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HISTORIC HEATH FARM ADVISORY COMMITTEE

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MEETING SUMMARY

Tuesday August 13, 2024

6:00-7:00pm

Bethlehem Town Hall, Room 101A/B
445 Delaware Avenue
Delmar, NY 12054

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

Staff: Lauren Chiyoko Axford, Open Space Coordinator; Rob Leslie, Director of Planning

Meeting Commenced: 6:00pm

Approval of Past meeting summary:

- Lauren circulated the draft meeting summary from July 17, 2024 by email and requested that comments be submitted.
- Lauren incorporated comments and resent revised summary.
- The July 17th meeting summary was approved unanimously.

Public attendees: Bill Ketzer, Michael Lucas, Sarah Walsh, Monica Sharp

- Bobbie provided an update to the group about Joining Community Forces:
- Joining Community Forces of Upstate New York is a voluntary military and community cooperative partnership organized to allow service providers the opportunity to engage and network in a common goal of connecting Veterans, Service Members and Families with community resources when needed.
- Bobbie and Lauren were invited to start attending the JFC monthly meeting, with Lauren presenting at the August meeting. The various members of the JCF collective work with active military, reservists, veterans and their families (in some cases) to provide a full spectrum of support and resources.
- JFC is an opportunity to network and to explore collaboration around shared goals. These collaborations have the potential to be nicely funded – which may provide some synergy for incorporating veterans into the HHFI Vision Plan.
- Bobbie also provided an update about discussions with Cornell Small Farms- Farm Ops Program. [Farm Ops : Veterans - Cornell Small Farms](#)

- An example of Farm Ops programming is that they are currently offering an Agricultural Marketing Veteran Cohort.
- Chris Flaherty, CEO of ClearPath for Veterans, a nonprofit organization that has 2 campuses, 1 is a 68 acre farm property in Chittenango, will present to the committee about future partnership at a future HHFAC meeting.

Presentation by Christine Hutchinson, Co-Director Northeast Farmers of Color (NEFOC) Land Trust & Network.

- Committee members briefly introduced themselves.
- Christine provided an introduction. In addition to her work at NEFOC, she is the co-president of Black Farmers United NYS, the Executive Director of Our CORE, Inc. whose mission is to “empower marginalized young people to uplift themselves and others through experiential and academic education”, and is a veteran teacher. Our CORE provides an agricultural education summer program for youth.
- Christine is originally from the Albany area- attended high school here and then College of St. Rose.
- Christine shared that she see a unique opportunity through the Heath Farm initiative to create a more just food system, provide opportunities for meaningful community development, increased environmental sustainability and economic growth.
- She is very hopeful that the HHFI can capture some of these opportunities
- Look at models that exist around our state and region.
- Christine introduced one interesting model- the Chester Ag Center
- The Chester Ag Center (CAC), is a farm incubator organization in the famous, super fertile black dirt region of the Hudson Valley.
- Christine envisions the HHFI helping to:
- Revitalize the land, fostering innovation, back into a more diverse active production, vegetables, other products, fruit trees.
- Provide non existing support for young farmers, new farmers
- Significantly strengthen the local food system Albany and beyond
- Restoration of the land: improve soil health, increase biodiversity, and enhance the overall environmental quality of the area.
- Increasing local system: farm to table connections,
- Demonstrate and trial sustainable farming practices- not just farming, but the care of the land: organic agriculture, permaculture, agroforestry
- Demonstrate good land management practices to climate change, extreme weather events (flooding now, but also drought in the past).
- Local job creation and scaling up of small farmers
- Many different jobs to be created in this space, jobs that will stay here, not going overseas, local food system jobs,
- Community development- hub in addition to an agricultural hub from the distant communities to counter climate change and environmental issues

- Opportunity to recapture local agricultural history, and also an opportunity for cultural awareness and education about the indigenous communities that pre-ceded European contact

Christine's specific role at NEFO is Black Land Stewardship Cultivation, where she specifically works with Black farmers to connect with land access opportunities. An important part of addressing land access for Black farmers, is to be aware of, and in acknowledgement of the history of Black land loss in the United States.

She presented the following statistics (see presentation slides for sources):

- In 1910, there were 295 Black farmers out of 134,181 Black residents in NYS
- In 2010, there were 139 Black farmers out of 3,073,800 Black residents in NYS
- Black farmers in particular are coping with many issues many people do, but at a higher rate: food insecurity, climate change, food sovereignty, land dispossession (since 1910 90% black land ownership lost), rural violence, ag inequity, propriety ag technology, federal discrimination, environmental oppression.
- Black land ownership and connection of black communities to the land. If nothing changes, the trends suggest there will be no Black farmers
- A number of entities have come into existence to address this discrepancy, so a marginal increase, but still an increase!!
- Historical municipal → federal levels of discrimination
- Farming credit is incredibly important- and by denying access to those loans, crop insurances, etc. further increase the inequity in land access for farm operations.
- Rural violence- causing black farmers to flee. Currently working with a farmer who has experienced vandalism, harassment, etc etc. Is more of a rarity than it once was, but it does still exist in rural communities.
- Market collapse- underrepresented as recipients of COVID relief funds
- Legal weapons- heirs property law- so much land has been lost due to this law. Usually associated with the southern US, but it does also occur in the NY, MA has recently passed legislation in regards to heirs property law.
- Farming and Ag \$42 B industry, black farmers comprise only 0.24% or 139 out of 57,000 of NYS farmers.

Christine went on to provide examples of organizations that are now in existence to assist BIPOC farmers in securing viable farmland, technical assistance and financial support:

- Soul Fire Farm- local farm: training
- Farm School NYC: training
- Black Farmers United: education and advocacy, governmental and entity level
- Black Farmer Fund: capital deployment for funds
- Corbin Hill Food Project: markets and distribution channels
- Northeast Farmers of Color Land Trust: addresses land access
- Chester Ag Center: excellence example of a farm incubator. Infamous black dirt- so one difference, between here and Heath Farm, is the soil.

Though the soils on the Heath property could benefit from quality and nutrient restoring practices, there is so much potential to support beginning famers and protect the farmland in perpetuity for future farming.

The Chester Agricultural Center:

- Has 12 farms at the moment
- The farm serve the mid-Hudson valley to NYC- 10 county foodshed 26 farmers markets, contribute to local feeding programs (soup kitchens, food pantries, free fridge) – thousands of pounds of produce. These farms would not be able to produce and move food in that capacity without the incubator space.
- In general, the CAC farms start small, but Chester Ag has a lot of land, so the farmer can scale up and expand into other space on the farm.
- Farm examples include: Larger operations like Dig Farm which supplies the culinary market (restaurant), Halal Acres (which added high tunnels this year)
- Heath Farm has even greater potential due to the size of land and having these other projects as models into how to successfully support farmers

Q: Chester Ag Center: the member farms own or lease? What are the features?

- Low cost leases \$400/acre and there are multiple buildings on the site
- Recently built a new wash pack station
- Shared resources and infrastructure- processing space, equipment,
- Managed by a nonprofit 501c3, and the land is owned by a private investor. Each farm is its own LLC.

Q: The Farm store: who runs it May -Oct?

There is a person who is hired by the CAC organization that runs the store. She also supports the farmers- i.e. translations support, help to connect farmers with entities like NRCS, helps farmers connect to each other, all farmers have a monthly meeting. Nothing to say that a farm store couldn't be a cooperative model.

Q: Are all of the offerings sold at the store grown or produced on the farm? Or do they bring in other items?

A: there are no animal operations at the CAC, so they do bring in meat, dairy and sometimes baked goods.

Q: In terms of incubators: are you aware of a municipality participating? And if so, in what role?

A: I am not aware of a municipality running an incubator, but I am aware of an incubator where the municipality own the land, and the nonprofit operates the incubator program.

*[*follow up research was conducted to learn more about this potential model- we were not able to identify a farm incubator that is operated on municipal land]*

Q: Does the incubator lease from the muni?

Yes. For an example of a single holder or community farm- they pay a nominal lease, they provide food access for the community in return

Q: How many acres per farm at the CAC?

A: it really varies- the smallest is 2 acres, the largest is Halal pastures at maybe at least 30+

Q: Do they have a variety of things they are doing on the land? Heath Farm lands are varied land with areas of wet soil, woodland, etc.

A lot of things they can't do to the wet soils.

There isn't any livestock production at CAC, the soils are way too wet for optimal herd/flock health. There is big variety of vegetables grown. They don't actively engage in agroforestry at the moment. There is a great potential at the Heath Farm for agroforestry, but this model (CAC) doesn't feature any agroforestry.

Q: One of the comments in you presentation, was that there are examples where this sort of management of the land is being used to buffer urban sprawl. Can you elaborate?

A: When development threats exist, it is critical to protect the land and ensure that the land it itself cannot be developed. There is nothing preventing all the land from beyond it from being developed. Having this incubator here might help to halt the sprawl heading south.

Q: Special accommodations to consider for farmers and farms operating so closely to suburban areas?

Because this is historically been farmed, having farming activity next to urban/residential activity is nothing new. There are protections from the State Right to Farm Law- and stronger still if enrolled in the Agricultural District. Orange County, where the CAC is, does have a right to farm policy.

Q: Water situation at Chester Ag Center? Town or well?

Where they are they use well water and due of the nature of the land and the location of the well, the farmers split the bill for the water/pump.

Q: Is the Heath Farm unique in some ways because it is a relatively large space?

This much farmland in close proximity to several Capital Region cities is a very unique opportunity from a conservation perspective, and food access perspective.

Q: What are the shared facilities at the CAC?:

Cold storage space, pallet system, storage for dry crops and thoughtfully located wash pack, shared compost system

Q: How was the CAC started? They have farmers first or built out the space first?

They built it and then they came. Not sure what farm was first, but nonprofit, once formed wanted to preserve the farmland and then invited these farms in. It has been an active farm incubator for 10 years. They are actually at full capacity right now! (it took them 8 years to get to full capacity). They are in the process of purchasing additional land, so farmers who are there and are out of space can expand. Also working on the housing project, housing a little easier in Glenmont. The housing will be 6-unit.

Q: Are the farms expected to graduate and move on or can they remain there indefinitely?

They can remain and hopefully expand if they want.

Q: Where there lending opportunities to finance facilities?

The new wash pack station was federal grant, funding a significant portion. Right now in NYS we have access to RFSI \$ resilient Food System infrastructure federal funds, for anything between production and market. Chester ag has a current project around cold storage. There is also an upcoming opportunity with Ag and Market and RFSI for equipment that is the best I have ever seen. The grant is for equipment only, no match required, you can purchase any equipment that lands in between that space harvest.

Q: Do the farmers apply for the grants?

The Executive Director of the CAC (501c3) does the grant solicitation and management for the most part for infrastructure, though for some funding, it would be the farmers.

Q: Any of the 12 farms related? Seems like they work together very well!!

They do work really well together. It is a very multi-cultural space there. There are locals farming there, and there are also farmers from other countries as well. There are farms that have grown and expanded and moved on. There are maybe about 25 farmer workers plus farm owners. Probably under estimating, the store manager, ED, former ED is working on the housing project, one property manager.

Q: Are there some months of the year there is no crop production?

Depends on the farm. Halal pastures through winter. Rise and Root have high tunnels, they stop to take a break, but they do have produce until at least until November. Grandpa Farm has storage crops through December.

Q: I know the soil was already amazing naturally, but did they do any work to get the soil ready for the farmers?

Different than the soils at the Heath Farm, they are VERY fertile, so no.

Q: This committee has been asking 2 questions:

- 1- What size land do young farmers need and where are these young farmers?**
- 2- From NEFO do you have members who are looking for land, to help give us some guidance to**
- 3- Is there a sweet spot of land size that is good for us to think about**

Flexibility is key. Day 1 farmers are not going to farm more than a couple acres. Seasoned farmers will want larger pieces of land. The fact that they could allow people to scale up (they didn't go and divide up land right away, provided smaller plots of land, and then grow in to a larger space), has worked really well. With Heath Farm, because the land does need remediation, it is probably better to start out with small areas, and then offer the opportunity to expand or move onto larger acreage. There are a lot of young people who want to start farming. A couple places to connect would be through the National young farmers coalition and NYC Farm School alumni (graduate and don't have a place to go)

Q: Do you have a list of young farmers waiting to get access to land?

A: There are statewide services that link farmers to farmland owners.

[See 7/17/24 Meeting Summary- Molly Johnston-Heck's presentation was on this service]

Q: Do you provide matching?

We don't keep a running list of matches. NEFOC does have a reparations map where people can connect with land opportunities.

Q: Family incomes for the farmers at CAC– are they sufficient or do they all have second incomes?

It varies depending on the farm. The Grandpa farm makes their living, Rise and Root- each of them have another job, Halal Pastures- making a living farming. Can't speak to everyone. For some CAC farms, the farm income is their sole source of income, but not for all.

General Committee Discussion:

- I like this model- maybe we can fit in veterans somehow, and also farmers in the NEFOC network.
- Can we also go vertical with other types of farming?
- Exhibition areas, demo, environmentally friendly, either in production, or demonstration, like the living roof at 5 rivers. It could be part of a recommendation
- The Heath Farm is centrally located within the Greater Capital Region
- Farming part of this is easy the management structure, the relationship with the owner, relationship with the farm supports, the cooperative use of structures, marketing, takes a really active, successful management group. That is what we need.
- New farmers don't get to benefit from the age old relationships among family across generations that many legacy farmers do. However a community approach to farming, can replace those traditional familial based relationships for the good of the farm business.

Public Comment:

Sarah Walsh (Mohawk Hudson Land Conservancy):

- Speaking from a millennial perspective, our generation has a lot of struggles in general, but young farmers have an additional struggle in accessing viable and affordable farmland. To be able to provide access to land to a bunch of young farmers with the experience and knowledge, that is next level!
- Look at our local farms, we work with many on farmland protection, and some of these farmers could be incredible resources. There are people in the existing farming community that are going to really help the incubator bloom out of just a concept, similar to the Chester Agriculture Center. This land doesn't all have to stay under municipal control. Could be sold to nonprofit. Not a monolith- put in the permanent protections (i.e. perpetual agricultural conservation easement), what do you want the land to look like way in the future?
- We don't know where agriculture is going exactly with climate change and all the other factors, Maintaining ownership of the land as long as possible, will provide flexibility to

keep it available for future farmer to stay. FYI MHLC serves as a FarmLink NY navigator, if we were to list the land on Farmlink, interested person would reach out to Sarah at MHLC to facilitate connection.

- This land doesn't all have to stay under municipal control, could be sold to a nonprofit.

Rob chimed in:

- Just wanted to point out that Christine mentioned 2 things that Molly (AFT) also strongly encouraged: flexibility and the ability for farmers to scale up.
- When we go back to looking at the land, which land is more associated with this sort of incubator space?
- What areas are less important to an incubator space?
- Town could protect and sell the areas not ideal for an incubator space.
- Stuart: We are charged to look at every possibility and how to maximize this money that we have invested and in a way that invests in our future.
- Kristen: there is a huge refugee and immigrant population, her grandfather from Sicily was a farmer. How many of these refugees and immigrants are farmers I wonder?

Michael Lucas (public comment):

- Perhaps have farmers try figure out a model for the use of this land? I grew up on a farm in Nebraska. How do you make a living with a small farm in the Northeast? A different kind of farming.
- One idea: produce food for the Free Food Fridge Albany: just to fill the fridges and provide easy access to fresh produce for those who have limited resources.

Monica Sharp (public comment):

- There is a market that hasn't been discussed at all yet. The production of beer!
- Local hops production and micro-breweries have increased so much.
- It's vertical farming, has a huge revenue, Hops is gold. Target the millennials, and growing interest in non-alcoholic beer, an area for hops production, and a brewery of non-alcoholic beer.

Meeting Adjourned at 7:25pm