

Appendix J

Agricultural Landowners Interview
Summary

Town of Bethlehem Agriculture and Farmland Protection Plan Interview Summary

Eleven interviews were conducted with farmers and owners of agricultural land in the Town of Bethlehem in August and September of 2008. The interviews were conducted by Laura Ten Eyck, a field consultant for American Farmland Trust's New York State office. Agricultural commodities represented in the interviews included dairy, horticulture, beef and produce. No representatives of the Study Advisory Committee for the Plan were interviewed. The following Interview Summary highlights common themes born of the interviews as interpreted by Ms. Ten Eyck. Where illustrative of a repeated theme, quotes have been used as stated by the interviewees.

Opportunities exist to educate farmers and landowners on existing programs to protect farmland and to provide new programs that make farmland more affordable.

Among farmers interviewed there was a significant degree of misunderstanding and lack of knowledge about New York State's Agricultural District Law, Agricultural Assessments and Farmland Protection Program. In general the majority of farmers and landowners renting to farmers did not believe a farmland protection plan was necessary for the Town and viewed it as interference in their private affairs that would restrict their options as landowners.

Most farmers and landowners interviewed had reservations about the permanent sale of development rights to preserve farmland. Most were opposed to permanent conservation easements as they did not want to inhibit what the next generation could do with the property. However, some farmers acknowledge that the future of farming in the Town may depend on farmland protection. "I don't feel there's a future for agriculture in the Town," says one farmer. "If someone wanted to come in and farm they couldn't afford it because of the price of land unless the government intervenes and buys the development rights." One farmer did express an interest in seeing his farm protected, but felt that the Town would not be supportive. In addition, farmers renting land have expressed an interest in purchasing land from individuals who would be interested in selling their development rights. In general farmers and landowners are more open to the concept of tax relief in exchange for conservation easements with term limits.

Farmers in Bethlehem are challenged by poor soils, disappearing farm support services, availability of labor and high land values.

In general, farmers interviewed in the Town of Bethlehem feel that much of the soil in Town is composed primarily of wet, heavy clay that limits agricultural production at times. Farmers have to travel between 25 and 60 miles or more to access equipment dealers, feed and farm supply vendors, and veterinary services. "If I have to call a vet because of a problem with one of the calves it takes them an hour and a half to get here," says a beef farmer. Processing facilities for meat and milk are also hard to find.

Finding quality farm labor is another challenge farmers reported that they face. Most farmers felt that people no longer wanted to do farm work because it is too strenuous and doesn't pay well enough. Some farmers rely on family members to lend a hand during crunch times. Some choose to only take on as much work as they can handle on their own. Some of the larger farms employ migrant labor from Mexico. "I wouldn't run my farm without migrant labor," one farmer says.

Because of high land values in town, many farmers reported that they rely on rental land. Most of the farmers interviewed do not have a business plan or a retirement plan. Some farmers expressed a willingness to sell their farms to another farmer to “keep it going”, but are not optimistic about the presence of existing farmers or new farmers interested in purchasing land. The majority of farmers interviewed do not have a next generation interested in taking over the farm and view their farmland as an asset they will have to liquidate in order to finance their retirement. “You can preserve the land all you want,” points out one farmer. “How are you going to preserve the farmers?”

The increasingly suburban nature of the Town of Bethlehem has resulted in conflicts and a perceived lack of respect and understanding between farmers, non-farm residents and the town government.

The suburban nature of the Town of Bethlehem presents additional challenges to farmers in the area. Because of the high volume of traffic it is very difficult for farmers to move farm machinery on roads in the town. “The situation is getting more and more dangerous,” says one farmer who is dependent upon rental land scattered around Town for his farm business. It can also be difficult for farms in the Town to receive deliveries, which come on large tractor-trailers that interfere with commuter traffic. Continual repaving of roads has increased the grade of ditches making it increasingly difficult for farmers to get their equipment into fields. Farmers complain of being wrongly ticketed and delayed by the Town police force for carrying out legal farm activities. In addition, trespassing is a major problem for farmers. People dump yard waste and trash on farmland and teenagers gather on farmland to have parties and leave behind garbage. People riding ATVs have caused significant crop damage. “We’ve been trashed by ATVs says one farmer. “We have a worn path.”

New residential neighbors have sometimes presented challenges to the business of farming in Town. Some farms have experienced increased flooding of fields due to changes in drainage patterns caused by new development. Suburban neighbors complain about the odor of manure being spread on fields as well as other farm practices such as spreading lime. Farmers believe the Town needs to educate the public about agriculture. “A couple of generations ago everyone was involved in farming,” points out one farmer. “Everybody still had a connection to farming. Today people think food comes from Price Chopper.”

Farmers believe the property and school taxes on their land are too high in relationship to the amount of money they can make from the land. Farmers and landowners who rent land to farmers also believe that they are over regulated by the Town through local zoning and subdivision laws. Farmers feel they have a lack of representation on Town boards and committees that deal with land use issues. Many farmers feel threatened by the Town’s desire to preserve open space and create a community trail system and believe that such plans may have a negative impact on their rights as property owners.

The challenges that face farmers today will impact what the future looks like for agriculture in the Town of Bethlehem tomorrow.

Most of the farmers interviewed were born in the Town or have lived there for most of their lives. All of the individuals interviewed personally valued farmland and viewed agriculture as central to their heritage and their way of life. “You can call it a business; you can call it anything you like. It’s a passion. You love it or you wouldn’t do it,” one individual says of farming.

Some individuals did see a future for farms in the increased consumer interest in purchasing local foods. Although the Town does have a farmers market, some farmers were concerned that the vendors might be coming from outside the town and were not really farmers but simply vendors who bought and resold produce.

The two young farmers interviewed were hardworking and optimistic with plans to continue to operate their family's farms into the future. Both however found they were significantly limited by the lack of available and affordable farmland. One older farmer saw a strong future for direct marketing of locally grown produce from his location however his children were not interested in farming and he thought it would be hard to find a farm buyer. Another older farmer expressed an interest in seeing his farmland preserved, but had little understanding of the available options and feared the Town would not allow it. Another farmer felt that the best way to preserve farmland in the Town was for farmers to sell land to wealthy individuals who would build second homes on a section of the land and then sell or donate the development rights on the rest. The majority of the farmers and landowners interviewed believed hobby farms, part-time farms, niche farms and equine operations to be the most likely face of agriculture in the town in the years to come.

Summary

The majority of the farmers and rural landowners interviewed feel at odds with the local government and uncomfortable with the suburban community. Many believe open space planning and farmland protection are ploys to take away their right to develop their land.

All farmers and landowners felt that the town and the farmers needed to work together to educate town residents about where their food comes from, the role farms play in the community and the reality of how farms operate. Specifically, many farmers were worried about children growing up without an understanding of where their food comes from. They expressed a desire to see schoolchildren brought to farms to start learning about agriculture at a young age and also wished that farm youth programs such as the FFA and the 4H, which were once strong in the town, could be reestablished as popular programs for those interested in agriculture.