live problem. The market is still producing first-generation communities, still building farms designed to be cut, at the very moment when the tools and the proof exist to build something far more durable. The generations are a diagnosis of the present, not a history of it.

The First Generation: The Farm as Amenity

Return to Serenbe, because it illustrates the first generation at its highest expression. This is not a story about a failed or half-hearted farm; Serenbe's twenty-five acres are beautifully run, and the community around them is a genuine success. That is precisely the point. Even in one of the most admired developments in the country, the farm is an amenity. It enriches the setting, supplies the restaurants, gives residents something lovely to walk past, and sells the lifestyle. What it does not do is carry the community's economy or determine its future. The first generation done well still leaves the farm in that supporting role.

Most first-generation communities are less refined about it. Harvest Green, outside Houston, calls itself an agrihood and does so accurately: a master-planned community of thousands of homes arranged around a farm of roughly a dozen acres. The farm is owned by the homeowners' association and operated by an outside company, and resident engagement is voluntary and modest. ⁵ On my visit, the participation in the farm's produce program was described to me, by staff and by the resident farmers, as running around four percent. ⁶ That figure is the first generation in a single number. When a farm serves a community as an opt-in hobby rather than a structural necessity, most residents simply opt out, and the farm's fortunes float free of the community's commitment to it.

Willowsford, in Virginia, shows what that structural weakness costs. It is a handsome, well-regarded development with a real working farm, and yet, as staff on my site visit recounted, the farm had come through a period of serious trouble. A run of unprofitable years brought it close to closing entirely before new management and a revised financial structure pulled it back. ⁷ The recovery is to Willowsford's credit. But the near-death is the lesson: the farm nearly disappeared because the structure permitted it to, and it survived only when the structure was changed. That is the defining vulnerability of the first generation. The farm competes for resources it is destined to lose, and it endures only on goodwill, until the year the goodwill runs short.

The Second Generation: The Farm Woven In

The second generation solves that vulnerability. Here the farm is built into the fabric of the community by design, protected so that it cannot easily be starved, and elevated from amenity to shared identity. The community is, in a real sense, *about* its farm. But the residential and lifestyle purpose still leads. The farm is secure and culturally central, yet it remains in service to the community rather than functioning as an outward-facing economic engine.

Prairie Crossing, north of Chicago, is the prototype and one of the earliest examples of the form, which makes it the clearest proof that generation is a matter of sophistication and not of date. Its founders reached for the word *community*, and though they framed it as a conservation community rather than an agri-community, the operative noun is the same, and the working farm at its center is real. More to the point, they protected it structurally: the farmland is held under a conservation easement and its ownership placed with a nonprofit foundation, which means the farm cannot be quietly cut when a budget tightens. ⁸ It is also economically serious. Its organic operation has generated on the order of twenty thousand dollars per acre against the few hundred per acre typical of the commodity ground around it, an early demonstration that a well-run farm inside a community need not be a money pit. ⁹ The farm is protected, valued, and productive. What it is not, yet, is the engine of a wider regional economy.

Aberlin Springs, in Ohio, represents the second generation at its most culturally accomplished. Its working farm supplies food to residents and is genuinely embedded in the identity and daily life of the community, not offered as an optional extra but built into what the place is. ¹⁰ Spending time with the people who built and run it was, frankly, formative for my own thinking, and I will return to that debt shortly, because what Aberlin Springs has mastered on the cultural side is something the third generation depends on.

Witchcliffe Ecovillage, in Western Australia, sits at the leading edge of the second generation and shows where its ceiling lies. This is one of the more sophisticated projects of its kind anywhere, designed from the outset to be self-sufficient in energy, water, and fresh food. Its ecological reach extends well beyond its own boundaries.¹¹ But the distinction that matters for this framework is one of intent. Witchcliffe was conceived to be *self-sustaining*, a complete and resilient system meeting its own needs. That is the second generation's highest aspiration, and it is an admirable one. It is also, by design, inward-facing. A community built to sustain itself has succeeded when it needs nothing from the outside. My friend and colleague Jeff Thierfelder, a key figure in the design and development of Witchcliffe, walked me through much of this thinking over two days of comparing notes, and I had hoped he would help build Hickory Run before his death last year.¹² Witchcliffe stands as the clearest marker of where the second generation ends and the third begins.

The Third Generation: The Farm as Engine

The third generation begins where self-sufficiency leaves off. An agrivillage is not built merely to sustain itself. It is built, from the first line of the plan, to serve outward: to supply the surrounding population, to create enterprise and employment beyond its own boundaries, and to strengthen the peer farmers and food producers in its region. Self-sufficiency is assumed. It is no longer the goal. A village, unlike a subdivision or a self-contained community, has an economy by definition, and an economy exists to exchange with the world around it.

Hickory Run AgriVillage is designed as a third-generation community. Its farm is a nonprofit at the center of the entire enterprise, not a protected amenity and not a self-contained provider, but the productive engine from which a commercial and residential economy grows and reaches outward. The chapters that follow lay out how that engine is built, how its pieces feed one another, how the nonprofit farm and the for-profit ventures relate, and what the model produces at scale. But the placement on the ladder is the starting point: where the first generation carries a starvable farm and the second protects a subordinate one, the third generation is powered by a generative one.

Inheritance, Not Replacement

It would be easy to read this progression as a ranking, the third generation simply better than what came before. That reading misses how the generations relate, and it would be both inaccurate and ungenerous.

The third generation does not replace the second. It inherits from it. The cultural mastery a community like Aberlin Springs has achieved, the art of weaving a farm into the identity and daily rhythm of a place so that people belong to it and not merely near it, is not something the third generation improves upon. It is something the third generation requires. An agrivillage that generates commerce and employment but has no soul is not a village at all. What Hickory Run takes from the second generation, and specifically from Aberlin Springs, is precisely that cultural foundation; its own contribution is to add an outward-facing economic engine. Culture and commerce together, the belonging of the community and the reach of the village, are what define the third generation. One inherited, one added.

Each Generation Has Its Place

Finally, a point that should temper the whole framework. These are not three products of ascending quality. They are three answers to genuinely different questions, serving different people.

The first generation serves the buyer who wants a pleasant home in an attractive setting, with a farm as a welcome view and an occasional farmstand. That is a real and sizable market, and there is nothing wrong with meeting it. The second generation serves the buyer who wants to belong to something, to share an identity and a food supply and a culture rooted in the land. That is a deeper commitment and a different, smaller market, and communities that serve it well, as Aberlin Springs does, are genuine achievements. The third generation serves the buyer, and

the region, that wants to live inside a working economy built on the land. It asks the most of its residents and reaches the furthest beyond its fences, and for exactly that reason it will never be the model for everyone.

Preserving all three generations is not a compromise. It reflects the real diversity of what people want from a life connected to agriculture. But this paper concerns itself with a specific set of outcomes: the financial durability of the farm, the depth of its social and community impact, the health of the surrounding economy, and the ecological consequences that ripple outward to soil, water, and food supply. On those specific measures, only the third generation reaches beyond its own boundaries. That is the model this paper examines, and Hickory Run is its proof.

Section 2. The Inversion: The Farm as Engine

The move from the first generation to the third is not a matter of degree. It is an inversion. In the conventional model, the development comes first and the farm is fitted into it, an amenity sized to what the real estate can spare. In the third-generation model, that order is reversed. The farm comes first, and the community is built to draw on it. Everything downstream of that single reversal changes: the economics, the culture, the ecology, and the community's relationship to the land it sits on.

Put plainly, in a third-generation agrivillage the farm is not the garnish. It is the engine.

To see what that means, it helps to name the roles the farm actually plays once it sits at the center rather than the edge. In a working agrivillage, the farm is the **draw**: the reason visitors come, the source of the agritourism and the events that bring outside dollars onto the land. It is the **source**: the origin of the food, the flowers, the honey, the fiber, and the raw materials that supply the community's kitchens, its markets, and its enterprises. It is the **classroom**: the site of the education, the internships, and the workshops that train the next generation of growers and draw students, apprentices, and paying learners. It is the **grocery**: the direct, local, fresh food supply for residents and for the surrounding region, in a form the industrial food system does not provide. And it is the **curiosity**: the living, changing, season-by-season spectacle that gives the place its character and its story, the thing that makes an agrivillage somewhere people want to be rather than merely somewhere they live.

Draw, source, classroom, grocery, curiosity. No amenity farm plays all five roles, because an amenity farm is not structured to. These roles emerge only when the farm is the organizing principle rather than a feature bolted onto one.

The deeper point is reciprocity. In the first generation, value flows one way: the development supports the farm, carrying it as a cost, and the farm gives back a pleasant view and a modest harvest. In the third generation, value flows in every direction at once. The farm supports the community, and the community supports the farm. The farm feeds the restaurant, and the restaurant's custom funds the farm. The farm supplies the events, and the events return revenue and audience to the farm. The farm is supporting and supported, integrating and integrated, at the same time and by design. It is not a hub with spokes running outward. It is a web in which the farm is the densest node, and in which what leaves one enterprise becomes what feeds the next.

That web is the actual innovation, and it is where the economics of the third generation are won or lost. A single farm carried as an amenity is a cost center, and a fragile one. A farm woven into a reciprocal network of enterprises is something else entirely: a system in which each connection either lowers a cost that would otherwise be paid or opens a revenue line off an asset already owned. The next section takes that claim apart piece by piece and shows how the connections actually work. But the principle to carry forward is the inversion itself. Move the farm from the edge to the center, from carried cost to generative engine, and the entire logic of the community changes with it.

Section 3. The Integrated Enterprise Stack

The Governing Principle

The financial case for a third-generation agrivillage rests on a single principle, and it is worth stating plainly before any example, because every example is simply a demonstration of it:

In an integrated agrivillage, every conventional cost center is redesigned to become a revenue node, a savings node, or both.

This is the mechanism that separates a generative farm from a starvable one. A conventional farm-centered community accumulates cost centers: landscaping, waste hauling, marketing, customer acquisition, feed, fertilizer, event decoration, line items that consume the budget and return nothing but their intended function. In the integrated model, those same functions are re-routed through the farm's enterprises, where each one produces income, eliminates a purchase, or both. The waste a conventional development pays to remove becomes the fertility a conventional farm pays to buy. The landscaping an HOA pays to mow becomes the forage that produces salable meat. The marketing a business pays to place becomes a blooming field that also sells cut flowers.

The consequence is not merely higher margins. It is *stability*. A farm whose costs have been converted into income streams is far harder to starve, because starving it would mean cutting the very activities that fund it. This is the throughline back to the first section: the reason the third-generation farm cannot easily be defunded is not sentiment or protective paperwork but architecture. Its costs and its revenues are the same activities viewed from two sides. Cut the cost and you cut the income with it. Fiscal resilience here is not a policy laid on top of the farm; it is a property of how the farm is wired.

What follows are four enterprises that illustrate the principle, each converting a *different kind* of cost. They are a window into the system, not the whole of it; the full web of connections is shown in the diagram at the end of this section.

Four Conversions

The sheep, or turning maintenance into meat. Every residential community of any size carries a landscaping and mowing budget, a pure and permanent expense. In the agrivillage, a managed flock of sheep grazes the common turf and residential greens that would otherwise be mowed, consuming roughly two-thirds of the grass volume before any machine is needed. The same acreage that a conventional HOA pays a crew and a fuel bill to cut instead produces lamb for the community and the market, deposits manure that builds soil fertility, and eliminates the fuel, labor, and emissions of mechanical mowing. One recurring cost line becomes three simultaneous outputs: protein revenue, soil improvement, and maintenance savings. Grazing here is deliberate and managed, rotational rather than continuous, which is what allows it to regenerate the ground rather than compact it. The lawn is no longer a bill. It is feedstock.

The apiary, or stacking value on a single input. A distributed apiary produces honey for direct sale, but the same hives supply a ladder of higher-value outputs from one biological asset: honey becomes an ingredient in the agrivillage's own elderberry syrup, and the hives yield propolis, pollen, and royal jelly, the medicinal inputs sought by the naturopathic and herbalist practitioners the community is designed to attract as tenants. One input, the bees, feeds three revenue tiers of ascending value: commodity honey, value-added syrup, premium medicinal supply. The apiary also earns in two ways that have nothing to do with what the hive produces. It is a teaching asset, the basis for education programming, experiential activities, and beekeeping workshops that generate agritourism and training revenue and feed the internship pipeline. And, most valuably in strict economic terms, the bees provide pollination. Commercial growers of tree fruit, nuts, berries, and grapes routinely pay to rent hives, because pollination is a real and rising cost in American agriculture. Here that cost

inverts: the same bees that produce the honey, syrup, and medicinals also pollinate the orchard, nut trees, berry and elderberry plantings, and vineyard, raising the yield and quality of every one at no additional cost. A purchased input becomes a free internal service that lifts the output of five other revenue lines. The bees earn on every level: as product, as classroom, and as the quiet engine of the farm's entire flowering harvest.

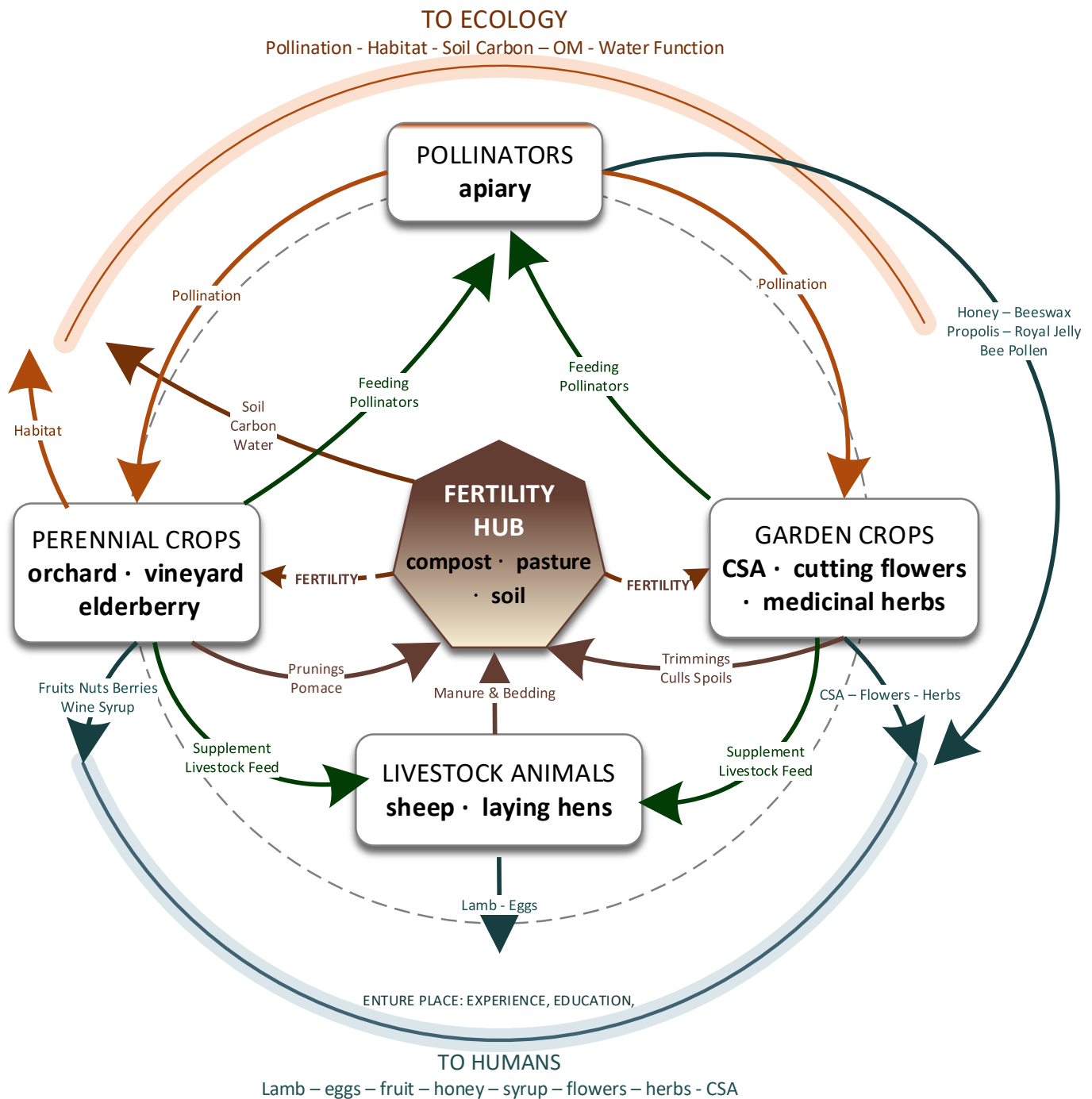
The café waste, or closing the loop from plate to soil to plate. In a conventional operation, food waste is a disposal cost and compost is a purchase; the two are unconnected. In the agrivillage they are the same loop. Food waste from the café and restaurant is composted on-site, the compost feeds the nutrient cycling of the farm's CSA production, the CSA feeds residents and the surrounding region, and the surplus that any productive farm generates flows to local food pantries and churches as charitable contribution. A disposal cost becomes a fertility input becomes a food supply becomes a community benefit. The loop that begins as garbage ends as both grocery and gift, and the farm pays for neither the hauling nor the fertilizer it would otherwise buy.

The cut flowers, or one planting doing the work of six. The cut-flower enterprise is the clearest single demonstration of the governing principle, because it converts more cost centers at once than any other node. A single strategically placed field of flowers is **pollinator habitat**, feeding the bees that supply the apiary. It is **cut-flower inventory**, supplying the event center's weddings and celebrations from stock already grown rather than bought wholesale. Sited along the main road as a designed display, it is **marketing**: a bright, seasonal, ever-changing field that functions as billboard and brand image for the whole community, at no cost beyond the crop itself. Within a dedicated cut-your-own and events zone, kept deliberately separate from core production to protect both the working farm and the visitor, it becomes **agritourism revenue**, where customers pay to harvest and do the picking themselves. It becomes a place of **emotional attachment**, where families photograph the milestones of their lives among the blooms, forging the kind of bond with a place that conventional businesses spend heavily and often fail to manufacture. And it becomes a venue for **cross-enterprise collaboration**: a bridal shower held in the middle of a blooming lavender field is the flower enterprise and the events enterprise selling each other, one asset generating two revenues and a lasting memory that markets both. Ecology, floral supply, marketing, agritourism, emotional branding, and cross-selling, from a single planting. The marketing budget, the customer-acquisition cost, and the brand-building spend a conventional development pays for in cash are here converted into a productive crop that also happens to make the farm more beautiful.

The System Beyond the Four

These four are illustrative, not exhaustive. The same logic runs throughout the operation. Garden seconds and produce culls feed the laying hens, which return eggs and reduce feed cost; all farm waste, manure, bedding, spent fodder, and the mulched output of forestry management, returns to the soil as organic matter that builds fertility and captures surface water; wandering bee swarms that reach neighboring properties become a paid removal service that is simultaneously a neighborly good turn and a source of free replacement bees; and the hospitality and events that draw on every one of these enterprises generate the agritourism revenue, the educational programming, and the internship pipeline that train new growers and bring outside dollars onto the land. Each of these is another instance of the same conversion: a cost, a waste, or a nuisance turned into income, fertility, or workforce.

The point is not any single loop. It is the density of the web. Any one connection, taken alone, is a modest efficiency. Taken together, they compose a system in which the farm's expenses and the farm's income are largely the same set of activities, and in which the failure of any one enterprise is buffered by the others, because no single node carries the whole. That density is what converts a fragile amenity into a resilient engine, and it is why the third-generation farm can stand on its own economically where the first-generation farm cannot. See the figure below illustrating sample interactions and interdependencies.



Section 4. The Three-Ring Structure

The integration engine described in the previous section raises an immediate and reasonable question. If the farm is a nonprofit, and the residences and commercial ventures are businesses, how do these pieces hold together without the farm quietly becoming either a subsidy the businesses carry or a charity the businesses exploit? The answer is structural, and it is the reason the model works where looser arrangements fail.

An agrivillage of this kind is built on three rings. At the center is the farm, held as a nonprofit. Around it sit two for-profit entities: the residential development and the commercial ventures, both belonging to the project's development organization, Ohio Sustainable Farm Development. And drawn to the whole is a third ring, largely independent: the individual entrepreneurs and businesses who lease commercial space and trade with the farm, whom the next section describes in detail. The rings are distinct by design. The nonprofit farm is not a division of the for-profit companies, and the for-profit companies are not dependents of the nonprofit. Each stands on its own footing, and the connections between them are arm's-length exchanges rather than internal transfers.

That distinction matters most in the direction the value flows. In the conventional amenity model, the development carries the farm as a cost, and the money runs one way, from the businesses to the farm, as a subsidy that lasts exactly as long as the budget allows. Here the logic is reversed and made mutual. The for-profit ventures pay the nonprofit farm for what they use: produce purchased for the restaurant, space rented for an event held among the farm's fields, products sold through shared channels. Value flows to the farm in exchange for the farm's assets and output, at fair market terms, the same way it would flow to any independent supplier. The farm is not propped up by the businesses. It is patronized by them, because what it produces is genuinely worth buying. The commercial and residential rings benefit from proximity to a working farm, and the farm earns real income from that proximity. Neither subsidizes the other.

The nonprofit structure of the farm is not incidental to this arrangement; it is the engine of the paper's larger promise. Because the farm is a nonprofit, its surplus does not distribute to owners. It returns to purpose: to the local food supply, to educational programming and internships, to research, to charitable donation, to the low-cost and no-cost classes and community access that a for-profit farm could never justify. The more the farm earns, the more it can do for the community and the region around it. Profit, in the farm's case, is not extracted. It is reinvested in mission. This is what allows a single model to make two claims at once that are usually in tension: stronger economics and deeper public benefit, arising from the same structure rather than traded off against each other.

The most important structural feature, and the one that answers the question this framework has returned to since its opening pages, is permanence. The reason the third-generation farm cannot be starved is not goodwill and not a promise. It is that the farm is designed to occupy its own parcel, held by the nonprofit, with its own zoning and property-tax treatment, cleanly separate from the residential and commercial ground around it. A farm merely woven loosely into a development can be shrunk, reallocated, or quietly defunded when priorities shift, because it has no independent standing. A farm on its own nonprofit-held parcel, distinct in law and on the plat, cannot be casually absorbed or cross-subsidized by the ventures around it. Its independence is not an intention a later board might reverse; it is built into the ground itself. That separation is what converts "we promise to protect the farm" into "the farm is structurally protected," the difference between the second generation's protected-but-dependent farm and the third generation's protected-and-independent one.

None of this requires the reader to work through the legal and financial architecture in detail, and this paper deliberately does not. The precise instruments, the entity agreements, the parcel platting, the terms governing each exchange between the rings, are being purpose-built by qualified counsel as the project takes shape. What matters at the level of concept is the shape of the thing: a nonprofit farm on its own protected ground, two for-profit ventures that pay it fairly for what they use, an independent ring of businesses drawn to the whole, and value that flows to the farm for real output rather than as a subsidy that can be withdrawn. This structure is what makes the integration engine durable, and what makes the impact of the following sections possible.

Section 5. Hickory Run AgriVillage: The Model on Real Ground

A framework is only as convincing as its embodiment. Hickory Run AgriVillage is where the three generations, the integration engine, and the three-ring structure stop being an argument and become a place.

The site sits about forty-five minutes northwest of Pittsburgh, just across the state line inside eastern Ohio, roughly one hundred forty acres in Mahoning County. Its character is best described as New England meets Midwest: the agricultural heritage and village sensibility of the northeastern countryside, set on the working farmland of the eastern Corn Belt. That blend is deliberate. It gives the project the cultural texture of an older, farm-centered way of living while grounding it in soil and a growing season that can actually carry a diverse, productive operation.

The community is organized into the three rings the previous section described, expressed here as three practical groupings. There is the farm and its market, the productive nonprofit core. There is the commercial cluster: a conference and event center, coworking space, and a set of village storefronts. And there are the residences. Each grouping maps onto the structure already laid out: the farm at the center as the generative engine, the commercial ventures drawing on it and paying it fairly for what they use, and the residences built to live in proximity to a genuinely working farm rather than a decorative one.

The farm itself is designed as an integrated, diversified operation, and its breadth is what makes the enterprise web of Section 3 real rather than hypothetical. It comprises an apiary; laying hens for table eggs; a sheep flock; a mixed orchard; a mixed vineyard; mixed berry plantings; medicinal herbs; year-round vegetable production supplying a community-supported agriculture program; and cut flowers. These are not a scattering of hobby plots. They are chosen and arranged so that each feeds the others in the closed-loop pattern already described: the bees pollinating the orchard, vineyard, and berries while producing honey and medicinal hive products; the flowers feeding the bees and supplying the events; the sheep converting turf to meat and fertility; the herbs and the hive products supplying the wellness enterprises the community is built to attract. The agricultural design, the enterprise selection, and the integration logic that ties them together are the intellectual core of the project, and they are the work this paper has spent its previous sections explaining.

The commercial ring is designed around a single, disciplined idea: curation. The storefronts and professional spaces are not intended to be filled with whatever tenant will sign a lease. They are meant to be selected, deliberately, for alignment with the community's purpose, wellness, human health, local food, and the enterprises adjacent to those. The kinds of businesses the model is designed to attract include naturopathic and family medicine practitioners, chiropractic, acupuncture, a compounding pharmacist, longevity and personal-care services, yoga and fitness, an herbalist, and the farm store itself. None of these tenants is committed yet; they represent the intended character of the commercial ring rather than a signed roster. But the point of naming them is to make the curation strategy concrete. A conventional development fills its commercial space to maximize rent. Hickory Run is designed to fill its commercial space to reinforce the farm's purpose, so that the commerce amplifies the mission instead of diluting it, and so that a resident or visitor moves through a coherent place organized around health and real food rather than a generic retail strip that happens to sit next to a farm.

Taken together, the site, the farm, the commercial cluster, and the residences are the proof that the model is buildable. Everything the earlier sections argued in principle, the inversion of farm from amenity to engine, the reciprocal enterprise web, the nonprofit farm on its own protected ground, is expressed here in a specific place with specific enterprises on real acreage. What remains is to show what a community built this way produces, not only for itself but for the region around it, and what happens when the model is repeated. That is the subject of the next section.

Section 6. At Scale: What the Model Produces Beyond the Fence

Everything to this point has concerned a single community. The final claim of this framework is larger, and it is the reason the third generation matters beyond the people who happen to live in one agrivillage. When a farm becomes the generative engine of a place rather than its amenity, the value it produces does not stay behind the fence. It flows outward, to the regional economy, to the watershed, and to the food supply. And when the model

repeats, those outward flows compound. This is not a projection. It has already happened once, at scale, in a place worth studying closely.

The Proof That Already Exists: Bluffton, Georgia

White Oak Pastures, in Bluffton, Georgia, is not an agrivillage, an intentional community, or a planned development of any kind. It is a working regenerative farm, and that is precisely why it is the cleanest possible proof of this framework's central economic claim. It isolates the variable: whatever happened to the town of Bluffton happened because of the economic force of the farm itself, with no community design wrapped around it to complicate the picture.¹³

The story is well documented, in Will Harris's own book and most recently in the just-released 2026 documentary *Groundswell*, as well as in Harris's account to me directly. When Harris began transitioning White Oak from an industrial commodity operation back to a regenerative one, the farm employed three or four people and the town around it was hollowed out. Clay County, where Bluffton sits, was identified by the USDA as the poorest county in the United States as of 2020, not the poorest in Georgia, the poorest in the country. Harris describes a town where, at the low point, the only thing a person could buy locally was a postage stamp.¹⁴

Today that same farm employs roughly one hundred fifty to one hundred eighty people, the largest private employer in the county, and its workers earn at least twice the county's average wage and spend it locally.¹⁵ The town now has a general store, a restaurant serving three meals a day, lodging, and an event center where before there was almost nothing; the general store is the only place to buy fresh food within a ten-mile radius.¹⁶ A single regenerative farm, by becoming a genuine economic engine, resurrected a dying town. Harris's agricultural evolution is documented in the films *Food and Country* and *One Hundred Thousand Beating Hearts*; the economic resurrection of Bluffton is the throughline of the book and of *Groundswell*.¹⁷

Two things make Bluffton the right anchor. First, it proves the economic engine is real, not theoretical, and in the farm's purest form, with none of the community-planning apparatus this paper otherwise argues for. If a bare farm can do this by accident of excellence, a community engineered from the first line to harness that same engine should do it by design. Second, Harris has made replication his explicit purpose: he established a nonprofit teaching arm, the Center for Agricultural Resilience, to spread the model, and speaks openly of the need for thousands of such farms across the country.¹⁸ The man who proved the engine works is himself working to multiply it, the strongest possible answer to the skeptic who assumes Bluffton is a one-time miracle.

Employment and the Local Economy

The Bluffton employment story is characteristic of regenerative farming, not an anomaly. Regenerative, diversified, integrated operations are structurally more labor-intensive than commodity agriculture, and deliberately so. Where industrial farming pursues an efficiency that removes human beings from the land, this model builds enterprises that require them: grazing, harvesting, value-added processing, events, education, direct-to-consumer sales. An agrivillage designed around a working farm and a curated commercial ring does not create a handful of amenity jobs; it creates a layered local economy, year-round farm employment, tenancy for independent wellness and food entrepreneurs, and the agritourism and education traffic that supports both. Each keeps wages and spending circulating locally rather than exporting them, the mechanism by which one farm changed the fortunes of an entire county.

Watersheds and Soil

The ecological consequences reach as far as the economic ones, and they follow from the same design choice: a farm built on perennial plantings and continuous living cover rather than annual tillage. The measurable benefits to water and soil come not from any single practice but from the whole system, above all from keeping living roots in the ground year-round.

The evidence is substantial. A meta-analysis of eighty-nine studies found that introducing perennials, the grasses, orchards, and agroforestry that make up much of an agrivillage farm, produced the largest gains in water infiltration of any practice studied, on the order of a fifty-nine percent increase, with continuous cover crops second.¹⁹ Keeping the soil covered and undisturbed reduces erosion dramatically, by more than ninety percent compared to conventional plowing in long-term studies, and cuts the runoff that carries phosphorus and nitrogen into waterways, the pollutants responsible for the algal blooms and dead zones that plague American rivers and lakes.²⁰ A landscape managed this way behaves like a sponge rather than a gutter: it absorbs and holds rainfall, reducing downstream flooding and drought stress at once, and keeps its topsoil and nutrients in place rather than sending them into the watershed as pollution.²¹

This is where the grazing animals earn a second mention. Well-managed, rotational grazing of the kind an agrivillage flock provides builds soil and improves infiltration; poorly managed continuous grazing does the opposite, compacting the ground. The distinction is not incidental. The ecological benefits claimed here depend on management, and the integrated design of an agrivillage is what makes good management the default rather than the exception.²²

Food Instead of Commodities

The third outward flow is the one most directly tied to why a nonprofit farm sits at the center of this model. The American agricultural system, for all its productivity, grows remarkably little food that people eat directly. In 2020, roughly thirty-five percent of the United States corn crop went to animal feed and thirty-one percent to biofuel, while less than two percent was grown for direct human consumption.²³ Across all major crops, only about a quarter of the calories grown in the country feed people directly; the rest becomes feed, fuel, export, or industrial input.²⁴ Researchers estimate that if those crops were directed to human consumption rather than to animals and industry, they could feed several billion more people.²⁴

This is not an argument that commodity agriculture is worthless. It is efficient at what it does, producing inexpensive feed, fuel, and export commodities, and it supports rural economies in the process. But it is structurally incapable of one specific thing: putting fresh, local, direct human food into the communities around it. That is the gap a third-generation agrivillage fills. Its farm exists to feed people directly, through its market, its community-supported agriculture, and the surplus it channels to local food pantries and churches. And there is a quality dimension beyond access: the nutrient density of produce is driven substantially by the biological health of the soil it grows in rather than by any label, so food grown in the living, biologically active soil this model cultivates can deliver more nutrition per serving than commodity produce trucked in from depleted ground, a meaningful advantage for a community that has grocery stores but no source of genuinely high-quality fresh produce.²⁵

What the Framework Promises at Scale

Return, finally, to the ladder. The first generation's farm serves the developer and stays behind the fence. The second generation's farm serves its residents and stays behind the fence. Only the third generation's farm is built to reach beyond the fence at all, and everything in this section is what that reach looks like in practice: jobs and wages that revive a local economy, water and soil that improve across a watershed, and fresh, nutrient-dense food flowing into a region that the commodity system does not feed. Bluffton proves a single farm can do it. An agrivillage is the attempt to do it on purpose, and to do it repeatably.

That is the significance of the whole framework, and the reason the distinction between the generations is not academic. The market is still building first-generation communities today, still placing starvable amenity farms at the edges of developments, at the very moment when the proof and the tools exist to build farms that generate instead. Every community built to the old pattern is a missed opportunity for the outward impact described here. The third generation is not merely a better product for the people who buy into it. It is, at scale, a materially different outcome for the land, the water, the food supply, and the rural economies of the country. Hood,

community, village: the pattern has been evolving toward this point all along, and the agrivillage is its most integrated, resilient, and ecologically responsible expression yet, a model for prosperous communities that give more to the land and the region than they take. The generations that came before proved what was possible. The third is where it comes together.

Judith Horvath, MBA, CPD

Regenerative Ag Design

regenerativeagdesign.com

judith@regenerativeagdesign.com

Hickory Run AgriVillage is a project of Ohio Sustainable Farm Development.

Notes and References

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The framework and comparative analysis in this paper are grounded substantially in the author's direct fieldwork: site visits to, and interviews and knowledge-sharing with, the communities and practitioners discussed. These firsthand primary sources include a full-day site visit and discussions with founder Steve Nygren at Serenbe (September 2023); a site visit and interviews with planners and staff at Willowsford (June 2023); a site visit at Harvest Green; a knowledge-sharing visit, tour, and Q&A at Aberlin Springs (June 2026); two days of joint presentation and discussion on intentional communities with Jeff Thierfelder, a key figure in the design and development of Witchcliffe Ecovillage (New Hampshire, September 2024); the author's podcast interview with Will Harris of White Oak Pastures; and the educational webinar "Growing Resilience: Farmer-to-Farmer Lessons in Soil & Sustainability" hosted by Singing Frogs Farm (March 2025). Specific firsthand citations are numbered below where they appear in the text.

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