

# Columbia County Agriculture & Farmland Protection Plan

## Focus Group Notes

April 6, 2011 – 8:00 – 9:30

Farm Bureau

Columbia County Soil & Water Meeting Room

Ghent, New York

- Slaughterhouse
  - [Background: County Supervisors are committed to donating land to the IDA to locate the mobile slaughterhouse unit. LILA (Local Infrastructure for Local Agriculture) is looking at how to structure it – whether to engage an operator, who would lease the docking site, etc. There needs to be an entity to do that. And there need to be offshoot businesses for aging, cut & wrap, smoking, etc. ]
  - Eklunds (Delaware County docking site) will transition to a permanent slaughterhouse. This shows how the mobile unit can be a leader for creating a permanent facility.
  - In the meantime, the mobile unit can alleviate the annual spike from August through October.
  - It offers greater flexibility – e.g. can stand dormant more easily than a permanent facility with more staff to consider.
  - Are other counties are also working on docking sites that could complement the Columbia County site? Greene County is thinking about it, although that's too close and could compete. Ulster, Orange and Sullivan are also looking at it. Until more sites are up and running, it could sit in Columbia County for a while, which could translate into an opportunity to learn more about how a permanent facility could work here.
  - Any estimate of need/# of animals? Has not been done reliably.
- Zoning impact on agriculture: had been asked at the Ag Brunch – the best answer to what can towns do about this is for them to “do no harm” and not be detrimental to agriculture, either with outright limitations or also unintended consequences of zoning that limits ag businesses and profitability.
  - There may be times when NYSDAM needs to be brought in to help towns understand the consequences of zoning.
- Education:
  - We need to get VoAg back (Vocational Agriculture). When was the last FFA/Future Farmers of America, around here? In Germantown, in 1957.
  - Greenville in Greene County does have a program.
  - You could bring back FFA even without VoAg.
  - Questar would be the right home – it already draws from three counties, and kids could be bussed there. Can they be bussed to Greenville now?
  - It's the right time – the kids are here
  - It's attainable, and it's important that we set goals that are attainable.
  - Obstacles?
    - Money, but also leadership. Look at other examples:

- Greenwich, NY VoAg program
- Talk to Sandra Gardner, at Taconic Hills (she's a FFA grad)
- Look at Connecticut – Regional 1 in NW Connecticut has a great program. Every kid must take a class in it. There's an Open House in May. Every kid is required to have an ag job. Some go on in farming, some to vet school.
- Note, there is an endowment fund based at UConn that has helped fund development of these programs.
- Columbia County's Farm-to-School (FTS) program (through Health Care Consortium) is already speaking with Questar about the local food aspect – the effort to get local foods in local schools; and to tie in with their culinary program, so that students learn more about where their foods come from. FTS has talked some to C-GCC also.
  - So if state funding is going to schools for FFA programs, we should look at that money – we don't have to invent new funding streams, it's there now.
- Could there be an ag business park with all kinds of processing and added value businesses? It could be made available to farmers.
  - What kind of structure?
  - It comes down to a cooperative structure.
  - In Connecticut, small-scale beef farmers are looking at how to start a small-scale slaughterhouse to serve them.
    - There are small-scale slaughterhouse plans available (Temple Grandin advisement?)
    - What is the appropriate scale for humane animal handling?
    - Hartwick example – had some failing infrastructure and received some help from their county and the state. Deal with about 400 farmers a year/650 farm properties. Maybe 2,000 cattle? 2,000 hogs?
- Right now there is municipal and county support for other business sectors – why not for agriculture, our county's #1 industry? We need to get ours to view agriculture in that way.
- What's the purpose of the CAFPP? Saving open space, or current working farms?
  - It's a balance of the two. But "you have to keep the farmer happy and profitable or you'll lose the good farm land."
  - How do you find young farmers? Or rather, "how do you help an old farmer get out (equitably)?" "Any multi-generational farmer now, if profitable, would gladly pass the farm down – or even to a stranger, with the right arrangement."
  - We need to ease taxes if land is to stay in agriculture use.
    - One proposal before Congress is to eliminate the estate tax for farms staying in farming.
  - So, the answer is, it's both the land and the farmer.
  - Municipalities can extend the ag exemption to fire and library taxes (by referendum)

- Absentee landowners are helping keep land available for farming. Renting rather than free leases is becoming more common, however (depending on the land, the demand.)