

NY Towns Share Stories of Ag Planning
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ALBANY, N.Y. — American Farmland Trust hosted its first New York state conference in Albany Nov. 15.

“Harvesting Opportunities in New York: Growing Local Economies and Protecting Farmland” drew 165 attendees.

The nonprofit organization is more than 30 years old and works nationally to help farmers and ranchers protect land through practical measures such as conservation easements and purchase of development rights. The group also works at the policy level.

The conference brought together a cross-section of professions, including farming, local food advocacy, agriculture research, conservation, land-use planning and people working for farm-to-school and farm-to-institution procurement.

Three workshop tracks supported the group’s mission of protecting farmland — “Buy Local: Growing Local Food Economies”; “Support Local Agriculture & Protect Farmland in Your Community”; and “Spread the Word about Local Food Economies & Protecting Farmland.”

Each track was broken into three sessions. Moderators led panelists to discuss their experience and work, leaving time for questions. The model allowed for dense storytelling and informational exchange, and encouraged networking both during sessions and beyond.

Land trusts and conservation groups from around the state were well represented in the second track. The first session, “Planning for Agriculture: Communities Taking Action in New York,” gave an overview of the planning process, and illustrated it at work in three different towns.

Judy Wright, a field consultant for American Farmland Trust who has worked with communities in central New York state as they planned for agriculture, moderated the panel.

Planner Nan Stolzenburg set the stage by outlining comprehensive planning and showing ways to integrate agricultural planning and regulations into the process. She encouraged people to look at existing zoning and farmland regulations, and try to make plans as farm-friendly as possible.

Measures such as agricultural overlay zones, she said, can help keep ag going in that zone. Clustering is another tool she recommended that towns consider, suggesting conservation within subdivisions. Such practices have allowed land

leftover from housing developments to be used for farming; in Pennsylvania, horse farms have been placed in these remnants.

“Just what is a farm is a very important conversation to have in your community,” Stolzenburg said. “Some places look at it as a commercial farm, some places recognize smaller and niche and hobby farms.”

This question came up as representatives from the towns of Ancram, LeRoy and Parma shared their very different stories.

Scott Copey, chairman of the Town of Parma, Farmland & Open Space Preservation Committee, described his town’s agricultural plan, which was the first plan approved by the State Commission of Agriculture.

The Town of Parma is a suburb of Rochester, and the need for ag planning arose from a controversial project that would have eliminated a few hundred acres of farmland.

“We tried to maintain a cycle that started with public support, that drove political support, which drove the committee to be established,” said Copey, describing, he joked, five or six years work in 10 minutes.

One key to the success in Parma, he said, was keeping the committee active even after the plan was adopted. The work of ag planning doesn’t stop once a plan is identified; the committee he’s on now is still working to fulfill the goals established in the process.

Another key, he said, was building partnerships between interested parties — organizations like land trusts and community groups, not just individuals. In Parma, that took the initial community interest and galvanized it in broader organizational support.

Shelley Stein, a Genesee County legislator and farmer, spoke for the town of Le Roy. Though the county is one of the top five ag counties in the state, the Le Roy town board represented a residential rather than agricultural mindset as the ag planning process began. This underlined for Stein, of Stein Farms, the necessity of helping nonfarmers understand the importance of agriculture to the economy and community.

“We have to be vigilant,” she said. “We need to tell our story every day.”

One way to do so is a farm facts column in a local newspaper. Le Roy’s runs in the local Pennysaver, and is a place where farmers and ag committees can talk about what is happening onfarm in laymen’s terms. Her own dairy hosts open houses and works to present a positive portrait of agriculture.

One useful tool in Le Roy's ag planning process was a map-coloring activity that helped participants see farmland. Two separate events fit geographic divisions that straddle farm and nonfarm constituencies, which helped ensure people would come to the meetings.

An aha moment came, Stein said, when people saw how much land was being rented and farmed versus how much land was owned and farmed. The question of addressing the needs of nonfarm landlords became apparent.

Sue Bassin from the Ancram Agricultural Advisory Committee spoke next. This

Columbia County town has a long history of farming on hilly land that in other parts of the state would be considered marginal.

"We're in the Hudson Valley which has strong pressure for food farming," said Bassin.

She encouraged people in the workshop to first research their town's interests in order to understand people's concerns, and use their preferences to build community support.

As in the case of the Town of Parma, Ancram relied on political support for the planning process, but that required changing the town board.

"Part of the political revolution was getting farmers on the town board and getting them on the ag planning committee," said Bassin, adding that expert help — Nan Stolzenburg consulted in Ancram — was also important.

Another key factor to the plan's success was communication. The committee printed a booklet about the ag and farmland protection plan in lay terms, and kept that available at the town office. All the committee's notes went online so people could see the process unfolding.

Ancram worked its way through the comprehensive plan, to the agricultural plan, and now is working on zoning.

During the question-and-answer period, Scott Fickbohm from Otsego County Soil and Water Conservation District asked for advice as the county embarked on its agricultural planning process. Fickbohm wanted to know how to open up the conversation so people would feel involved.

Stein suggested an activity such as the map coloring Le Roy used, and feeding people. She and other panelists advised breaking the various groups up to best allow people to be heard.

John Brennan from the New York State Department of Agriculture and Markets said funds for agricultural plans are available, and information for interested

towns and municipalities is online. The state awarded more than \$600,000 in September.

In the course of an hour and a half, a lot of ground was covered. People left with clear pictures of how three towns had achieved agricultural plans, and models of how they might work in their own area to make the same happen. Even though a long lunch line was forming, people stayed in the room and exchanged email addresses, and asked questions.