

**Town of White Creek
Comprehensive Plan and Ag Protection Plan
Steering Committee/Agricultural Focus Group Meeting Minutes
June 17, 2009**

Attendees: , Carol Moore, , Don Sweet, Sarah Ashton, Rody Walker, Dick Dempsey
Absent: Tim Smith, Rupert Jennings, Bill Badgeley , J. Tudor, Rich Moses, Ed Gulley, , Darryl Caputo, Jim Perry, Peter Hetko

Minutes: The minutes of the May 20th meeting were reviewed and approved.

Criteria to Prioritize Farmland: The meeting opened with a brief discussion focusing on the criteria to prioritize farmland protection. It was noted that ‘farm plans’ were not a matter of public record and therefore including this as a criteria would be difficult as data would be more unwieldy to obtain. The question was asked if a farm has a management plan does it make protection of the farm of higher priority? The committee needs to identify the critical farmlands in the town. Walker noted that he was in favor of a point system and also giving some credit to people managing lands (with farm plans). He felt this might be a way to encourage people to undertake the development of plans. Dempsey noted that at some level farms need to develop plans. Walker confirmed that at a certain size farm plans are mandated (700 cows for dairy) and he feels that farms with plans result in better operations. Conservation issues are important. The agricultural sector/regulators are increasingly asking smaller sized farms to develop plans too—like nutrient management plans. Ultimately the question remained how can information about the presence of a plan be easily obtained to prioritize farmland.

Later in the meeting Nan handed out the revised printout of criteria which put more weight on soils data—50% to quality of soils and 50% to the rest of the criteria (with 25% to resources and 15% to development pressures and 10% to environmental issues). It is not clear the degree to which soils of prime importance or state-wide importance exist in the Town of White Creek. Nan and her colleague Don have data on soils from Washington County Soil and Water and will plot the location of the soils visa vie the parcels and forward a map to the committee members. The thinking was if there are very, very few locations with strong soils then perhaps this should not rank as such a high percentage of the criteria. One strategy would be just to include as priority farmland tillable soils; some think that soils are the most important quality to consider.

Nan noted that NYS allows communities to create their own definition of priority farmlands. PDR outlines a certain set of criteria at the state level and NYS wants to know what the local criteria are. Walker noted that there are viable farms that don’t have prime soils. A question was raised if state or local criteria take priority? Nan will investigate this question. There are farmlands that may not be of priority soils that promote the character of the community---with clay and rocky soils. Nan noted that State PDR programs look for letters of support and place a heavy weight on viability as well as importance of the farms to the community. Private funds as well like those provided through the Agricultural Stewardship Assn come up with ranking systems. The State looks at soils, local conditions and definitions—which help to create value beyond just prime soils.

Overall the criteria established, Nan noted, create a picture of where important lands in a community are located and what is taking place around them and as a result programs and policies and regulations are developed to protect and promote the use of farmland.

Committee members were asked in advance of the next meeting to review the revised criteria and give further consideration to the grid. Members are also asked to review the map for farmland identification---noting those parcels which have not been coded as agricultural but which are being used for that purpose so that the maps can be revised to reflect the extent of agricultural activity in the Township. Ashton will ask Somers to help define what is a tree farm as there are several properties that are used as wood lots and it is not clear which should be labeled as 'agricultural'. Nan will provide the committee with a map noting the location of prime soils and those of statewide importance.

Sub Vision Statements

Nan noted that the committee had updated the overall vision statement and the agricultural vision statement and definition of agriculture. Now one of the main tasks of the Committee meeting was to review and refine the 'sub-vision statements' focused on the economy, community character, the environment, recreation and services infrastructure. She passed out the draft sub-vision statements for each of these categories which were derived from the data gathering report and the public meeting.

Economy: With regard to the site for business development, the current statement refers to the Village of Cambridge but committee members wondered how to handle the hamlet of White Creek and hamlet around Bensons/Eagle Bridge Machining. The question too of trying to attract (if that was desired) a manufacturing concern vs. a big box retail store was raised. Dempsey pointed out that a manufacturing concern like Cambridge Valley Machining employed a lot of people and created little odor or noise and brought in important income into the community. Moore noted that either would create a stir and Walker raised concerns about the land pressures created by growth. Sweet noted that the focus is really on *creating small businesses*. Ultimately the plan can encourage small business development or discourage it or regulate it. Moore felt it was important to empower ourselves as a community and think ahead rather than just waiting for things to happen to us. Ashton mentioned that there may be a way to engage some graduate students in a study of what appropriate small businesses might be for this locality. The group concluded that in its next public workshop it would ask the community to identify: What would be good small businesses in/for White Creek? And potentially present additional information if available regarding some small business options. The committee also felt it was important to include as part of the economic sub-vision a focus on *retaining existing small businesses* and holding on to the existing jobs in the community noting the relocation of Vermont Timber Frames, Wright Dolls and ultimately the Hospital.

Community Character: In response to a question, Nan noted that this was developed from the comprehensive plan public meeting. A phrase incorporating the richness of 'arts and cultural events and venues' was proposed to be added.

Environment Nan confirmed that at the public meeting many participants noted an interest in alternative energy and self-sufficiency. Nan noted that the 'environment' category can include information regarding steep slopes and wetlands. Dempsey noted the need to add an interest in increasing access and promoting trails for recreation (snow mobiling, bird watching, hunting) was important. Walker noted that farms considered wildlife in their work relating his experience postponing haying of a field in Vermont to protect the meadow lark's and bobolinks nesting patterns consistent with the Audubon Society's recommendations.

Ashton inquired about the state parks and preserving the forests. Also, reflecting upon the data gathering phase steering committee meetings there was continual interest in ensuring that the

aquifer was maintained, clean and protected. (Nan confirmed that all ground water is part of the aquifer.) Also to be added: White Creek has and will retain a diversity of habitats.

Recreation: Add diverse arts and cultural opportunities and offerings. Add a variety of sports and youth club activities (such as 4-H).

Services: There was an interest in ensuring that public services were affordable to prevent over taxation. Add Active volunteer fire and rescue. The character of rural roads was also suggested to be included and retained.

Housing: The Committee thought it wise to consider adding a section on housing. *Ensure that housing stock is diverse and affordable.* There was discussion about the role of second homes in the context of the community—adding to the tax base but sometimes when second home individuals passed away it resulted in vacant older homes. *The percentage of owner occupied vs. rental needed to be considered and the community should strike a good balance and err on the side of ‘owner occupied’ though offer affordable opportunities.* Dempsey noted that in the ‘70s an ordinance was passed regulating mobile homes. Walker suggested that there should be standards and conditions. With regard to mobile homes, Nan noted that legally a community can’t ban mobile homes but can direct them to specific locations. Ultimately it was thought that they should be allowed.

Next Meeting Weds. July 15th 7:30PM Town of White Creek, 28 Mountain View Drive.