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Town Supervisor

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TOWN OF BETHLEHEM
Albany County - New York
445 DELAWARE AVENUE
DELMAR, NEW YORK 12054



**HISTORIC HEATH FARM ADVISORY
COMMITTEE**

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MEETING SUMMARY

Thursday June 20, 2024
8:00am-9:00am

Delmar-Bethlehem EMS Building, 2nd floor
114 Adams Street Delmar, NY 12054

In Attendance: Bobby Lukasiewicz, Stuart Lyman, Zan Mckenna, Gabby Sant'Angelo, David Vigoda, Dale Richter, Mark Warford, Kristen Yourno

Staff: Lauren Chiyoko Axford, Open Space Coordinator; Rob Leslie, Director of Planning; Kathleen Reid, Administrative Assistant

Meeting commenced at 8:00am.

Approval of Past meeting summary:

- Lauren circulated the draft meeting summary from May 15, 2024 by email and requested feedback.
- Lauren incorporated comments and re-circulated the revised summary.
- The May 15, 2024 meeting summary was approved unanimously.

Presentation by:

Linda Garrett, NY Regional Director, American Farmland Trust (AFT)

Presentation Topics:

- Agrivoltaics – Solar and Agriculture Working Together
- Regenerative Agriculture: Improving Soil Health
- Linda provided a brief history of American Farmland Trust AFT- a national nonprofit organization committed to saving America's Farmland.
- AFT protect farms from develop and keep farmers on the land
- AFT Promotes sound farming practices

Agrivoltaics Benefits:

- Solar development is a major threat to viable farmland; instead of working in competition, AFT wants to help determine how best to co-site energy production and viable farming, providing dual-income on the same piece of farmland.
- Shades livestock- helping with herd health and overall production
- Increase soils capacity to retain water
- Dedicated income stream for farmers (even if crop fails, guaranteed income from solar)
- Many municipalities zoning laws are currently too restrictive to allow agrivoltaics without variances.

Agrivoltaics in NY:

- New York State has not yet provided incentives for solar developers to adopt agrivoltaics on projects.
- Solar leases include a decommissioning plan and a bond to pay for the decommissioning funds should be paid upfront in case the land is sold
- Leases to the solar company, are typically 30 years and can be extended another 10-20 years depending on future of solar- perhaps the lifespan is longer than we anticipate?
- Bethlehem zoning law for solar requires – a decommissioning plan and bond
- Bethlehem maximum height to top of solar panel is 12 feet – agrivoltaics layout would require a higher panel height. Typically the design is 8-ft to the racking for the panel. Town zoning law would need to be updated.
- Local law does not have an established row requirement but typical spacing is 10-15 feet, which is much smaller than 60-ft spacing agrivoltaics is using.
- Local law does not require fencing – the fence choice is up to the solar company.
- Farmers generally like the fencing for agrivoltaics as it keeps wildlife out.

Discussion:

- Adjacent solar array good for education purposes (there is an approved solar development application for the adjacent farm to the north of the Historic Heath Farm Initiative properties. This project is a conventional 5MW ground mount array)
- Would there be less opposition to solar farms IF there was also farming activities happening?
- A hypothetical scenario is that the Town would retain ownerships of a agrivoltaic demonstration site, and then lease to separate entities- the farmer and solar company. Or, lease to one entity?
- Linda - in NJ developers are paying the farmers to farm their solar developments – the incentive credit allows the developer not to charge the farmer.
- The incentive allows the developer to hold the property – good for new and beginning farmers that do not have enough capital to start farming.
- Rob – not sure the town can pay the farmer to farm the land – will have to look into with town attorney.
- David- residents may think that the town is in competition with both farmers and solar developers.

Comments:

Steve Hadcock – Team Leader, Ag Entrepreneurship and Market Development,
Cornell Cooperative Extension:

- Farmers only have part of the information, need for demonstration and research.
- Some solar developers do not want to develop this way, especially without an incentive.
- A lot of farmers are selling to solar developers to finance retirement.
- Cornell Coop Ext doing allot on soil health tours.
- Cornell Small Farms Program: is flourishing!
- Co-locating solar has challenges: every solar installation costs farmers a full year of production to remediate the soil issues caused by installation, and presents the potential to create another burden for the farmer to bear.

Tom Gallagher- Farmer, Longtime Cornell Cooperative Extension staff member:

- Younger farmers may be willing to do it.
- Older farmers are not buying into it, because older farmers will want to see it in practice before trying.
- If it can be shown to be a good tool for farm viability, that's great.
- Dedicated income from solar helps to alleviate the pressures of crop failures or other production losses (not putting all the eggs in one basket).

Linda of ATF:

- Looking to set up demonstration site to figure out how to best use this type of dual production to increase farm viability.
- NJ Rutgers University-Doing research on energy production and how animals how interacting with panels.
- What will farming will look like in 20-30 years from now? We don't know exactly, but we know it won't be the same as it is now and current factors of farmland loss aren't going away.
- Panels over vineyards and apple trees – in Europe, a lot of new innovation is happening, tracking panels vs. stationary, higher clearance, etc. options exist and could be explored.
- There is a lot of misinformation out there about panels leaching and contaminating soils. This has not be found to be the case.
- The AFT/Rutgers University project in NJ – was well received.
- Future farming: adjusting farming methods for greater resiliency in the face of climate change and contribute to energy production needs.
- Agrivoltaics Demonstration and research is a great opportunity to help find a path forward that recognizes our State's clean energy goals, while also acknowledging the threat solar development poses for our remaining viable farmland.

Lauren:

- Connecting with famers through: Upper Hudson Valley Chapter of the National Young Farmers Coalition, Lower Hudson Valley Chapter of the National Young Farmers

Coalition, the Northeast Farmers of Color Land Trust and Network, American Farmland Trust's Farmland For a New Generation program and program staff.

- Farmland for a New Generation provides listings of interested farmers, can search with various parameters, a good starting point to connect those seeking land tenure with those looking to lease or sell farmland.

What can AFT do?

- Depends on the scenario and approach, they are here to help think through all the possibilities.
- AFT is actively buying land, protecting it, and then selling to qualified farmers at the agricultural value (pre-emptive purchase right).
- AFT can also, facilitate research.
- Soil compactions, temperature, moisture yields.
- How much energy can be produced
- Sensors to look at shading temp and moisture.
- What crops grow best.
- Solar design options.
- Local laws to encourage or accommodate agrivoltaic projects.
- Working with solar development so there is interest in creating agrivoltaics demonstration projects in New Jersey and New York.
- AFT is also developing a guide (best practices) for land owners interested in working with both solar developers and a farmer.
- Solar developer companies will do things when the farmer asks even without the incentive – a lot of costs to solar developers, but AFT's partner companies are staying ahead of the curve knowing that solar energy production and viable farming are necessary.
- AFT doing a lot to work with farmers and to improve soil health:
 - Healthy soils support ecosystem function
 - Educate farmers and general public about benefits of these practices and their benefits such as: carbon sequestration, reduced erosion, improved yields, reduced costs and increased resiliency.
- A lot of information is available on American Farmland Trust website as well as Cornell Cooperative Extension.
- Doing a lot of research on solar in NY and NJ – Rutgers project is new, first growing season this year.
- AFT is developing a training curriculum for farmers to know how to grow crops around solar.

Lauren advised:

- The town has been awarded a \$50K grant for capacity building of the HFFI. We are waiting for the contract and funds to be received, but soon the barn will get a sign regarding progress in planning and the website for updates.
- Highway is providing maintenance (mowing, weeding along foundation).
- Stanton Farms currently leasing land.

- Farmer on a new piece of land will have to spend time getting to know the land, the soils, weather patterns, local markets, etc. Potential support through participating in an agrivoltaic or regenerative farming demonstration project could be a great tool for farmland access for young farmers.
- Potential for collaborative educational programming for farmers: American Farmland Trust, Cornell Cooperative Extension- not re-creating the wheel, but building off of existing programming.
- There are several farm programs specifically for veterans- Cornell Small Farms Program, Heroic Food, Armed to Farm, etc.

Committee Comments:

- Rob asked the group: what would be helpful to keep these discussions moving forward?
- Response: presentation(s) on how we can find who to farm here and who to work with.
- Not a specific person but how can we recommend next steps?
- Would like to see the discussion be more specific than vague.
- Expert information on what kinds of farming will go well where.
- A presentation on where and how to find the farmers/soils.
- Stuart shared: If the vision recommendation from the committee eventually includes start up opportunities for inexperienced farmers, I think the cautionary comments from cooperative extension representatives were quite helpful.

Next Steps:

-Lauren will invite additional potential partners to the next meeting

Public Comment: No public comments provided.

Next Meeting:

Wednesday July 17, 2024, 8-9:00 Delmar-Bethlehem EMS Building

Meeting Adjourned at 9:00am