

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



SUMMARY OF MEETING September 15, 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, Giles Wagoner; Liz Brock, David Haight, Debbie Kitchen, Robert Leslie, Laurie Ten Eyck

Comments on Meeting Minutes

- The Committee determined the July 21, 2008 meeting minutes were sufficient. The meeting minutes will be posted on the Agriculture and Farmland Study Advisory Committee webpage.

Discuss agriculture interviews and statistics

- Laurie Ten Eyck provided a summary of the interviews conducted by American Farmland Trust (AFT). She indicated the interviews were completed. Two individuals were not interviewed because she was not able to contact them or they decided not to be interviewed. Her summary of the interviews included discussion on the following categories: agricultural issues, farmer/town conflicts, farmer/suburbanite conflicts, farmland protection tools, and the future of agriculture in Bethlehem. AFT will prepare a written summary of the interviews as part of the existing conditions section of the plan.
- Tom Gallagher provided a summary of the farming data that Cornell Cooperative Extension maintains. The majority of crops in Town consists of hay and corn. Other agriculture activities include raising livestock, operating greenhouses, and pasture land. Bethlehem includes approximately 60 farms that comprise 6000 acres of land. Approximately half of the farms are rented.
- The Town indicated that approximately 1% of the Town's taxable land base is agriculture, while the residential land base represents approximately 74%, commercial/industrial land base represents 20%, and wholly exempt land base represents 5%.
- Mr. Wagoner stated his property currently receives the 480a tax exemption for forestland. He indicated this program reduces his assessment by 90%.
- The Committee indicated research should be conducted to estimate the fiscal ramifications regarding term easements. The Town/AFT would look into this as the plan moves forward.

Distribute copies of updated maps

- Rob Leslie distributed copies of the Farmland Soils and Agriculture and Farmland Map, prepared by the Town, to committee members. The Farmland Soils Map illustrates farmland soils of statewide importance and prime farmland soils. The definitions of these soil groups were provided to committee members. When utilized properly these soil groups are capable of producing high yield crops. There was discussion on the soils illustrated on the Soils Map and a similar map prepared by the Albany County Soil and Water Conservation District. The map prepared by the Town includes the most current soil information from the Natural

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Resource Conservation Service, the agency that identifies prime farmland and statewide importance soils. It was recommended that another version of the Agriculture and Farmland Map be prepared with a single category representing parcels as farmland/agriculture.

Discuss landowner education meeting on farmland protection topics

- The Town announced the landowner education meeting would be held on October 6, 2008 at 7:30PM in the Town Hall Auditorium. All landowners owning 7+ acres would receive an invitation letter and preliminary agenda. The goal of the meeting is to educate these landowners on the various agriculture/farmland and open space protection tools.
- David Haight from AFT provided an overview of the agriculture and farmland protection tools that would be discussed at the landowner education meeting including Town Right to Farm Law, Public Education/Awareness, Special District Abatement, Term Easements/Tax Abatements, Easement Programs, and Incentive Zoning. There was discussion whether all taxing entities (i.e. town, school, fire, and special districts) honor the agriculture assessment. The Town indicated the Town Assessor would be able to provide this information.

Action Items:

- Town to speak with Assessor regarding taxing entities honoring agriculture assessments.
- Town to prepare alternative Agriculture and Farmland Map.
- Town to confirm percentage of taxable land use base (farmland, residential, commercial/industrial, and wholly exempt).

Topics for October 14 Meeting:

- Identify agricultural goals and objectives for the Town
- Draft a vision statement for the future of agriculture in Town
- Identify key priority agricultural areas