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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

Wednesday July 17, 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, Tom Seymour

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

Meeting Commenced: 8:00am

Approval of Past meeting summary:

- Lauren circulated the draft meeting summary from June 20, 2024 by email and requested that comments be submitted.
- Lauren incorporated comments and resent revised summary.
- The June 20, 2024 meeting summary was approved unanimously.

Presentation by:

Molly Johnston-Heck, Regional Farmland for a New Generation Manager
American Farmland Trust (AFT)

Introductions:

- Committee Members introduced themselves and provided their background.
- Molly introduced herself and provided history on the American Farmland Trust (AFT), which is based out of Saratoga and is a national organization to help protect agricultural land and with the focus to keep farmers on the land and provide farmland protection.

American Farmland Trust (AFT)

- AFT is a national organization whose mission to preserve the land that sustains us by keeping farmers on the land, promoting environmentally sound farming practices, and protecting our agricultural land.
- AFT operates across the United States. The national office is in Washington, DC and the regional office is here in Saratoga Springs, NY.

Farmland for a New Generation (FNG) is the Land link/ Farm finder entity in New York, which is operated in partnership with AFT + NYS Dept. of Agriculture & Markets

Farmland for a New Generation (FNG) – New York: General Information + Stats

- Farmland New Generation-NY began in 2018 with the launch of the NY Farmland Finder website.
- Before that, FNG worked primarily in the Hudson Valley and managed the Hudson Valley Farmlink Network since 2015.
- Many states and regions have land link websites where landowners can post available farm properties and land seekers can create profiles.
- NY Farmland Finder (NYFF) website has directories of properties and land seekers, as well as events related to land access and transition, resources to help land seekers and landowners, and farm jobs for those looking to gain experience before seeking land themselves.
- As of early 2022, NYFF is only farm link site in NY.
- Provides website, resources, technical assistance (TA), network coordination.
- Most of their technical assistance is with farm seekers.
 - Connecting with landowners.
 - Evaluating properties to determine whether it's a good fit.
 - Clarifying goals and plans.
 - Developing a business plan.
 - Gathering paperwork to access financing.
 - Drafting or reviewing lease agreements.
 - Referrals to attorneys, accountants, business planners, conservation planners.
 - Focus on working with non-operating farmland owners – including institutions and municipalities.
 - Tracked 148 matches in 6 years or +9,000 acres of land and supported thousands of farmers with events over the years.
 - Thousands more beginning farmers and farmland owners supported with events and TA over the years.
- NY Farmland Access Fund:
 - Buy land, protect it, sell to farmers – creating land access opportunities.
 - There is huge value in playing the role of holding land and creating these opportunities – farmers need TIME to get financing together, landowners often do not have time to protect land (especially using state FPIG dollars) – they need to sell land quickly.

What are Farm Seekers looking for?

- 50 farm seekers currently listed on the site looking in Albany County.
- Only 2 Albany County properties are listed on the site currently– neither are a straightforward lease or sale situation.

- People are looking for easy access to markets, often including on-farm markets (CSA, farm store, agrotourism) – the Capital Region is a great market, and many farmers travel down to the Greenmarkets or sell wholesale in NYC.
- Infrastructure needs: water, electric, housing, storage/barns, fencing, equipment.
- Also needed: autonomy (for farmer), clarity and transparency (in expectations).
- Small acreage – anywhere from 3-50 acres (some may want more).
- Vegetables, herbs, small livestock (chickens, sheep, goats).

Examples of Farm Seekers:

- Every other month AFT sends out a newsletter and feature farmers seeking land, farm properties, and our partners.
- <https://nyfarmlandfinder.org/stories/featured-farmer-profile-philip-prevosto>
- <https://nyfarmlandfinder.org/find-a-farmer/farmer/tell-tale-farm>
 - Experienced farmer, currently farming full time and has markets in NYC – looking for smaller acreage for vegetable production.
 - Looking to expand markets, needs access to all the infrastructure listed above.
- <https://nyfarmlandfinder.org/stories/featured-farmer-profile-betsy-ho>
- <https://nyfarmlandfinder.org/find-a-farmer/armer/good-chi-farm>
 - Small acreage vegetable farmer growing Asian vegetables.
 - Already has market in Capital Region.
 - Would like to diversify to small livestock, mushrooms, etc. with more land.
 - Needs infrastructure! Calls out fencing in her profile.

Questions/Advice for Advisory Board:

- Be as clear as possible about what you want out of this situation.
- Try to give farmers as much autonomy as possible.
- If you plan to lease, make it as long term as possible, develop clear criteria to ensure that you get a farmer who will work out long term.
- Whatever you decide – secure tenure is very important! Whether that's a 30 year lease, selling a portion of the property outright, or a more creative solution like a 99-year ground lease.
- Make sure there is sufficient infrastructure included – housing, fencing, water access, electricity, some kind of storage – or have a plan in mind for how a farmer may be able to achieve these things – cost share if leasing, make sure price is affordable enough to add infrastructure, ensure they can build housing, etc.
- If the board or town has goals or hopes for the project and the land, make sure to write it down! Create a request for proposal and have a transparent process for review.
- If you are looking to protect the property think about who will hold the easement.

Committee Questions

Q: Water access needs?

A: either public or well – farmers main factor is if they have to pay for water or not. However, if a farmer wanted to have a certified kitchen in the barn for example, it would require public water access.

Q: Any general tips?

A: Farmer should be transparent and clear with their goals and the Town, before proposing any opportunity, make sure expectations and restrictions are clear. (i.e. what kinds of restrictions come with the land, what kind of practices are encouraged? Is the public allowed access? Etc.).

A lot of farmers are looking for the opportunity to grow a farm business- example: a small veggie farm uses the land and has the option to sell at a farm stand on site. Down the road maybe they graduate to a commercial kitchen to diversify offerings to include pickles, jams, etc.

Something we see often is that aesthetics can be problematic for neighbors (looks, smells, noise, etc.) and can result in challenging conversations.

Also, certain types of farming will not work in certain areas. Good to give freedom and autonomy to farmer to make farming decisions as long as consistent with agreed arrangement.

Q: Does Farmland trust qualify the quality of the land? And do you keep track of successful farmer/landowner matches?

A: The first thing AFT does is look at the soil map and encourage farm seekers to be clear what they are proposing and offer soil maps – to confirm soils will work for the farmers intended use. Farmland Trust does not keep statistics on success beyond five years.

Q: What is an ideal lease term?

A: An ideal lease term is dependent on what a farmer wants and what the town is willing to take on. A 30 year rolling lease is a good idea, you want at minimum a five year lease. Leasing with option to purchase is the best and what every farmer is looking for. This allows for a farmer to make sure land works for them and be a good investment.

Q: Trends in desirable farm size? Thoughts?

A: Creating a table for how many acres a farmer wants is limited to the data AFT receives on the Farmland Finder website.

- Be cautious subdividing parcels.
- Have clear lease agreements and amount of acreage.
- Housing opportunities vary depending on people and what we will allow.
- The town does not want to be a landlord for housing – do not have the resources.

Q: Is there value in putting the Town's land on the website so then we can talk with farmers that might be interestedunderstanding that it would take the Town time to get to an agreement stage.

A: Perhaps not through the website but with a profile to reach out to farmers and have a conversation ultimately.

Q: Timeframe for town board?

A: Recommendations will be addressed year after year depending on resources we have - the process could take 2-5 years.

Public Comment:

Ross Mactavish (resident):

- Q: Concerned that the town purchased land before they knew what they wanted to do with it. Not many farmers that want to farm Bethlehem. Money would have been well spent giving to farmer that is already here and can provide them with a tax break.
- A: *Heath Farm Committee tasked by Town Board to establish vision plan for future use of the land. Committee's role is not to question the Town's purchase. Any concerns with Town's purchase should be directed to Town Board.*
- Q: Cost to repair the barn?
- A: *Town has a consultant retained that is preparing stabilization plans, bid documents, etc. and will share cost with town board when complete.*
- Q: Do we have a builder in town that knows what needs to be done on the barn?
- A: *Town has a consultant retained that is preparing stabilization plans, bid documents and based on structural and architectural assessments. The Town is overseeing immediate stabilization efforts, and the committee is tasked with community recommendation for medium/long range view.*

Zack Davis (ecologist at the Bioreserve, Glenmont):

- Does not think single use of agriculture on the land will be best approach for town.
- Using an ecological notion of landscape would be better than agricultural.
- Finding right farmer will be critical for success.
- Look at plant diversity.
- Finding an ecologist would be best to take a more holistic approach.

Jim Taylor (6th generation farmer Sunny Acres Farm Athens, NY):

- Has been using restorative/regenerative farming techniques on his family farm for the well-being of the animals, crops, and people living and working on the land.
- Diverse markets, working with natural cycles for successful land stewardship and farm business
- Shared a good book: *Holistic Management: A Common Sense Revolution to Restore our Environment*, by Allan Savory with Jody Butterfield
- Sharing of knowledge and experience, ongoing education and curiosity, not everything will work, but that is part of the process.

Nathan (Farmer, Corning Hill Gardens, Glenmont):

- The more the town wants to control (restrictions/allowances), the smaller the pool of interested farmers.
- Think about balance.

Next HHFAC meeting is:

**Tuesday August 13th, 2024 6pm-7pm
Bethlehem Town Hall, Room 101A/B
445 Delaware Avenue, Delmar, NY 12054**

At this meeting, Christine Hutchinson, co-director of the Northeast Farmers of Color (NEFOC) Land Trust and Network will be presenting to the group. At NEFOC, Christine leads the Black Land Stewardship Cultivation Program, a transformative initiative focused on supporting Black farmers in the Northeast, is a board member of Black Farmers United of NYS, and directs Our Core, Inc., a hyperlocal organization that empowers marginalized teens.

Meeting Adjourned at 9:20am