

**Town of White Creek
Comprehensive Plan and Ag Protection Plan
Steering Committee Meeting Minutes
September 16, 2009**

Attendees: Don Sweet, Sarah Ashton, Rody Walker, Jim Perry, Peter Hetko, Bill Badgley, Darryl Caputo

Absent: Tim Smith, Rupert Jennings, J. Tudor, Rich Moses, Ed Gulley, Carol Moore,

Minutes: The minutes of the July 15th meeting were reviewed and approved.

Updated Maps/Prioritizing Farmland: The Data Gathering Phase of the Comprehensive Plan was completed in April 2007 and contained data from 2006. Hence, Nan and her colleague Don have been updating relevant maps using updated Tax Parcel Data supplied by Washington County. She handed out revised land use maps which also include insight from the committee members on parcels which may be coded vacant land but are used for agriculture. Peter and Bill updated the map in Chestnut Hill/upper Ash Grove and Sarah will complete lower Ash Grove and submit the data to Nan. Other corrections pertained to including the Moses Property as an ASA preserved property and land owned by Pete Niles—Nan will ask for updated information from ASA. Rody noted that some of his property had been just awarded funds to purchase development rights. Once this transaction is complete these lands will be added.

Nan/Don produced a map denoting Farmland Soils in White Creek. Included were soils with soils of prime importance (orange), statewide importance (yellow) and those included in the LESA score by Washington County (pink). The mapping only ranked those parcels classified as agriculture (or with a 100 code) by the assessors as well as any additional farmlands that the Committee members had identified. She suggested that the Committee not look at particular parcels but more globally—which illustrate that the more important farm soils are in the south of the township and a bit in the north east along Ash Grove. It was clarified that if a house is on the property despite the land's use it is classified residential but a part of the parcel could be considered for prioritizing as farmland. In addition to visiting each parcel to determine the amount of farmland aerial photos could help identify open fields but would not necessarily help with the identification of tree farms or maple sugaring operations. Committee members were reminded to let Nan know if there are any other parcels not denoted as agriculture by the assessors which are in use—they will update one more time before the plan is finalized.

Maps were handed out entitled Agricultural Prioritization using LESA calculations. This map gives the Town a local tool to target farmland protection programs—such as purchase of development rights programs or other tax incentive programs. The Map results are based on the criteria/ranking that the Committee established over the last few months. Don M. (Nan's partner and the GIS specialist) put in all the data and each parcel received a numerical rating based on the criteria and its relevant ranking (criteria included soils, ag exemption, active ag use, size, adjacency to protected lands, distance from the hamlet and roads, existence of wetlands and streams). Each parcel received a numeric ranking, priority. The darker the green the higher the score. 84 was the highest score received (out of 100). The committee felt that all parcels should be ranked not just those with the assessed coding of 100—but vacant land and residential too. The soils may show that some of these lands are valuable for farming too. Nan will have Don M. do this. (There was also discussion about including State Lands (forests) already conserved and it was determined that this land did not need to be included as it was already conserved.)

If you look generally at the results, one notes that the darker green parcels are mostly clustered in the Southern part of the Township. There are also some highly rated parcels just outside the Village of Cambridge. This map can be used to determine which farmlands could be protected given their high value to the Township for agricultural lands. Nan noted that NYS ranks parcels primarily on the potential profitability of the soils. Don M. (GIS partner) made a couple of observations about the criteria established. (1) The Committee discussed an interest in denoting which parcels were in active agricultural use but the data does not distinguish this. (2) Distance from a road/hamlet. As a crow flies which is the way the computer views parcels almost every parcel is within a very short distance to the roads—all within 3 miles. Don M. suggested that the Committee tighten this criteria to 0-.5. The Committee will review this and reconsider distances. Darryl asked why the distance from roads was important; Sweet commented that for development purposes having roadside frontage would be important. Another committee member commented that if a parcel was nearer a road it might be more attractive for development and if good farmland the community might wish to rank it higher for protection.

Recap of Accomplishments to Date Nan noted that the committee had accomplished much—received public input through a public visioning workshop, held two farm focus groups, updated maps, developed vision and sub goal statements, developed criteria for farmland prioritization. Some additional tables needed updating given that the Data Collection Phase of the plan used data up to 2006. Now the committee would switch gears and look at strategies for the plan to attain the goals outlined.

Strategies for the Plan

Nan provided a handout that include the vision statement, sub vision/goal statements and a Tool Box or Laundry list of strategies that the Committee could consider implementing to achieve agriculture related goals. She and other committee members suggested that the committee review each one and include, modify or delete it as necessary. Ultimately Sarah clarified that we would want to prioritize the potential implementation actions and this is something that we might want to engage the public in. Don S. confirmed that the Tool Box was designed to help the Township reach its goals. Jim supported the establishment of an agricultural committee that was grassroots based to help guide work. Sarah suggested that such a committee brainstorm ways to be ‘staffed’ so that strategies could be implemented. Jim asked if other towns had such an agricultural advisory committee. Nan noted that those that were serious about farmland protection and improving the agricultural economy did. Such a committee had a scope of work outlining expectations and reported to the Town Board. It was most successful when it had a part-time staff member to follow up. Cornell Cooperative Extension or ASA could be resources to identify staff within their ranks who could serve in this function. Other Townships could share such a resource. Nan encouraged the committee to brainstorm creative low cost ways of staffing it to be aggressive in implementation. The Committee might wish to speak to Salem which is also developing a plan.

Roady noted that dire situation that the dairy industry was in. Jim noted that the Board of White Creek passed a resolution asking for support of the dairy industry—farms are declaring bankruptcy and many rural communities are going to collapse. Bill noted that it was a federal issue. Representative Murphy is talking about it. Roady noted that Vermont is in a desperate situation. Nan noted that the National Farm Bureau is trying to work on the issue and shift the attitude about farming. Roady noted that the multiplier effect of farming is 2.6—one of the biggest. Peter asked what the committee could do about it and questioned whether it should be zoned agriculture before banks take farmland. Nan suggested that several communities that are not as comfortable with zoning have used their comprehensive plans not to recommend zoning but rather to outline broad concepts and principles that could be considered should the

community desire zoning—if the municipality did have zoning what are some of the broad concepts that should guide and what might it accomplish. There seemed to be interest on the Committee in pursuing and outlining some of these concepts. Peter reminded the committee that a toxic waste site almost went into Hoosick Falls but because of regulations on the town books it was stopped.

Nan asked the committee to review the initial Tool Box of Recommended Strategies that she had developed and brought to the meeting to achieve the goals outlined in the plan. Moving forward she was going to review the SubDivision and Site Plan Review Regulations as well as the Right to Farm Law. She was going to review them with an eye toward making recommendations to the committee regarding ways in which these tools could be strengthened to help realize the plan's goals.

Sarah followed up on a discussion about holding a Natural Resource/Environment meeting to inform the subdivision statement/goals and outline some more concrete strategies for the plan. Such a meeting would be scheduled for early October—hopefully October 8th. In addition to involving committee members who are involved on the Steering Committee (Hetko, Badgley, Caputo). The committee suggested inviting people with an interest in natural resources such as Neil and Stephanie Gifford, Scott Fitcher, Howard Romack, Rich Norman, Rup Jennings, Mike Bodner, Don Otey, Don Record.

Next Meeting Weds. October 21st 7:30PM Town of White Creek, 28 Mountain View Drive.
Please review tool box of recommended strategies to achieve agricultural subdivision statements.