

## **SUMMARY OF MEETING November 17, 2008**

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



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**Bethlehem Town Hall Room 101 – 7:00 PM**

### **Attendance**

#### Members:

Tom Gallagher, Paul Kleinke, Nancy Neff, Chuck Preska, Timothy Stanton, Robert Verstandig, Jr., Giles Wagoner

#### Staff/Consultants:

Robert Leslie (Town), Deborah Kitchen (Town), Liz Brock (AFT)

### **Meeting Summary**

A summary of the October 14, 2008 meeting was discussed and approved. The document will be posted on the Town's Agriculture and Farmland Study Advisory Committee webpage.

### **Conversation on the Future of Farming in Bethlehem (What are the opportunities?)**

Mr. Leslie distributed copies of a list of Bethlehem Agriculture and Farming Opportunities – developed at the July 21, 2008 SAC meeting; a condensed list of generic Goals for the Bethlehem Agriculture and Farmland Protection Plan – developed at the October 14, 2008 SAC meeting; as well as a list of Draft Goals related to Agriculture/Farming- developed at the October 23, 2008 Public meeting.

Ms. Brock distributed a list of agricultural related goals from the Comprehensive Plan and a list of goals inferred from the information gathering process to stimulate Committee discussion on the Plan's goals. She also noted that the October 14, 2008 meeting summary contains a complete list of goals discussed by the SAC at that meeting.

Definitions of Agriculture, Agricultural Use and Agricultural District were provided as follows:

NYS Department of Agriculture & Markets definition of Agriculture - Circular 1150, Page 5 #11:  
Agriculture -- "Farm Operation" means the land and on-farm buildings, equipment, manure processing and handling facilities, and practices which contribute to the production, preparation and marketing of crops, livestock and livestock products as a commercial enterprise, including a "commercial horse boarding operation" as defined in subdivision thirteen of this section and "timber processing: as defined in subdivision fourteen of this section. Such farm operation may consist of one or more parcels of owned or rented land, which parcels may be contiguous or noncontiguous to each other."

The Town's Zoning Law includes the following definitions related to agriculture:

Agriculture, Agricultural Use -- "The employment of land, including for the primary purpose of obtaining a profit in money, for raising, harvesting, and selling crops, or feeding, including but not limited to, grazing, breeding, managing, selling or producing livestock, poultry, fur-bearing animals or honeybees, or by dairying and the sale of dairy products, by any other horticulture, floriculture or viticulture, aquaculture, hydroponics, Silva-culture, animal husbandry, or by a combination thereof. It also includes the employment of land, including for the primary purpose of obtaining a profit, for stabling or training equines, including but not limited to providing riding lessons, training clinics and schooling shows, including other on-farm niche marketing promotions."

Agricultural District -- Shall mean a district established pursuant to Article 25-AA of the Agriculture and Markets Law.

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Mr. Gallagher submitted a copy of a document entitled: "Factors Considered by the IRS in Determining If Your Farm Is a Business". Ms. Neff noted that you can have a farm that is not actively engaged in agriculture as a business but you cannot have an agricultural business without having a farm.

The Committee is in favor of the Town adding a definition to its Zoning Law for "agri-tourism".

### **Development of Goals & Opportunities**

Mr. Preska stated that farms should be allowed to expand/diversify activities to enable them to introduce and engage in other agricultural related opportunities – including agri-tourism.

Mr. Wagoner noted that it is not clear where the plan is going with regard to small farm operations. He had been under the impression that the Committee was going to tailor the goals and objectives of the plan toward the needs of part-time farmers because the majority of in-Town farm operations are small. He believes it would be beneficial for the Town to investigate the possibility of reducing the threshold requirements for obtaining an agricultural assessment or create a different tax incentive. He asked that the Committee be provided with a copy of a written summary of the interviews conducted by AFT as presented by Laurie TenEyck at the September 15, 2008 meeting. Ms. Brock stated that she will prepare a draft for the next SAC meeting.

Mr. Leslie noted that the goal of the plan is to identify strategies and ways that the Town can continue to make agriculture a viable option. Ms. Neff noted that she believes the underlying goal of the plan is to keep the land in farming so that the land can be retained as open space. The Committee agreed that it is difficult to imagine what agriculture might look like in the future.

Ms. Brock noted that there are tools that can be utilized to enable businesses to stay viable and it would be important to build them into the strategy. The goals should be written broadly to cover the types of agriculture that could exist in the future. She noted that the Town can look at existing resources and find out what it needs to do to support or add to those resources.

With regard to the education component, Ms. Neff and Mr. Gallagher noted that there are educational resources available through the NY Farm Bureau and Cooperative Extension.

### **Agriculture & Farmland Protection Plan – Mission Statement:**

"To encourage farm and agricultural uses of land and protect property owners' rights".

### **Revised Goals/Incentives:**

- Support economic opportunities for farms and businesses that complement agriculture
- Give farmers a voice by including members of the agricultural community on Town Boards and Committees
- Encourage flexible town policies and regulations that are supportive of agriculture
- Provide voluntary incentives for landowners to continue agricultural activities
- Assist and support in resolving issues causing adverse impacts on agricultural businesses and farmland (drainage, encroachment, dumping, trespassing)
- Encourage educational opportunities to enable the public to better understand the benefits of and need for agriculture in the community

When establishing goals, the Committee referred back to the following tasks:

- 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

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- 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

The plan will include a vision, goals to meet the vision, recommendations to meet the goals, and actions to meet the recommendations.

### **Master Agricultural Map**

The map was revised in response to comments provided at the October meeting. The font size of the section showing the sources was increased; a disclaimer was added to the map which clarifies that the map is a 2007 snapshot of agriculture in the Town of Bethlehem; as well as a notation which states that the map does not preclude other parcels from being included at a later date.

### **Next Steps**

Review consistency of goals and strategies to achieve goals with the Towns Zoning Law and Subdivision Regulations.

Continue the conversation about the future of farming and agriculture in Bethlehem.

### **Action Items:**

- Distribute copy of revised goals
- Research Farmer's Markets in the Town of Bethlehem
- Develop/obtain definitions for "Hobby Farm" & "Agri-tourism"
- Find out if it would be possible to lower the threshold/income requirement that enables a farm to become eligible for Agriculture Assessment
- Contact Office of Real Property to discuss possibility of lowering assessments for parcels with term easements
- Provide the Committee with a copy of NYS Law regarding the appointment of Planning Board Members NYS Dept. of State Laws for Towns, Section 271
- Distribute copies of "Factors Considered by the IRS in Determining If Your Farm Is a Business"
- Provide the Committee Members with a written summary of the interviews conducted by AFT as presented at the September 15, 2008 meeting
- Obtain a copy of the educational resource materials available to school districts via NY Farm Bureau and Cornell Cooperative Extension and find out if any of the teachers in the Bethlehem, Guilderland or Ravena-Coeymans Central School Districts are using the information that is available to them

### **Topics for the next meeting (January 26, 2009) are as follows:**

- Review goals and compare them with Town's policies and regulations

Respectfully submitted: Deborah Kitchen