

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



**SUMMARY OF MEETING October 14, 2008**  
**Bethlehem Town Hall Room 101 – 7:00 PM**

**Attendance**

Members:

Lynn Dente, Tom Gallagher, Paul Kleinke, George Leveille, Stuart Lyman, Nancy Neff, Chuck Preska, Giles Wagoner

Town Staff/Consultants:

Robert Leslie, Deborah Kitchen, Liz Brock (AFT), Laurie TenEyck (AFT)

**Comments on September Meeting Summary**

The summary of the September 15, 2008 meeting was discussed and approved. The document will be posted on the Town's Agriculture and Farmland Study Advisory Committee webpage.

**Comments on Large Landowner Meeting**

Mr. Leslie provided an overview of the large landowner education meeting held October 6, 2008. 386 invitations were mailed to property owners owning 7+ acres. 66 people attended. The goal of the meeting was to provide the landowners with information about the agriculture/farmland and open space protection tools including Town Right to Farm Law, Public Education/Awareness, Special District Abatement, Term Easements/Tax Abatements, Easement Programs, and Incentive Zoning. John Behan (Behan Planning) and Liz Brock (AFT) presented the tools. Attendees were asked to break out into four groups and share their thoughts, comments and concerns about the tools. Some of the agricultural issues expressed at the meeting include the following:

- Right to Farm Law might be another level of bureaucracy that may not be needed
- Address trespassing and encroachment issues via a Right to Farm Law
- Match farmers/renters with landowners to enable landowners to qualify for Ag. Assessment.
- Develop options for farms unable to meet Ag. Assessment threshold of \$10,000 income
- Large landowners should be represented on the Planning Board and Zoning Board
- Education of farming operations to schools and residents
- Term easements was viewed as an attractive option
- Trespassing, encroachment and drainage issues were raised as major concerns

**Review Master Agricultural Map**

The map was revised in response to comments provided at the September meeting. The agricultural parcels are now grouped under one classification instead of being broken down into categories such as agricultural assessment, agricultural districts and real property data. The new classification is entitled "Parcels Involved in Farming and Agriculture". Members were asked to review the map and provide updates as needed. AFT noted that the Town will need to submit a map as part of the Plan in order to fulfill the visualization requirement. The map should encompass lands the community is looking to support and protect. Members discussed the prospect of creating a layer on the map which shows the areas of Town that cannot be used for Agriculture – including constrained lands and parcels that are already developed. Dr. Lyman asked for clarification as to whether or not the map needs to be exhaustive. He would like to make sure the map is not used as a point of reference to exclude properties that are not currently shown, i.e., industrial areas not yet developed that are suitable for agricultural uses. Mr. Leslie will add a disclaimer to the map which clarifies that the map is a 2007 snapshot of agriculture in the Town of Bethlehem and it does not preclude other parcels from being included at a later date.

**Identify Agricultural Goals and Objectives**

The Town would like to develop ways that will help to make agriculture a viable industry in Town. The Committee recommended that future decisions should be based on the use of the land - not the ability or inability to make a profit on it. The plan will include a vision, goals to meet the vision, recommendations to meet the goals, and actions to meet the recommendations. It was noted that it might be a good exercise to find out what are the economics of undeveloped farmland; what are the cost of community services; what are the fiscal ramifications of providing tax benefits to agricultural landowners since only 1% of the Town's taxable land base is agriculture, while 75% is residential, 20% is commercial/industrial and 5% is wholly exempt land base.

Dr. Lyman expressed concern that the Town has already embraced a structure to develop an Agricultural Protection Plan and it appears as though the goals already exist and the committee is at the level of suggesting implementation – not developing the goals. Mr. Leveille noted that a Tier II recommendation of the Comprehensive Plan included development of a Farm and Open Space Protection Plan. The purpose of creating the committee was to obtain direct input from the stakeholders to refine the Plan and help the Town to better understand what is meant by farmland protection. AFT will attempt to condense the goals into major categories. The following goals were discussed by the Committee:

- Work with willing landowners to conserve open space
- Encourage flexible land use policies and regulations that are supportive of agriculture, i.e., machine shop
- Utilize creative land development techniques to retain the economic value of agriculture
- Develop mechanisms for protecting and enhancing the Town's agricultural resources
- Increase opportunities for direct retail marketing and on-farm processing of farm products
- Encourage educational opportunities to enable the public to better understand the benefits of and need for agriculture
- Support economic opportunities for farmers and businesses that complement agriculture
- Support appropriate taxation of farmland and buildings
- Give farmers a voice, i.e., encourage active participation of members of the farm community on town boards and committees, i.e., Noise Ordinance Committee, Bethlehem 2020 Committee
- Encourage development patterns that buffer the effects of new residential/commercial development on agricultural businesses, i.e., regulations to address neighbor complaints, drainage issues, etc.
- Support policies that encourage agricultural use of lands and protect property rights of landowners
- Demonstrate public support for agriculture, i.e., signage, Right to Farm Laws, Community Farm Day
- Allow properties previously used for agriculture to revert back to agriculture use regardless of how much time has lapsed
- Simplify approval process for agricultural related projects, i.e., building permits
- Support the business of farming just as other industries are supported in Town
- Educate landowners about options, i.e., agricultural districts, agricultural assessments
- Reduce the minimum threshold for agricultural assessment requirements via a Right to Farm Law
- Mirror the language used in the Comprehensive Plans that speaks to respecting the rights of property owners
- Enable farmers to make decisions about the future of their property to make it more lucrative for them to stay in business

Mr. Leslie stated that the goals set forth by the NYS Dept. of Agriculture and Markets include the following:

- Document current farming operations and agricultural businesses to result in a status of agriculture and farming activities in Bethlehem
- Identify opportunities/strategies to enhance, manage, and continue the viability of agriculture and farming in the Town
- Analyze the factors concerning areas and lands proposed for participation, i.e., value to Bethlehem's agricultural economy, value to Bethlehem's community character, level of conversion pressure, and consequences of possible conversion to non agriculture and farming activities

## **SUMMARY OF MEETING October 14, 2008**

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#### **Discuss Open Space Plan "Topics Meeting" Scheduled for October 23, 2008**

The Town will hold a public meeting to discuss topics that will be addressed in the Open Space Plan, i.e., Recreation and Pathways, Natural Systems, and Agriculture and Farming. The Town will present an overview of the existing conditions and provide the community with an opportunity to discuss and develop goals for the Plan.

#### **Next Steps**

Continue the conversation about the future of farming and agriculture in Bethlehem and re-evaluate the list of goals.

Ms. Brock stated that she has begun to see an increase in the number of people who are expressing an interest in farming as a way of life rather than a business; and it is important to remember that opportunities for this type of lifestyle do exist in the Town of Bethlehem.

#### **Action Items:**

Provide the Committee Members with a copy of the NYS definition of Agriculture - to address concerns raised about whether it includes the words "for profit"

Provide the Committee Members with a copy of the Grant Requirements

Establish a definition of "Hobby Farm"

Create a definition of farming on the use of land as opposed to the motive or intent of the use

#### **Map**

- Enlarge font size of sources listed on Master Agricultural Map
- Add a notation which states that the information is based on 2007 data
- Add a notation that the map does not preclude other parcels from being included at a later date

Provide the members with a written summary of the interviews conducted by AFT as presented at the September 15, 2008 meeting.

Respond to question raised about fiscal ramifications of providing tax benefits to agricultural landowners since only 1% of the Town's taxable land base is agriculture, while 75% is residential, 20% is commercial/industrial and 5% is wholly exempt land base. What are the economics of undeveloped land?

Provide the Committee with results of research that was conducted to estimate the fiscal ramifications regarding term easements. The Town/AFT would look into this as the plan moves forward.

#### **Possible topics for the next meeting are as follows:**

- Review/discuss goals and objectives
- Develop Vision Statement

Respectfully submitted: Deborah Kitchen