

Executive Summary

An Agricultural & Farmland
Protection Plan For Putnam County

Agricultural Opportunities &
Challenges in Putnam County



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Prepared by the
Putnam County
Agricultural &
Farmland Protection Board

Executive Summary

Agriculture in Putnam County is a diverse, multimillion dollar industry and a crucial land use that strengthens our local food supply, economic vitality, quality of life, community character, picturesque landscape, environment, and recreational opportunities. Top agricultural and farming activities in the County include equine and livestock operations, greenhouses, nurseries, orchards, maple syrup, hay and corn production. There are 11,309 farmland acres in Putnam County (about 4% of the total land base). Farmland includes, but is not limited to tillable lands (890 acres) forest lands (4024 acres), and pastureland (1,818 acres). The average size of the farm is 52.6 acres, and farms range from 1.25 acre in size to 1,200 acres.



These lands are under intense pressure and at great risk of being converted to non-agricultural development. Thoughtful, decisive action is needed now to preserve the remaining farms and agriculture in Putnam County.

Located in the heart of the scenic Hudson Valley, Putnam County is within commuting distance of New York City. The risks to continuing agriculture in Putnam County are great: compared to other Hudson Valley counties Putnam showed the greatest loss of farmland acres, the highest agricultural production expenses, and smaller net return per farm. Putnam County also has the highest rate of increase in new housing units compared to other Hudson Valley counties. High property values and taxes are one of the major issues facing agriculture in Putnam County.

However, great potential for agriculture still exists. Agriculture has a strong positive economic impact in Putnam County (its multiplier effect is one of the highest in the region). Recent years have shown large increases in the market value of agricultural products, and there are many opportunities for niche marketing, vegetable growing, and agri-tourism activities. Further, there is support for agriculture among the public and the existing certified agricultural district and the Putnam County Agricultural and Farmland Protection Board provide a basis for further protection and enhancement of agriculture in the County.

Agriculture is Important to Putnam County

Farm businesses contribute to our local economy. In addition to millions of dollars worth of economic activity and farm related employment, farms pay more in taxes than they demand in local services and thus are wise financial investments for local towns. Farms contribute to a growing tourism industry in the county and offer a variety of recreational activities. Farms are working open spaces and are an alternative to congested residential development. They enhance the diversity of the Putnam County landscape and create the scenic views that define the distinctiveness and uniqueness of our County. Agriculture holds a major chapter in the history of Putnam County and farms have always played a vital role in the development of the county's economic and cultural fabric. In the New York City Watershed, agriculture is the preferred land use to protect water quality. Further, agricultural lands are crucial non-forested areas essential to life for hundreds of species of plants, mammals, insects, and birds that rely on open space for their primary habitat. And, farms are a local source of fresh, safe food and we have the opportunity to ensure that Putnam County farms supply the local demand for fresh and safe agricultural products.

Agricultural and Farmland Protection Efforts

A variety of New York State laws and programs encourage and protect commercial farming. One major program – the Agricultural Districts Program, authorizes the creation of special districts to preserve farmlands and to protect their owners and operators. Being in an agricultural district benefits farmers several ways: by limiting taxation on farmland; by providing “right-to-farm” protections; by preventing local governments from enacting unreasonable regulations on farm operations; by requiring that the impact on farms be reviewed during the development process, and by limiting eminent domain proceedings. Other programs help reduce property tax burdens. There has been a certified agricultural district in Putnam County since 2003. However, many of the farms in Putnam County are small and do not

meet state criteria for inclusion in these programs. Therefore, many county farms have neither protections nor benefits afforded larger farms.

Another state program includes authorization and funding to help counties develop strategic plans for agricultural protection and enhancement that identify and analyze the agricultural value of farmlands, and highlight threats to future agricultural uses, and describe activities, programs, and strategies to keep land in agriculture.

To augment existing local agricultural protection and enhancement efforts, the Putnam County Agricultural and Farmland Protection Board initiated a planning process in 2003 to develop an agricultural plan for Putnam County. A consultant was retained in April 2004 to assist the Agricultural and Farmland Protection Board in developing this plan. Planning activities have centered on: documenting the economic importance, issues, trends, and needs of agriculture; developing a Geographic Information System (mapping) of farms, farmland, and environmental conditions related to agriculture; identifying future opportunities for agriculture; identifying areas suitable for farmland protection and developing a priority ranking system for lands to be protected; articulating a long-term vision for agriculture in the county; developing a series of goals to fulfill that vision; and developing specific strategies to achieve those goals. This plan meets the statutory requirements of New York State law (AML) Article 25-aaa. The planning process included extensive data collection and public input.



A Long-Term Vision for Agriculture and Farmland in Putnam County

A long-range vision for agriculture and farmland was developed from identifying the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats facing agriculture in Putnam County. The vision expressed in the following statement sets the tone and points the direction for the future—

Agriculture in Putnam County is working open space understood and appreciated for its intrinsic contribution to Putnam County's economy, environment, beauty and character, history, recreational opportunities, and our quality of life. Lands remain available for active agricultural activities. Agriculture also plays an important role in providing a local supply of fresh food and produce. Farmers are able to capitalize on new economic opportunities such as agri-tourism, niche or specialty products, and fresh products. Farm management is enhanced to increase profitability and use of best management practices protects natural resources. A positive attitude towards farming galvanizes the agricultural community and its advocates so that they are successful in funding and providing programs to assist farmers to be more productive and profitable.

Goals, Objectives, and Strategies for Agriculture and Farmland Protection

The Plan establishes five major goals, and multiple objectives and strategies to fulfill the vision for agriculture and farmland in Putnam County.

Goal 1: Economic Opportunities - Preserve agriculture as an important industry in the county and promote further agricultural economic development.

Our vision: The number of farms and greenhouse operations in Putnam County will grow and new niche markets will be developed. The County, through its programs, will encourage the development of agriculture as a goods-producing industry with the potential to generate additional economic activity across all industry sectors. Agri-tourism will become an important component of the county's economy. Agricultural production costs including property taxes will be controlled. More farmers will take advantage of agricultural assessments to reduce their costs. Putnam County will be regionally known as a location for safe, farm-fresh foods and unique, high-quality plants and flowers.

Our Strategy: This goal can be accomplished by aggressively integrating agriculture into existing county economic programs and initiatives; by decreasing costs of farming in Putnam County through programs that help farmers share

resources, take advantage of the agricultural assessment program and receive expanded tax benefits for agriculture; by increasing agri-tourism and green marketing opportunities in the County, and by promoting farm diversification efforts such as niche marketing, direct marketing and new product development opportunities.

Goal 2: Community Support - Increase community support of agriculture and cultivate an enhanced appreciation of agriculture and the many roles it plays in Putnam County.

Our Vision: Local and county government decision-makers and the general public will understand agriculture and the many important roles it plays in the County. These decision-makers will be active partners in preserving and nurturing farming. A positive attitude towards farming by farmers, other business people, and the general public will develop. There will be fewer negative farm/non-farm interactions.

Our Strategy: This goal can be accomplished by establishing new agricultural promotion efforts aimed at local decision makers, the general public, and area businesses. These activities could include farm visits and tours, more direct contact between farmers and local officials, developing a widely promoted county identity and logo for agriculture, developing and distributing Putnam County Agricultural Fact Sheets, expanding the educational role of the Tilly Foster Farm, and establishing a “Pride in Farming” program aimed at the farm community.

Goal 3: Supportive Policies and Programs - Promote regional, county, and local policies and programs that encourage and sustain farming.

Our Vision: The County Agricultural and Farmland Protection Board provides key leadership for agricultural education and initiatives in the county. Farmers are actively involved on local planning boards and with area chambers of commerce to advocate more agricultural economic development efforts. Local Planning Boards understand state law requirements related to the agricultural district and are working to effectively administer them. Town planning efforts and zoning are enhanced to be farm-friendly and the county and towns have enacted right to farm laws.

Our Strategy: This goal can be accomplished by strengthening the role of the Putnam County Agriculture and Farmland Protection Board as an advocate for agriculture in the County; by increasing farmer participation in local and county government activities and in local economic development efforts; by working to better integrate agriculture into local planning efforts; and by increasing participation of local towns in comprehensive planning and application of farmland protection strategies. The Plan encourages adoption of right-to-farm laws, use of tools to enhance administration and effectiveness of the Agricultural District program, methods to help minimize impacts of proposed projects on farms, and use of local land use planning tools such as comprehensive planning, farm-friendly zoning, and alternate subdivision layouts to protect farmland and open space.

Goal 4: Education - Promote policies and programs that enhance farm viability and profitability.

Our Vision: Farmers will have increased access to agricultural information. A farmer’s network will have been created and will meet regularly to support county farmers and provide a mechanism for communicating and sharing information. More farmers will have completed farm business plans to help increase their profitability.

Our Strategy: This goal can be accomplished by providing more training and educational opportunities for farmers and agri-businesses aimed at enhancing farm profitability.

Goal 5: Open Space and Natural Resources - Preserve agriculture as working open space and promote farm practices that protect natural resources.

Our Vision: Additional working farmlands will be protected from non-farm development through easement programs. New development will consider and plan for farmland and other open spaces through use of innovative siting techniques such as clustering and conservation subdivision designs. Farms will be buffered from new uses. Putnam



County will embrace smart growth techniques designed to maintain open space, farms, rural character, and enhance existing population centers such as hamlets and villages. Local communities will use incentives to accomplish land use goals such as density bonuses.

Our Strategy: This goal can be accomplished by seeking funding from various sources to initiate a Purchase or Lease of Development Rights program within the County, and by encouraging use of farmland protection techniques at the local level such as cluster development, use of conservation subdivisions, sliding scale zoning, smart growth initiatives, buffers, agricultural overlay zones, zoning incentives, or establishing alternative development densities.

Putnam County Farms at a Glance

- There are 215 farms in Putnam County: The Town of Patterson has 27%, Philipstown 20%, Southeast 19%, Kent 18%, Putnam Valley 14%, and Carmel has 2% of the farms in the county. There are a total of 11,309 acres of farmland in Putnam County, representing about 4% of the total land base in the county. Seventy-one or 33% of farms are within the agricultural district representing 4,551 of the 11,308 total farmland acres in the county; 144 (67%) are not in the district. Farm activities in Putnam County include greenhouses, tree nurseries, orchards, maple syrup, hay, corn crops and livestock operations related to poultry, horses, beef, sheep, goats, and hogs. Almost half (92 or 43%) of our farms are horse-related operations.
- Putnam County has 59 farms larger than 10 acres with \$10,000 or more in gross sales. Twenty farms have sales greater than \$1,000. Six farms have gross sales of \$100,000 or more. Eighty-six are classified as “hobby” farms with no sales. (The USDA recognizes a farm as any agricultural operation with gross sales more than \$1,000. New York State recognizes commercial farms as operations that are seven acres in size with gross sales of at least \$10,000 or less than seven acres with \$50,000 in gross sales.)
- The average size of farms in the county is 52.6 acres. The majority (137 or 64%) of Putnam County farms are located in the New York City watershed.
- The Agricultural Census indicates that land and building value per farm in Putnam County declined from \$586,257 to \$477,895 between 1992 and 1997; the average land and building value in the county, nevertheless, is almost twice that of New York State as a whole (\$286,620 in 1997). The value per acre in Putnam County (\$6,682 in 1997) remained stable; the per-acre value of farm property statewide was \$1,284 in 1997.
- Based on the \$2,928,000 value of sales reported by the 1997 Census of Agriculture, the annual sale of agricultural products in Putnam County adds an additional \$4.4 million to the local economy each year generating 42 full-time equivalent jobs with \$1.1 million in earnings. Thus, for every dollar of agricultural production in Putnam County, an additional 51 cents in economic activity is generated in other sectors of the local economy, including services, finance, real estate, and transportation.
- Total cash receipts from farm sales in Putnam County rank 53 or 54 among the 62 counties in New York State. However, data from the Agricultural Census show that net cash returns (agricultural sales minus production expenses) for farms in Putnam County increased by 61% between 1992 to 1997.
- Although for most of the 1990s, the value of agricultural output in Putnam County remained constant at \$2 million, total cash receipts nearly doubled from 1999 to 2000. Much of this growth occurred in nursery and greenhouse businesses, which increased from \$3.46 million to \$6.58 million. Cash receipts for livestock were about \$88,000.
- The market value of nursery and greenhouse crops in Putnam County increased by more than 100%. The total number of farms in nursery and greenhouse production in Putnam County more than doubled in the five-year period.
- Putnam County ranks 51 in New York State in numbers of horses, but ranks 14th in total equine value. The average value per head in Putnam County is \$19,500 compared to \$10,130 statewide. From 1988 to 2000, the value of equine inventory in Putnam County rose by 204%.

- Between 1991 and 2001, farm production expenses increased at a rate of approximately 2.2% annually. The average county production cost of \$43,646 per farm was lower than the statewide average of \$68,906 in 1997. The cost of hired farm labor in Putnam County has increased nearly 12% per year.
- Hired farm labor and property taxes account for more than 50% of the costs associated with agricultural production in Putnam County—compared to 21.2% statewide.



Prioritizing Farmlands for Future Protection

In order to implement this Plan successfully, Putnam County decision-makers will have to take advantage of the many farmland protection techniques available to them. No one tool will work alone. Some of these techniques include purchase of development rights programs (PDR), and land use and economic development techniques applied at the local level. It is important that Putnam County targets these tools to specific farmlands having important characteristics that make them critical to support continuing agriculture. In order to identify those lands, a ranking tool was developed. This tool is called Land Evaluation and Site Assessment, also referred to as LESA. It is a tool to help citizens and officials in Putnam County locate and prioritize those lands that should be protected from conversion to nonagricultural uses. It helps identify farmlands needing protection by taking into account soil quality and other factors that affect ongoing agricultural practices. LESA is an analytical tool - not a regulatory program and its role is to provide a systematic and objective procedure to rate and rank sites in order to help people make decisions on where to target farmland protection programs.

Implementation Steps

This plan is designed to be implemented over many years. General responsibility and leadership to accomplish this will be with the Putnam County Agricultural and Farmland Protection Board. The County Legislature, the County Executive, and the Soil and Water Conservation District will also have a vital role to play. Other key players include local town governments and their Planning Boards, Zoning Boards of Appeals, Building Inspectors, Assessors, and Town Boards; appropriate county offices; local farmers and growers; Cornell Cooperative Extension; the Watershed Agricultural Council and other farm related agencies such as the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service and Farm Service Agency; and area land trusts and other non-profit organizations. The plan outlines recommended time frames and key players needed to assist in implementation of the specific action strategies. The plan should be reviewed and updated every five years.

Residents, elected officials and government agencies can help support Putnam County farmers now and into the future by becoming familiar with this plan and assisting in its implementation.

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