

Columbia County Agriculture & Farmland Protection Plan

Focus Group Notes

March 19, 2011 – 10 to Noon
Stuyvesant Town Hall
Stuyvesant, New York

- Farms are faced with the high cost of inputs – can we benefit by purchasing cooperatively?
 - Coops can be difficult to manage, but can work well
 - Could government be helpful with the costs of a coop? How could it be structured?
 - Columbia County Fruit Growers do joint purchasing – it's very low key, informal, no expensive structure. It works well
 - There may be good cooperative opportunities – group buying for insurance, for example – but you need scale to achieve the maximum savings.
 - Even with cooperative efforts, a farmer still needs a good business sense
 - No more government regulation, involvement in things like this
 - There needs to be more awareness of what opportunities already exist
- Important to recognize that direct marketing isn't the only answer for profitability
- The county has potential for added-value businesses – how can county government help?
 - Processing for frozen vegetables
 - Meat processing plant
 - The NYC Council on the Environment is developing a mandate that would require local sourcing for grains for products sold at the Greenmarket – the county could help educate farmers about this and facilitate some exchange to comply/seize this opportunity
 - What about ADM? How much local grain do they purchase?
Answer: some in Columbia and Dutchess, but a minor amount. The logistics of local truck delivery rather than their simpler rail method make it less attractive to buy local
 - ADM's standards are difficult to meet in our geographical area – it's not the prime area for grains – too humid
 - What would be involved with meeting this opportunity? New processing facilities? That kind of infrastructure has disappeared from Columbia County. We need to rebuild other infrastructure like this – we need vegetable storage facilities also

- What about development pressure? It's a strong competitor for farming even if everything else were in place
- What could be the role of agritourism? Branding? Columbia County should be brand that gives back value to producers
- There needs to be education about land use and the value of our good soils for agriculture
- Property taxes! Should be structured better to help farming. Thresholds for ag exemptions are too high. We need alternate structures – for example, while the ag exemption program is state-based, towns/counties/school districts can play a role by creating PILOT's (Payments in Lieu of Taxes) for farmers
 - Could there be something with term easements that would offer a property tax deduction for the term?
- New York State currently produces only 30% of what it consumes – this is an opportunity.
- Too many State regulations. Why do we have to pay \$30 to have our soils sheet updated? Soils don't change.
- The way to protect good ag land is to maintain farm profitability
- Direct marketing and distribution involve issues of scale. There are opportunities for new added-value businesses to fill the need for marketing assistance
- Business is business – agriculture or not – and the same market rules apply
- With distribution by “middlemen” we have to be prepared to give up some of the profit
- The County should have a procurement policy to buy local for our institutions, including schools, correction facilities, etc.
 - But we have a processing gap. Schools don't buy produce the way homeowners do --- vegetables arrive there cleaned, cut, and usually in a can
 - Some local fruits are bought by local school districts
- There are limits to local – were are where we are because of our ground, our climate, what our land grows best. There's a reason why dairy and fruit have dominated here. Our availability of water is a big factor in dairy here. Somethings will have to be bought out of the area. We can't do grains on a large scale.
- Farms are businesses – people need to understand that, and they also need to understand the value, for example, of ag exemptions, how they help farming. Education needs to be the first step
- Opportunities for added-value businesses are particularly helpful for second-/younger generations of farmers wanting to get started

- When the Plan is looking at prioritizing lands for protection, we should make sure to coordinate with town comprehensive plans and work with local towns.
- We're farming a lot of leased land – what happens with succession? Will this land remain available? On the other hand, what happens when a farmer leaves and the landowner can't find another? What can the towns or county do to help this?
- We have to remember that small and large farms (commodity and small scale) need each other – we lose the infrastructure we need otherwise
- We need to be sure of smart planning practices --- once you divide up a farm into five-acre lots, it's no longer feasible to farm. If large tracts become multiple smaller tracts – a leasing farmer could end up working with dozens of different landowners. Each one is a relationship, each one has a special requirement or need. It's a huge management task.
- Conservation programs like easements need to be flexible. What if a building envelope doesn't account for the need of a new and different kind of farm operation?
- Even “traditional” farms are changing their farming practices. We're coming closer together. We need all kinds of farming.
- The public needs more information. There are lots of misunderstandings about food, food safety, and similar subjects