

Ag Protection Plan Meeting 9/25/08—Town of Callicoon, Town of Delaware.

1. Introductions:

Linda Babicz
Alice Diehl
Virginia Andkjar
Jim Scheutzow
John Gain
Earl Myers
Stefan Gieger
Joseph Horak
Tom Bose
Dick Riseling
Tanya Hahn
George Fulton
Don Meltz (CPEA)
Nan Stotzenberg (CPEA)
Jill Weyer (SC)
Julie Richmond (SC)

7:30 pm: Meeting called to order.

2. Brief review of approach (Nan)

Let's recap the general steps we'll take over the next few months.
Three phases- keep focus on these, not the end product, because that becomes overwhelming. Look at steps, not solutions. Solutions will come later.

First:

Identify resources in the towns (ag resources, characteristic of farming, types of farming, who is farming). This will take a few months. Solid facts are necessary to understand issues and trends. Future steps will be based on this information. Includes opinions—the public, farmers, and ag businesses. Maps provide much base information, and we work from there.

Second:

What do you want for your future? What kind of ag, what kind of role will ag play in community and economy? Phase 2 will be shorter than phase 1; we get information from the public and farmers.

Third:

How will we get there?
We do lots of brainstorming and discuss options.

Again, try to be patient and not jump to phase 3.

Info collection in first phase:

- soil information
- changes in demographics

- land use changes (subdivisions, their impact on farms)
- the farms themselves
- physical and natural resources (how they impact farms- limitation or opportunity) existing regulations and plans (build on, not reinvent them)
- buildout analysis (look at towns and see what zoning and land use regulations will likely bring)
- prioritizing types of farms and farmlands that would be targeted by PDR programs if that opportunity comes up. Note that the state isn't directing you to say anything in particular. They want to see you prioritize your lands.

Information gathering: OSI intern Julie DiRoma is working through mid-December. Great asset, doing a huge amount of work.

Visioning in the second phase:

Vision statement: an important part of the plan. If you don't know where you're going, you won't be able to get there. Something to work towards over time.

Goals and recommendations in the third phase:

Don and Nan pull everything together. Given each town's circumstances, and goals, what will we recommend?

Once we know strategies and goals, we'll give direction. Identify how the town boards, the county, and other involved groups should implement the plans, what funding sources exist, etc.

Once the draft is together, we move into the adoption process. Town boards adopt/ accept the plan, NYS Ag and Markets adopts/ accepts it. Ag and Markets wants involvement in the process, and wants to help (John Brennan). County Farmland Protection Board also reviews the draft. Consultants will also help with the SEQR process. You can adopt it as a stand alone plan, as part of a comprehensive plan, as an amendment to a plan, etc.

Questions about the process

Q: Does it start with the survey?

Simultaneously get public input and mapping done. Don has already started some mapping, the County has sent some GIS data, Julie has read and reviewed many plans.

Q: What is the sequence of the public input component?

Now we ask farmers and the public about agriculture, importance, issues and challenges. Helps to inform the vision statement. Later, during or just before the draft stage, we get more public input on the draft in progress. (Look at the proposal for suggested timeline of public meetings). Julie will write press releases, and keep the public up to date on committee activities. Let Nan and Don know if you have ideas for getting the word out.

Q (Don): We need your help identifying every single piece of farmland in every town. Every field that adds to the ag economy will be mapped, and we'll use this information when we prioritize farmlands.

The FSA has some maps.

Discussion: FSA maps have parcels but Don wants actual measurements of each field. What is a farm, what is a farm field? These questions are harder to answer. We want to capture rental properties as well. The tax parcel database is easy to read but it's an approximation of where the farms are. Parcels are often not coded by the assessor as a farm (rented land, for example). Hard to quantify. The County has FSA maps of pasture and cropland, and these are a great place to start. They are not, however, available to the public. Small farms and niche farms, woodlots and beekeeping operations are too small for tax exemptions, so they don't show up on tax maps, and the consultants need committee members' help in capturing them.

Q: If one has 100 acres, do you want it broken down by what happens on each of those acres?

Don will identify fields using aerial photos, then ask you to verify what's being actively cultivated.

Q: We're primarily dairy but also bees and maple. Include these?

Yes! Diversity of farming on the ground never shows up in our data. We would never know about this diversity without your input. We'll send you maps, aerial photos, and an agenda, and ask you to work on them—what's going on where. Write on them, mark them up, etc. Good project for meetings the consultants can't attend.

Q: People hear "farm preservation" and think of PDRs, but it's not necessarily just that. A large share of our public has that misconception.

An important point. So far there has been no publicity to explain the plan, but Julie put together a press release to let people know there's a survey going out. Maybe first we should let them know what we're doing. A good opportunity to clarify those misconceptions re: PDRs. Inform the public that this is a whole toolkit, not just one action. Remind people that we're looking at a broad range of land use, education, economic development, and programmatic strategies. Maybe Julie can do a broader press release.

Q: What websites will we use, to disseminate information to the public?

www.planningbetterplaces.com

Don will put a link on this website, so that town webmasters can link to it from their websites. The County will also post the link on its website. To keep it simple, there will be one page for Callicoon and Delaware, and one for Liberty and Bethel. People will have the opportunity to comment on the material.

Q: Phone contact?

Jill Weyer will be the public contact.

3. Getting to Know Agriculture

Nan: We'll spend 30 minutes discussing the community and agriculture, using Don's maps. This will get the conversation going, and help Nan and Don learn about what's

going on. We have a list of questions to discuss, and then we'll talk about the survey a little bit.

Q: Would it help to physically go out and drive?

Nan: Yes, we plan to do so once we get the info started.

The maps:

Don picked out centroids of agricultural class parcels (meaning the tax assessor has said these are farm parcels, not residential or commercial). Don labeled them as vacant land, livestock, or crops. Together we will flesh out what else is going on in these parcels.

8:45 pm: 30 minute break-out session to review maps.

9:15 pm: groups reconvene.

Q (Nan): Some folks say the small farms, even if they have very little farm income, should be included because they contribute to open space, but they're different from traditional dairy farms. What do you think?

-I don't know any dairy farmers who only do dairy. They're all so diversified now.

-We asked to change the survey question about income percentage derived from farming.

The farms that are in the most trouble are the dairy farms. There's pressure on beef farmers as well, but it's chiefly dairy.

-Well taken, because the dairy farmer needs the most land.

Q (Nan): Are the dairy farms in trouble b/c of the overall dairy economy or something specific to here?

-The overall.

-It's not the best farmland in the world.

-There's nobody to take over farms.

-It's not an easy business. We're on a hill but we're not unprofitable. So it's not just the land.

Q: Some people just have a subsistence farm for themselves. Include them?

Yes, if we're looking at maintaining and preserving farmland. They are not developing or selling their property.

Nan: This was a great start, I learned a lot. We did more than identify locations on a map; we learned about issues. Next thing on the agenda is the survey.

4. Progress of Survey

Jill: We're undecided about cover letters—a joint letter from the supervisors, etc? It depends on how formal we want to be.

I took as many comments as possible and incorporated them. Tried to keep all the questions in, and add in others that we thought of afterwards. Has anybody looked at the emailed copy?

Q: re: agricultural service business section.

Since we wanted to keep it to one survey, we blocked out questions for farmers, agribusiness or service questions, and questions that could be answered by anybody.

Q: Do you have a mailing list?

That's the next question. For the farmers portion, we're using the parcels in an ag district, properties that have an ag exemption, and if their property is assessed as an agricultural parcel. So that's any of the 100 property codes. Based on that, Callicoon has 1256 parcels and Delaware has 950 that meet one of those three criteria. We took that and removed the duplicates. Now we're down to 1077 in Callicoon and 777 in Delaware. We might still delete more duplicates. Also, if a farmer owns parcels in each town, we could remove those duplicates.

Q: Otherwise that farmer will receive duplicate surveys?

Yes, we'll try to get those out. So we've got 1200 surveys, which is a lot.

Q (Nan): Your ag district is huge and there are lots of parcels in an ag district that have nothing to do with agriculture. I'm not sure that's the right way to go.

-On my farm, there are 9 different leases with other landowners for the ag assessment, and we're the only ones who use it. So do they need to get the survey?

-As a person who leases land to farmers, I would like to receive the survey.

Q: On the income brackets, you should have one that says zero because you might be a subsistence farm.

Jill: We should put more brackets in the lower ranges.

Q: What do you think the highest is?

Over a million.

Q: Will people not fill this question out?

-If not, doesn't matter. More important is what percent of your net family income comes from farming.

-Gross annual sales question makes people nervous—broaden out the brackets. If this is an attempt to see how much revenue is being brought into the town, it's not a good way to get that information. Important to leave it in, though.

Q (Nan): Again, the parcels in ag district that don't have anything to do with ag. Do you want those people to get the survey? If I were in an ag district and had 50 acres of woods and didn't do anything with it, I would read the survey and be puzzled by some of the questions. We need to tell people why they got the survey, and then ask if they have any ag on their property. Then, if no, tell them to answer certain questions only. (for example, how much of a concern is loss of farmland—anyone can answer that).

-Also people with woodlands are potential farmers; they might harvest their wood.

Nan: If we ask them if they have a farm on their property, will they know what we mean by "farm"? Would they consider their woodlot a farm?

-Well it's considered agricultural.

-Some landowners don't even know that.

Q: Add the term forestry to the survey?

-Maybe just reorganize it.

Q: I think we should have a bracket for less than \$25,000 (gross annual sales from your farm/ business). I think in the next few years we're going to see a lot more people with very small annual sales from their farms, and this will legitimize their small-scale farming activity. Maybe even go down to \$10,000.

-\$10,000 makes you a farming business as far as taxes go. So that should be a cutoff.

Q (Nan): Any thoughts on the mailing list? Sending it to nonfarmers?

-General discussion re: ag exemptions and ag districts.

-Jill: Let's reorganize this section and send the survey to everybody.

Q: How long before you think this will be finalized?

Jill: We're still working on the list because the list we got from CCE gave only five agribusinesses in the towns. Delaware Valley Farm and Garden, First National Bank of Jeffersonville, Mullally's Tractors, Dr. Nebzedowski, and Tractor Supply.

Q: What about Cochection Mills, Narrowsburg Feed and Grain, etc.?

-They're not in the selected towns.

-There are many others though.

-Jill: Julie will do a general yellow pages search.

Q: But what about others? Lots of our feed suppliers are not in Sullivan County.

-Jill: we can send it to out-of-county farm services businesses.

-Nan: people can add to the list.

-Plumbers, carpenters, lumber mills, excavators, electricians.

Jill: We're hoping to get the survey out by the end of October.

-Nan: Don't give respondents lots of time to fill it out. Two or three weeks at most. There are a lot of respondents. Suggestion that the survey be set up as a scanned database.

-Jill: we usually get back about 10 percent.

-Nan: I hope you get 25 or 30 percent.

Q: Will we get more back, if we hand deliver them?

Probably. We can call or follow up with respondents.

Nan: We can first look at the question of whether people have some kind of active farming, and separate the responses out, to focus on one group first. It will be interesting to see how their opinions differ on that question.

Q (Nan): can you print these out at the County?

Jill: I think so. And we can enter the data into SPSS.

Q (Jill): Should we remove all duplicates?

-Yes.

-Jill: And, if you own property in both Callicoon and Delaware, I'm going to remove your name from one of the lists.

Jill: So I will rearrange the survey based on your comments. On the question "What is the major enterprise of your farm?" I will rephrase and have respondents check all that apply (reflecting diversity of farms).

Nan: I can help with a cover letter.

Comments re: anonymity and privacy. Respondents must be assured of their anonymity since they are answering questions about income and tax reporting.

We should add a line for people to explain the negative relationship they experience between farms and non-farm neighbors.

Q: Would hunting camps get the survey?

Only if they meet the criteria.

Q: Why do we care about their education?

-Jill: that was something that some people wanted to know. Others thought it was inappropriate.

-Lots of younger farmers have to go to college.

-It can sound intrusive but it's a good question.

5. Other public input

Nan: We included an introductory meeting for the public, in our first proposal. To get public input on agriculture. And then we would have an agricultural focus group, having similar discussions with smaller numbers of farmers. We can modify that plan, but we should do those things over the next couple of months if we're going to do them. I advise against doing anything between Thanksgiving and Christmas. The initial public meeting should either be before Thanksgiving, or we can wait until January to do the public meetings.

General response that it's best to focus on the agricultural community now, and public input a little later.

Q: Gas leases are going to become a big issue. Should there be a question in the survey about gas leases, and whether respondents feel they will be beneficial or harmful to agriculture? This will affect many farmers. Maybe it will preserve agriculture if properly regulated.

-General discussion.

-Given the level of concern about it, it is a good idea to add a question about it.

-If you sell your farmland to a gas company, the gas company will not subdivide and sell your land. So it can be a benefit to open space. Unlike selling to a developer, who will subdivide and develop.

-Julie: we hesitated to put gas leasing questions on the survey, because it is so contentious and we did not want respondents to suspect that this was a survey about gas drilling, but if worded properly, we can include it.

Q: If this is anonymous, why are we putting the SBL number down on the survey?

Jill: it helps us with mapping, but we can remove that question. For confidentiality.

6. Next steps

Regular meetings will be set for the third Thursday of the month, at 7:30 pm. We might not have a meeting each month, but we will set this as our standard day and time. ***Next meeting will be Thursday October 16.*** We will send out an email reminder and make sure this room will be available.

Q (Nan): Can we have a telephone conference, if we (Nan and Don) want to participate but cannot be here?

Answer: Yes, there is a speakerphone.

9:35 pm: Meeting adjourned.