

**Kick off Public Meeting for Town and Village of Salem
Agriculture and Farmland Protection Plan**

**November 13, 2008
7:00 – 8:30 pm
Historic Salem Courthouse**

Attending: Chuck Alexander, Jay Kerr, Seth McEachron, Jay Skellie, Dottie Schneider, Karen Weinberg, Meg Southerland, Maurice Patrick, Thomas Jilek, Paula Schafer, Bruce Ferguson, Betsy Bashaw, Brigid Nosal, Jay Ballanca, Anita Witten, Matthew Ferguson, Robert Laukaitis, Eileen Ryan, Herb Perkins, Joseph Childs, Steve Alexander, Liz Brock (consultant from American Farmland Trust)

Steve Alexander, Town Supervisor

Supervisor Alexander explained that the agriculture and farmland protection plan grew out of a goal to update the Town's Comprehensive Plan. While beginning work on the Comp Plan, the committee was made aware of funding available through the New York State Department of Agriculture and Markets to fund town level agriculture and farmland protection planning. Since agriculture is the largest industry and user of land in town, the committee decided to seek this funding, so as to use this plan as the foundation for the updated Comprehensive Plan. The update for the Comp Plan has been put on hold until the agriculture and farmland protection plan is complete. Supervisor Alexander expressed the town and village's commitment to getting public input on the plan in order to best meet the needs of the community. Steve introduced Dottie Schneider as the Chair and representative from the Town Board and Joseph Childs as the Representative from the Village Board.

Dottie Schneider, Chair Agriculture and Farmland Protection Plan Steering Committee and Town Board Member

Ms. Schneider welcomed the audience and thanked them for coming to participate in the plan. She explained that the Comprehensive Plan Update Committee had developed a small subset committee to steer the agriculture plan and had invited members from the farming community to join. She encouraged participation in the planning process and she invited anyone interested to come to the steering committee meetings, held on the second Monday of the month at 7:00 at the Town Offices on Main St.

Liz Brock, New York Field Representative, American Farmland Trust

Liz Brock introduced herself as the consultant from American Farmland Trust who was hired by the Committee with the grant money received from the Department of Agriculture and Markets. Liz discussed that the process is an opportunity find tools to support agriculture and farming into the future. Liz identified the current steering committee members: Dottie Schneider, and Chuck Alexander from the Comprehensive Plan committee – these two members will provide continuity between the two committees - Karen Weinberg, Seth McEachron and Lissa Chambers.

Liz explained that this was the public kick off meeting to introduce the plan process to the community and that a draft plan would be shared in approximately 9-10 months. The process

would include interviews with farmers and other agriculture business members. When the draft is shared the Committee will be looking for comments from the public.

Meg Southerland asked if there will be a voting process on the plan. Liz stated that comments will be taken and incorporated, but this Protection Plan does not require a public vote. The plan does require acceptance by the Dept. of Agriculture and Markets and then the Town Board would vote to adopt the plan.

Liz went on to explain that the definition of the Farmland Protection Plan was not necessarily restricted to protection of land through easements and buying of development rights, but was protecting the profitability of agriculture in the future as well.

Someone asked if there was currently a Comprehensive Plan and Steve Alexander replied there was a plan that was last updated 10 years ago. The Plan is available on the Town website.

Agriculture in Salem

Liz Brock led a discussion on agriculture in Salem. Participants were asked to share their perspectives on the strengths and weaknesses of agriculture in the Town and Village of Salem, as well as opportunities for and threats to farming in this region. The results are below, captured as shared by meeting participants with minimal editing purely for the sake of clarity.

Strengths

- Diverse agricultural community compliments the strong base in dairy farms here
- Strong core of support services here, including machinery dealers, vets, feed and fertilizer dealers.
- Location of town – good roads and infrastructure to get in and out
- Fertile soils and available water, especially along the many creeks in town
- Diverse soils, too, some flat, some hilly, some dry, some wet – helps in scheduling cropping and also in years that are too wet or too dry.
- Critical mass of farms here – Salem stands out in the County for it's rural landscape
- Community support of agriculture – not a lot of complaints from non-farmers, interest in buying local, willing to work with local businesses
- New start up farms, especially niche farms, have been attracted to this area.
- Proximity to markets and people who will pay for a premium product – including Saratoga, Albany and NYC
- Physical beauty of town attracts new farmers. Old, abandoned farms are being revitalized into new operations by new residents
- There is available farmland for use
- Tourism opportunities here – agritourism with diverse farm operations and processing (milk bottling, cheese making, etc)
- Battenkill Kitchen/ Farm to Chef Express – tools available to process and market farm products.
- FFA program in school and agricultural classes still being taught
- CCE/SWCD/USDA in Greenwich/Hudson Falls – nearby
- General sense of optimism in the farm community
- 60 miles from Port in Albany

Weaknesses

- Increased fuel costs and costs of production generally

- Increased feed costs in Salem compared to other areas – “we’re in no man’s land” – hard to get to Salem
- Finding quality labor – it’s expensive, but willing to pay for quality. Challenging if you can’t provide housing as housing in area is expensive on a farm salary
- Hard to get enough customers locally – have to either take products to other retail operations or farmers markets in other towns, or wholesale the product.
- DSL – reliable internet access for mail order – “we had to go satellite and it’s expensive”
- Competition for land from other farmers (rental) and from development (lost for good) – have to go further out from home farm.
- Fragmentation of land – land being chopped up until small, lots – 5 acres or less.
- Taxes – high relative to the value to the town of having open space versus residential development
- Not much local market
- Railroad brings in feed/fertilizer at a cheaper rate but infrastructure is lacking. Logs are the only thing going out – potential opportunity. Rail rates are expensive in NY.

Threats

- Fragmentation of land
- Luther Forest/AMD development – pressure to continue to fragment land and potentially increase the price/cost of land
- Education of realtors/developers – cluster development to allow for agriculture around it
- Government regulations – state/federal – Slaughterhouses/National Animal Identification/selling raw milk - not tailored for small farms to meet these regs
- Unfunded mandates a burden to small farms – including CAFO rules (concentrated animal feeding operations).
- Younger generation leaving town and farming and not returning. “lost the last dairy farm on Bunker Hill”
- Public awareness of what agriculture entails – manure management, traffic, moving equipment on roads – bad blind corner on bridge across Black Creek on Route 29 – dangerous

Opportunities

- Expand/develop stronger retail market in town beyond farmer’s market – though question was raised “are there enough customers to support it?”
- Boutique/specialty farming – value added, creating retail products, increase in fiber
- Promote Salem – like Bennington/Manchester, VT – advertising
- Use Chamber to pull people into town
- Cooperative arrangements for marketing/distribution or staffing at farmer’s markets to access retail markets out of town
- People want to buy local – Advertisement on NY cows to match CA cows
- People interested in decreasing their carbon footprint – potential interest in downscaling
- Methane digestion/composting
- Public events – Al Fresco dinner/Cheese Tour – Branding Washington County and attracting people from outside the area because of farm products. Easy to set up a tour in Salem because of diversity of farm products raised here.
- Salem hasn’t been “found” by “outsiders” – chance to protect it proactively rather than reactively. Opportunities for small scale, diverse farms here. The region offers a place for people from away to purchase affordable second homes.
- Slaughter house in region – huge demand. Current facilities are booked up 8-9 months in advance.

- Biodiesel and other alternative fuels, energy production
- Controls on development – how to encourage residential development to be “done right”
- Art and music community is thriving here as well – attracts people to region – possibilities to partner two missions

Next Steps

Ms. Brock concluded the meeting by sharing the next steps for the plan, including stakeholder interviews with members of the agricultural community in Salem, along with an analysis of farmland and resources in town. She invited anyone interested to come to a meeting or contact her directly for information about the plan. In addition, she said that all meeting minutes and agendas would be available on the town webpage: <http://www.salem-ny.com/townminutes.html>