

Ag Committee Meeting, Bethel and Liberty, 9/30/08

1. Introductions:

Dean Farrand	Peter Stettner
Nelson Hector	Nan Stozenburg (CPEA)
Ray Kelly	Heinrich Strauch
Don Meltz (CPEA)	Dan Sturm
Bill Pammer (SC)	Joe Walsh (CCE)
Julie Richmond (SC)	Dave Weiss
Susan Runnels	Jill Weyer (SC)
John Schmidt	Ted Yoemans
Thomas Sprague	Jennifer Young

8:00 pm: Meeting called to order.

2. Brief review of the approach. (Nan)

Phase 1: Learning about current conditions and issues facing agriculture in the towns.

- Includes physical conditions (soils, land uses), economic changes, etc.
- Creating a picture of the current state of agriculture in the towns.
- Don will map the information.
- Very important to gauge where you are now, before moving on.
- Public opinion, farmers' opinions, committee members' opinions are part of this phase.
- We hope to have a general public meeting/ workshop to get their ideas on agriculture, as well as more targeted agriculture focus groups. At some point we need to work on organizing those groups.

Phase 2: Creating a vision of the future of agriculture. Maybe preserving what you have, or moving in a different direction. The vision builds on phase 1.

Phase 3: Setting a path toward the vision we establish in phase 2.

Important to step back and look at each step, rather than jump to phase 3.

We will build on past planning efforts, not reinvent the wheel.

When we are done, the towns will have a set of steps to take, to accomplish their goals.

- Our recommendations will be realistic, so that towns can move toward their goals over the next couple of years.
- We hope to give towns a tool, so they can identify the steps to take, identify who can help, identify potential funding sources, and prioritize each step.
- We will help the plans be adopted: adoption by town boards, adoption/ acceptance by Ag & Markets, and the County Farmland Protection Board.
- Town boards have the option to adopt these as stand-alone plans, or incorporate into their comprehensive plans.
- Ag and Markets pays close attention to these plans—they don't direct the towns but they want to help and be available.

Don: My first step is to map each parcel in the towns that has some farm activity on it, whether or not it is identified as a farm. This is important because each parcel adds to the farm economy.

Nan: Any questions about the process?

Q: Will we identify opportunities for growth, as part of the process? For example, if a farmer retires and a son or daughter might want to take over?

A (Nan): Yes, absolutely. That is part of the visioning process. We will identify strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats and address each of these in the plan.

Q: Are you going to identify farmland that is not currently being used? Woodland or vacant lots?

A (Nan): Yes, these could present us with opportunities for future use.

Q: Doesn't the county have a lot of GPS locations already?

A (Don): Yes, they have already mapped out a lot of farm fields. Now the job is to fill in the gaps, address the time lag between the time of the map's creation and today, and do some general ground checking.

Nan: We will never know your community as well as you do. We rely on you for this part of the process. Please contact Don and me as we move along, if you have any ideas.

Nan: We will post all maps, documents, survey results, meeting notices, and other information on our website. We will create a link, which your webmasters can post on your town websites, so that visitors to your sites can easily click on the link and go to our site and see all this information.

3. Getting to Know Agriculture (Don, utilizing maps).

Breakout sessions about the maps.

4. Progress of the Survey

Jill: We've revised the survey, and this is our concern: we want to make sure the surveys are answered, and that we can ask the most interesting questions and get the most important information. Based on the original ag parcel criteria, there are about 2000 parcels to receive surveys. We want to bring that number down, so based on our prior discussions, we have revised the parcel criteria: parcels with an ag exemption, parcels that are ag assessed, and parcels in an ag district that are over five acres. Hopefully that would remove smaller residential properties and allow us to target farmers.

Also, we discussed how to target agribusinesses and restaurants. Maybe some restaurants are not currently buying from farms, but the survey is a great way to let them know that they could, and start a dialogue around buying from local farms. We are working on creating that list, and in doing so we are revisiting a discussion of whether to have one survey or two separate surveys. The survey gets longer and longer, and it might be better to go back to two surveys, one for farmers and one for businesses and services, to simplify.

Q (Jill): Does anyone have feedback?

A: After looking at it, I wouldn't want to see any more questions be added in.

A: It's fine as long as it doesn't get any longer.

A: If you need more data, and it needs to get bigger, you need to split it into two.

A: It's getting a little complicated.

A: If the directions get more complicated, no one will want to fill it out. If we split it, it will be simpler and the font can be larger and more readable.

Q: Could we remove #7? (re: familiarity with various farmland protection strategies)

A (Nan): That question is really designed to gauge support for those strategies. If we keep it in, we might change it to read "support/ not support" or "interested/ not interested." If most respondents say that they're not familiar with these strategies, where do we go—try to educate them, or try to educate them and then ask them if they would support the strategies? "Familiar... not familiar" might not yield the best information.

A: A pamphlet on these programs could be sent out before the survey.

A (Nan): That could be explored in the ag focus groups. I think it's important to use this opportunity to both educate respondents and get them interested in these strategies.

A: Maybe we could move this to the end of the survey, to get ideas for future action.

A (Bill): We could remove some of these—like right to farm laws. Also, SC Ag and Farmland Protection Plan, and Town Comprehensive Plan. Those are a done deal.

Shortening the list might help, because otherwise people are going to receive these surveys in the mail and be overwhelmed by this list, impacting our response rate.

A: We could reword the question: "From the list below, please choose the three most important strategies for protecting farmland."

A (Nan): I'm concerned that if we do that, respondents will pick the things they're familiar with. There might be good, viable options on the list, but since respondents aren't familiar with them, they won't choose them. It's more valuable to force respondents to read the list, and state whether they would support the strategies, than to include #8 (asking respondents to choose 3 strategies from the list in #7). We can remove some of these choices, but I would suggest changing the scale from "familiar/ not familiar" to "support/ not support" and add a column for "not familiar/ don't know."

A: We could make #7 into a list, and then just ask people to describe their support in #8.

A: Yes, and remove some of the choices.

A: We could group these strategies. For example, these are land conservation programs, these are financial assistance programs, and others.

A: Some strategies aren't on here. Ag building exemption, historic barns.

Q: How about energy efficiency programs as a strategy in #7?

A (Jill): That's in another question—which programs you participate in (#29).

Q (Nan): Which others in #7 should we remove? Which aren't viable for a town to do?

A: Most towns don't have loan programs; that happens at the county level. Occasionally it happens at the town level, but not frequently. However, since access to capital is such a big problem for farmers, town loan programs should not be removed from the list of possibilities. The four towns could even create some sort of loan fund together, to make the goal more realizable.

A (Nan): Differential assessments are another one. It's a big process for a town to try and offer tax incentives above and beyond what NYS offers.

Q (Julie): How would you all recommend that we setup Question #7? Given your town's political environment, and other factors. Do you feel the survey gives you enough opportunity to give feedback or suggestions on farmland protection strategies?

A: It's alright the way it is.

A: Maybe there are a couple that we don't need.

A: So we'll change it to "strongly support... not support." We can always recode down later on, if we leave the Likert scale in.

Q: Can we sit down with a farmer and interview him/ her?

A (Nan): We will do that in a focus group.

Q: Are you going to send this out before or after the focus group?

A (Nan): Before.

Q: Can we clarify #19, re: how many households does your farm support?

A (Nan): If a farm has the farmer and three adult sons, then there are four households being supported.

Q: Why does #19 not include hired help?

A (Jill): We wanted to know about the family in this question, and there's a place for hired help in #10.

Nan: This is our attempt to reach everyone and give everyone a chance to participate. If we have two surveys, one for businesses and one for farmers, and fine tune all these questions, we can get the best information for understanding agriculture.

Q: Would it be helpful to have a question at the top, asking if you are a farmer, and asking you to return the survey even if you aren't involved in farming and don't fill the rest of the survey out?

A (Nan): We've talked about having that as a first question.

Q (Bill): What's been your past experience with response rates among farmers?

A (Nan): For any kind of planning survey, we generally get 25 to 30 percent. Response rate is tied to the mailing list—the universe.

Bill: Some of the questions might actually skew answers. For example, in #2 instead of "limited availability of farm labor" we might just say "availability of farm labor."

A (Nan): Yes, this wording might be leading, and we should remove such adjectives.

A (Bill): We can also remove #3 (re: the three greatest challenges facing you), and rank them ourselves when we go through the data using our software.

Brief discussion of the importance of anonymity. We might still get comments from people, questioning how we got their information, and questioning how we are using their information.

5. Other Public Input

Q (Nan): When should we try to have a public meeting, to involve the general public in the plan and get their input about agriculture and its importance to them. Should we get it done before Thanksgiving, or after January 1?

A: Let's focus on the survey now, and do the public meeting next year.

6. Next Steps

Jill: We will email out the list of agribusinesses and agriservices to the committee, for you to add to or remove from. We will also email out a revised survey.

The fourth Tuesday is identified as a regular meeting date. Next meeting October 28 at 8 pm at the Liberty Town Hall.

Nan: If you have a speakerphone hookup, we can participate remotely and save money.

Meeting adjourned.