

David VanLuven
Town Supervisor

Robert Leslie
Director of Planning

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



HISTORIC HEATH FARM ADVISORY COMMITTEE

Lauren Chiyoko Axford, Open Space Coordinator
laxford@townofbethlehem.org
(518) 439-4955 x1106

MEETING SUMMARY Wednesday August 21, 2024 8:00am-9:00am

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

Attendance: Bobby Lukasiewicz, Stuart Lyman, Zan McKenna, David Vigoda, Dale Richter, Mark Warford

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

Meeting Commenced: 8:00am

- Meeting Summary for 8/13/24 meeting will be circulated.
- The committee members revisited the concept of a 'farm incubator' option that was presented at the 8/17 meeting by Christine Hutchinson, highlighting the Chester Agricultural Center as an example.

** Farm Incubator: a farm incubator, or farm business incubator, is an arrangement where viable farmland is made available for multiple farmers to access land, access to shared equipment and infrastructure (such as irrigation, tractors, implements, bulk ordering of supplies, wash/pack station, storage, and farm market or other distribution, point of sale services). In this model, each farm is an individual business, where there is a diversity of crops and value-added products are grown and made. It is most common for a nonprofit organization with 501c3 tax-exempt status to oversee and manage the day to day coordination of the site. The nonprofit may or may not provide dedicated staff to assist with land management, facilities maintenance and the running of a farm market. The HHFAC recently learned about the [Chester Agricultural Center](#) in Chester, NY and discussed if this type of innovative use could be incorporated into the recommendations of the advisory committee.**

The following questions and comments were provided by the committee during the discussion:

Q: Is it (farm incubator) an option for our land? If so, which section, which areas?

- An incubator would be much better by the barn (Wemple & 9W) because of visibility, accessibility, the potential restoration/re-use of historic farm store on site could provide revenue for those farming the land.
- If the Town were to considering selling areas 8, 9, 10 (Selkirk parcels) to a private farmer the Glenmont parcels around barn could still be used for farm incubator space.
- There are working examples all around us (regionally), but nothing all that close.
- Opportunity: there is a gap for a farm incubator type facility in the Capital Region. Some of this land, with the barn could provide a site.

- The Heath Farm's location at a major crossroads of the Town, central located in the greater Capital Region, an incubator here would be both visible and accessible.
- We need to clarify what we mean by incubator- are these opportunities for aspirational farmers? For current Farmers? A formal training program? Those with strong educational structure are the best funded organizations, Glynwood Center and Rodale Institute for example.

Q: Are there examples where a municipality retains ownership of the land?

- Northampton Grow Food is a community farm with 1-99 year lease options for small farmers. Further research has indicated that the Town who had previously owned the property, conveyed ownership to the NFP that manages it(located in Western MA)
- Nonprofit management of the site is the common version of farm incubator model
- This could be accomplished by either leasing the land at a nominal fee to the nonprofit, or selling it to either the nonprofit, or a private farmland investment group to facilitate this future use.

Q: Is there a version where extension services run the incubator program?

- CCE- Albany County already provides technical assistance to farmers, though not in an incubator setting.
- The Cornell Small Farms Program website highlights a few farm incubator centers in the region.
- The Cornell Small Farms Farm Ops program- Incubator Program for Veterans who aspire to, or currently farm.

Committee Comments Re: Farm Incubator:

- If the Town were to partner with a nonprofit for this type of initiative, it would be critical to partner with a stable organization (good fiscal track record, expansion of programs/services)
- For this type of model, where the Town retains ownership of the barn and land, an RFP would detail the opportunity with specific parameters, and a set scoring matrix would be used for selecting the most appropriate nonprofit for the opportunity.
- A farm incubator addresses farm more than just the biggest challenge for young farmers (land access). It would also offer support for setting up a successful business, such as access to marketing support, tax filing, grant writing assistance, shared equipment and facilities, reduced overhead etc.
- A potential unique feature could be that the incubator also extends tech assistance beyond start up farmers, to any interested current farmers. Current farmers who are interested could participate in business or marketing classes, or attend field days to learn about different methods and crops that could increase their farms viability, or have the option of selling their goods at a farm market on site.
- It should be community centered, since it is in such an accessible and visible location. Added educational and recreational opportunities for the public are additional community benefits. It is a great opportunity to for the non-farming community to learn about local agriculture, and to support local farmers.
- This could be an opportunity to educate and set the tone, a revitalized local food system to help sustain future generations.

- Agro-tourism and entertainment opportunities could also be incorporated as they engage community and provide additional farm revenue.
- The land is on 9 separate tax parcels, and boundaries can be changed in order to create the most practical and useful opportunities. It will be important to maintain some flexibility for future farmers.
- Test gardens could provide a place for on-site workshops, volunteer engagement opportunities and also be aesthetically nice.
- Most of what we are talking about will require more funding- partnering with a nonprofit could strengthen funding requests.

Q: Or, could the Town could just sell it all? What is the best direction of the future use of the land?

- Regardless of current or future ownership, agriculture is the primary focus, education/conservation/recreation, yes, but promoting and supporting farming/agriculture is the priority.
- If the Town decides to sell any portion of the land, the Town won't do anything without transparent due diligence (surveys, appraisals, SEQR, Town Board approvals, etc.).
- Areas 8,9,10 should be recommended for permanent protection and then sold to a farmer for private farm operations. Does the rest of the committee agree?

Q: Is it is enough land for an incubator without the Clapper farmland?

- Consideration: there are farmers who want or need to be public facing and there are farmers who don't want or need to be public facing. The Glenmont parcels vs. the Selkirk parcels offers 2 different settings.

Q: Would it be better to have these groups come tell us what they want?

- We have been gathering a lot of that feedback through our guest presentations and ongoing discussions with members of a wide group of stakeholders.
- The advisory committee is capturing that information through our recommendations in the Vision Plan.
- Flexibility is a recurring comment from those we have consulted. It provides a chance to get started, and the opportunity for expansion and growth beyond the start-up stage. Better to not slice up the land in too small of parcels, that will limit a farmers chance to expand the business.

Q: Would it have more of an educational vibe, rather than a consumer vibe?

- There is an opportunity and growing interest in consumer/resident education in regards to farming practices and local food.

Q: What is the historic significance?

- It has local historic significance. Will check with NY SHPO about national register eligibility/nomination and the pros/cons of such a designation.
- Even if it is eligible, we don't have to register as a historic structure.
- The final future state of the barn is still to be determined.
- The Town intends to stabilize the barn, but future potential restoration or renovation is still to be determined. Options for permanent repairs will be explored for feasibility, cost effectiveness and usefulness.
- Want to keep a forward looking perspective while also providing a historic imprint.

- Doesn't need to be all or nothing, keep looking forward, don't get too hung up on history.
- A vision of success: the barn is stabilized, maybe even upgraded for incubator space, keep the store because it was part of the local historical significance.

General Committee Discussion:

- In this discussion we are identifying all the hopes and dreams based on our distilled knowledge gained through previous committee meetings.
- The committee is to provide recommendations that align with the overall Vision Plan and all the information we have gathered over the last several months. Appropriate funding opportunities will be identified using the recommendations as a guide.
- We should provide a list of options, with our recommendation(s) provided. If the top recommendation wasn't feasible for one reason or another, there would be a backup.
- We are tasked with a vision for the land, where does this vision intersect with the Town's vision and if we have positive conversation in our meeting about the incubator space, how far do we want to take it?
- We provide recommendations, highlight considerations in the plan, and sometimes the recommended action item might be to "collect more information pertaining to [particular topic]."
- Some of the recommendations will increase the strength of grant applications
- Find the sweet spot in the vision that engages the greater community, in addition to farmers. If it is a Town owned space, it should also feature things community would enjoy.
- A recap of the committee role and Town staff role in the Heath Farm project was provided: the advisory committee is tasked with the overall vision for the property, and to provide with recommendations. Concurrently, Town staff is working to stabilize the barn, so that the recommendations of Vision Plan regarding the barn, can be implemented.
- The acquisition was more about protecting the 307 acres of land, but since the purchase included the barn, and there's community interest protecting the barn, the Town took the initiative to understand what it would take to stabilize so that future reuse is possible.
- The Town has a structural and architectural assessment done of the barn complex to determine if it was possible to save it and if so, have a stabilization plan and go out to bid to do the work.
- Stabilizing the barn keeps it in existence, so the potential for restoration and/or adaptive re-use remains a possibility. Without stabilization, it will continue to degrade further.
- We need to be flexible in our recommendations, provide options (in descending order of priority)

Public Comment: none

Meeting adjourned 9:10am