

**Town of Bethlehem
Agricultural and Farmland Protection Plan
Study Advisory Committee Meeting**



SUMMARY OF MEETING July 21, 2008
Bethlehem Town Hall Room 101 – 7:00 PM

Members Present: Lynn Dente, Tom Gallagher, Paul Kleinke, George Leveille, Stuart Lyman, Nancy Neff, Chuck Preska, Tim Stanton, Giles Wagoner; Liz Brock, Debbie Kitchen, Robert Leslie, Laurie Ten Eyck

Comments on Meeting Minutes

- The Committee determined the June 23, 2008 meeting minutes were sufficient. The meeting minutes will be posted on the Agriculture and Farmland Study Advisory Committee webpage.

Present tentative meeting schedule and timeline

- Town/AFT provided a brief discussion on the tentative meeting schedule for the Agriculture and Farmland Protection Plan. The Committee recommended including a discussion on the agriculture and farmland protection “tool box” at the September 15 meeting.

Review/Finalize interview questions (themes)

- AFT reviewed the interview questions (themes) with the Committee. It was recommended that references to the term “tools” be changed. The term “opportunities” was recommended in its place. There was general discussion regarding the tools listed in Item 13 and it was determined that the PDR tool should be changed to conservation easements, which would include PDR and LDR (lease of development rights). A final question (theme) will be added: “What challenges are facing your farm business?”

Review/Finalize draft list of interviewees

- The Committee determined that no changes should be made to the potential interviewee list developed at the June 23 meeting. The Committee listed the agriculture and farming operations and the perspectives that each potential interviewee would offer:
 - Jim Bohl – crops, beef
 - Jim Frueh – crops, beef
 - John Geurtze – small livestock (sheep), vegetables
 - Dave Hillman – land use perspective
 - Jay Jakovic/Magee – heifer replacement, hay, corn
 - Linda Jasinski – rents land, sheep, beans
 - Bill Kolber – green house/vegetables
 - Rick Lesser – veterinarian, equine
 - John Mead – beef, cattle, hay, corn
 - Tom Newell – development pressure
 - Jen Preska – dairy, horses, younger generation
 - Michael Stanton – younger generation
 - Mike Waldenmaier – rental landowner

SUMMARY OF MEETING JULY 21, 2008

Page 2 of 5

There was discussion regarding the need to interview the Committee members in addition to those listed on the potential interviewee list. It was determined the best approach is to wait to see what information is provided from the interviews. If there is a need for more information, the Committee will discuss supplemental names or Committee member names for interviews. AFT will conduct the interviews during the month of August and prepare an interview summary by the Committee's September 15 meeting.

- The Town will gather contact information of the potential interviewees (address and phone contact)

Review/Finalize draft notice letter to interviewee

- The Committee reviewed the draft notice letter and determined the following:
 - Reorganize the letter to include the request for an interview earlier in the letter
 - Letter should be signed by Supervisor Cunningham and Tom Gallagher
 - Provide contact information for Rob Leslie and Tom Gallagher in case the interviewee has questions or wishes to discuss
- The Town will update the letter and mail
- AFT will contact potential interviewees following the Town's mailing
- The Committee recommended mapping the location of the interviewees to understand their representation throughout the Town.

Review SAC's results of field check of Agriculture and Farmland map

- There was discussion regarding the purpose of the map. The map was prepared to illustrate the location of farming operations and agricultural activity in Town. It was recommended that the various agricultural land use classifications (i.e. cattle, dairy, livestock, etc.) based on the NYS ORPS data be removed from the map since it is not accurate. Since crop production varies from year to year, showing the classifications does not help to provide a "picture" of agriculture activity. The Committee determined the map would be clearer if it only included agricultural district, agricultural assessment and agricultural land use (no classifications) data. This would illustrate what parcels are involved in agriculture.
- The Committee recommending preparing a soils layer map that would include prime farmland and statewide importance soils.
- The Committee discussed researching landowners who rent land for agricultural production as a distinct population in town from those that own and operate properties. There was discussion regarding the challenges and threats to rental land compared to land that is owner operated in town. The Town should meet with the Town Assessor to gather available rental data.
- **Cornell Coop. FSA research**
 - Mr. Gallagher indicated he would meet with Tom Della Rocco of the FSA to discuss agricultural data that is available from the FSA. The data cannot be provided at the parcel level, but it can be provided at

SUMMARY OF MEETING JULY 21, 2008

Page 3 of 5

the Town level. Mr. Gallagher will also research FSA data regarding renting land for agricultural purposes in Bethlehem.

- The Committee determined it would be best to illustrate the FSA data in a chart or graph.

Roundtable discussion of the agricultural community in the Town of Bethlehem

Results of the Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats (SWOT) exercise are listed below. Items were recorded as stated by committee members with minimal editing. This list will be revisited during the course of the planning process.

Strengths

- Proximity to markets/customers
- Relatively flat land
- Proximity to Albany – close to government for policy making and service providers
- Relatively affluent customer base
- Services provided by town (water/sewer) – agricultural facilities could be hooked into these in some cases (could be a threat too) (Question on public water and sewer – must you connect if it's brought to your area?)
- Proximity to other rural/farming areas – town agricultural land is part of a bigger agricultural community
- Supportive Community Culture for rural nature of town
- Customer demand for locally grown/healthy food
- Closeness of highways to transport/receive products and services
- Farmland is pretty (aesthetics)
- Large population of young people interested in equine
- Soil supports diversity of agricultural use
- Those involved in farming have a lot of experience/knowledge

Weaknesses

- Development pressure is encroaching on agricultural land
- Impact of new senior housing construction on agricultural land is a concern – odors/ loose animals/ liability
- High property/school/sewer taxes
- Trespassing on agricultural land is a concern
- Neighbor issues – neighbors in some cases are reporting perceived violations on farm neighbors of local and state regulations
- No younger generation to take over farms – long hours/poor income is leading them to want to take other jobs
- Deteriorating farm facilities
- Wet heavy clay soils limit the type of agriculture possible and the kind of money you can make from the land
- Support business are far away including vets, equipment dealers, feed, nutritionists, ag lenders
- Not enough farms to support the agricultural support businesses in town

SUMMARY OF MEETING JULY 21, 2008

Page 4 of 5

- Current zoning may not allow for new agricultural uses (or may make it more difficult for farmers to implement new agricultural uses)
- Lack of a critical mass of farms
- General public/community doesn't understand the realities of agriculture – just want it pretty – “Agriculture uses open space as a business”
- Drainage from new development impacting water flow on farmland – flooding fields and barns
- Lack of knowledge of public officials and local police – dealing with trespassing, barbed wire, truck/trailer permits
- Traffic in town – difficulty to move tractors and equipments on roads
- Pedestrians in the way when trying to move equipment – esp. bicycles
- Conflict over future of the land within families
- Issues with Planning Board and Zoning Board of Appeals in meeting requirements
- Disparity between value of land as agricultural use and development
- Estate tax issue after 2010 – taxes are due in 9 months – not feasible
- Lack of competent local labor force

Opportunities

- Get farmers involved in local policy – on Planning Board and Zoning Board of Appeals
- Direct marketing/agri-tourism (however farm markets won't solve all of agriculture's problems)
- Equine farms – growth in interest surrounding horses
- Challenges with Farmer School tax credit and 50% income requirement – opportunity to value school taxes differently
- Liability insurance reform – currently difficult to invite public onto the farm with current liability laws and fears
- Implement a tax on non-farmers to subsidize farmers
- Educational opportunities for general public
- Changing demographics – interest in buy local/older population/ interest in sustainability – all having impact to change the marketplace
- Expand Farmer's Market in town and increase access to it – encourage local farmers to sell/restrict to local vendors only?
- Town legislation to prevent people from outside the town/county to sell farm products next to farm landowners in the town. Competition from outsiders not paying local taxes is unfair
- Take a close look at zoning in non-rural areas
- Lack of slaughter facilities/processing facilities – including dairy – opportunity to attract processing.
- Link older/younger generations or existing and new farmers and land in help with next generation take over of farms
- Education in schools – encourage back to agricultural 4H – currently 4H population in more urban than rural and geared towards non-ag programs
- Credit opportunities for students in local schools – release program to work on/visit local farms.

SUMMARY OF MEETING JULY 21, 2008

Page 5 of 5

Threats

- Liability – trespassing
- Worker's Comp is cost prohibitive
- State regulations on farms – CAFOs (Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations)
- Zoning limitations on agricultural business opportunities – hard to start a hobby farm (Question on 2 hog limit?) – Site Plan Review is difficult process
- Residential Development
- Property/School Taxes
- Changing demographics towards an increasingly older population, interested in decreased commuting time, are causing land at fringe of growth to lose value
- Land conversion in the Bethlehem School district is higher because of interest in the school – not much developable land left so land values are increasing rapidly.
- Lack of commercial industry in town to keep taxes down
- Energy costs

Action Items:

- Town to update interviewee letter and mail letter this week (July 21)
- Town to obtain contact info of interviewees (address and phone)
- AFT to conduct interviews/summarize results of interviews
- AFT to transfer results of SWOT exercise to Word document format
- Town to update agriculture and farmland map to show parcels in agricultural use (remove land use RPS Classification, land owner names) Map would include assessment and district layer.
- AFT to obtain commodity data from FSA (Cornell Coop) and/or Ag Census by zip code and display in graph/chart
- Town to prepare soils map (prime farmland and statewide importance)
- Town to obtain farmland rental information from Town Assessor
- AFT to work with Cornell Coop to gather farmland rental information
- Town to prepare map of land owner interviewees
- AFT to update timeline to include discussion of tools at Sept. 15 meeting
- AFT to remove "tools" term and replace with "opportunities" and remove PDR and change to conservation easements in Themes (questions) list

Topics for September 15 Meeting:

- Review summary of agriculture (statistics) and interviews (personal knowledge) collected
- Discuss benefits provided by farms to the Town
- Discuss landowner education meeting on farmland protection topics
 - Discuss agriculture and farmland protection “tool box”