

Amherst Agriculture and Farmland Protection Plan Advisory Committee Meeting Summary

Date of Meeting: March 5, 2020
Meeting Time: 7:00 PM
Meeting Location: North Amherst Fire Hall

Subject: Town of Amherst Agriculture and Farmland Protection Plan

Attendees:

<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Robert Gilmour, Town Planning Bd.	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Elizabeth D'agostino, Amherst CAC
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Brian Kulpa, Town Supervisor	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Carrie Stiver, Bflo Niag Heritage Museum
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Dan Howard, Town Planning. Dept.	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Sarah Gatti, ECDEP
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Don Spoth, Spoth Farms	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Roberta Rappoccio, Town Planning Dept
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Rick Vilonen, Hi-Way Garden Ctr.		Not in Attendance:
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Mark Gaston, ECSWCD	<input type="checkbox"/>	Cheryl Thayer, Cornell Coop. Extension
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Mike Badding, Jr., Badding Bros.	<input type="checkbox"/>	Kevin LaLosk, 12 Gates Brewery
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Jon O'Rourke, Amherst IDA	<input type="checkbox"/>	Howard Kadmus, Sweet Jenny's
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Julie Anne Yates, Village Coop		Other Attendees:
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Rachel Chrostowski, WNYLC		Ben Vilonen, Williamsville DPW
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Rick Gillert, Resident Advocate		Dan Spoth, Spoth Farms
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Kathleen McCormick, Cornell Coop. Ext		

INTRODUCTIONS

Bob Gilmour, Committee Chairperson, opened the meeting, followed by general introductions by all present. Opening remarks were provided by Supervisor Kulpa.

He stated that the goal of the Amherst Town Board was to foster a better, more profitable, more sustainable agricultural district/community. He is hoping to see agricultural land that is currently vacant return to active production; identify ways the Town and the Amherst IDA can play an active role in spurring economic development in and around the agricultural community, which starts with protection, zoning and land use decisions. Local agricultural businesses contribute to this and need support. The Town needs to nurture farming and agricultural uses to strengthen existing and foster new activities.

Wendy Salvati, project consultant, discussed the role, responsibilities and expectations of the Advisory Committee. The committee members were provided a project binder that contained all relevant documents to date (meeting agenda, committee roster and contact information, project scope of services summary and draft table of contents, and draft map of agricultural activity in the Town).

Wendy noted that throughout the course of the project there will be four additional Advisory Committee meetings. It was decided that they would all take place at 7:00 PM at the North Amherst Fire Hall; tentative dates include:

1. Tuesday, June 9, 2020
2. Thursday, September 10, 2020
3. Tuesday, November 10, 2020
4. Thursday, January 5, 2021

Project information and draft report documents will be provided to committee members via email and internet file share links for larger documents. The committee indicated that this means of project communication was acceptable.

REVIEW OF PROJECT SCOPE OF SERVICES AND SCHEDULE

Wendy stated that the Project Team included representatives of Wendel, who is the lead and will be preparing the primary sections of the plan under Part 1 of the Scope of Services. WWS Planning, a subconsultant to Wendel is responsible for committee meetings and public outreach; and Camoin Associates, another subconsultant who is responsible for the work outlined in Part 2 of the Scope of Services. The total project budget is \$50,000.

Wendy reviewed the Scope of Services summary and project schedule. Today's meeting is the kickoff meeting for the project and marks the initiation of work on the report. Between now and the next meeting, the inventory and analysis of existing conditions and resources in the Town will be prepared. This will entail a review of all data and resources and development of necessary maps to illustrate information.

It is important to note that the definition of farming may represent a wider variety of uses and/or additional types of farming that are occurring in the Town, going beyond just large farm operations in North Amherst. Farming in many communities has been diversifying to include traditional large farm operations, as well as smaller-scale (hobby-type, non-commercial farming) activities. Residents may be keeping a few chickens, growing vegetables or herbs, or keeping bees for example on small properties.

Public outreach will include the Committee and the various perspectives of its members. Other outreach will include stakeholders' meetings with farming interests in the Town and a general public meeting, to gather input on important issues and opportunities and the overall vision for farming and agriculture in the future.

Analysis of data and other relevant information will include a land evaluation and site assessment, a "farm-friendly" analysis of existing zoning and other land use regulations and work being performed by Camoin Associates, which includes an examination of the potential for agricultural support facilities/incubator space; examination of the hemp industry initiative and market diversity; and the potential for establishing an agricultural and natural resources tourism initiative. A SWOT analysis (identification of existing agricultural strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats) will also be prepared as part of the development of findings.



WWS Planning



The findings from the inventory and analysis, combined with input gathered from stakeholders and the public, would be used to develop draft goals and objectives and preliminary recommendations for the Plan.

Comments on the findings received from the committee will be used to revise the goals and objectives and recommendations for presentation and discussion with stakeholders and the public in October 2020. Input from these meetings will be used to finalize the draft report sections and prepare an implementation strategy that is tied to the goals and objectives, outlining action items aimed at achieving the goals. Thereafter, a draft report will be prepared that will be provided to the committee for review prior to a final committee meeting in January 2021.

Dan Howard stated that it was important to note that the findings, recommendations and implementation strategies developed as part of this project will be used to inform the Town's Comprehensive Plan and other planning efforts in the Town.

Wendy made note of the draft table of contents in the binder that illustrates the various sections of the report, proposed maps and layout of the Agricultural and Farmland Protection Plan.

Wendy noted that the draft report must be reviewed internally by the NYS Department of Agriculture and Markets (NYSDAM). Comments from NYSDAM would be addressed and the report would be provided to the Erie County Agriculture and Farmland Protection Board for their review and approval. Any comments received from the Erie County Board would be addressed and the plan would be provided to the Amherst Town Board for their final review and adoption. The adopted plan would be sent to NYSDAM for final approval.

OVERVIEW OF PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT

Wendy discussed the strategy for public outreach, which will include: two stakeholders' meeting with farmers and other farming interests, two public meetings and ultimately a public hearing prior to the adoption of the Plan (at the end of the process) Wendy emphasized the important of spreading the word about the project and meetings to get people involved and encourage attendance. Wendy said that she would look to the committee to help identify additional stakeholders and farming interests The Town's website, the Amherst Bee and Buffalo News will be used as a means for promoting the meetings.

It was decided that the outreach meetings would be held at the North Amherst Fire Hall. April 23rd was selected for first stakeholders' meeting and May 14th for the first public meeting. Once a list of stakeholders has been compiled, Wendy will work with Roberta to provide them with a letter of invitation to the meeting.

DISCUSSION OF CURRENT STATE OF AGRICULTURE IN THE TOWN

Wendy noted that a survey questionnaire had been provided to the committee members prior to the meeting to complete and discuss the questions. The following was offered:

1. What things are grown or raised in Amherst?



Corn, hay, herbs, flowers, microgreens, high value vegetables, heritage tomatoes, soybeans, shrubs, hops, hemp, citrus, figs, annuals and perennials, vegetable plants, ornamental flowers, gourds

2. What other agricultural pursuits occur within the Town?
One pig, sheep (at the Amherst museum), cows/beef cattle,
3. Where does farming occur in the Town?
North of Schoelles Road
4. Does farming or other agricultural activity occur year-round? If so, where?
Yes – greenhouses in the off season
5. What do farmers do in the off-season to generate income?
Farm activity typically goes year-round
6. Who/what are the markets for agricultural products produced in the Town?
Direct retail sales, wholesale, farm markets, hemp is processed in Pendleton, corn is marketed to ethanol plant (Medina)
7. Are market trends changing in the Town? What are emerging markets?
Dried flowers are popular again; the flower business is always changing (the businesses can see the trends coming (monitor social media)
Entertainment and educational farming events are gaining in popularity (seasonal “make and take” events)
8. What, if any, support services exist in the Town?
All support services are located out of town (nothing in Amherst) –Niagara County, Springville; also, online sales are increasing (All State’s Ag Parts)
9. Is there need for agricultural incubator business space in Amherst?
Cold/tempered storage
Communal kitchens and pre-prep kitchens (for food trucks)
Hemp freeze drying facilities
10. What areas under pressure by development and should be protected?
All that is left of the original large farming operations is located north of Schoelles Road, which is all protected lands now, a portion of which is included in agricultural district #17
Lots of wetlands and lack of sanitary sewers north of Schoelles helps maintain the integrity of the agricultural areas
Everything that is farmable is being used
There is growing pressure from renewable energy interests on Amherst farmland
11. Should the Erie County Agricultural District be increased?
Yes, absolutely; although not a lot than can be added (wetlands are an issue)
Should add the corner of Campbell Blvd. and Tonawanda Creek Road
12. Do you work directly with any County, State or local agencies or support assistance?
Yes, the Farm Service Agency/Farm Bureau; Natural Resource Conservation Services



When asked, the CCE and SWCD representatives said they do not do much, if any, work with Amherst farmers

13. What do you envision for the future of agriculture in the Town?

- Protect current agricultural uses and expand the agricultural district and farm activity
- Keep sanitary sewers out of the area (the comprehensive plan articulates where sewer should and should not be extended)
- Need to understand what is happening with agricultural zoning

PRELIMINARY ISSUES AND OPPORTUNITIES

- The Town has a Right-to-Farm law but signs indicating this status have not been installed along Town roadways/entryways
- Trends are shifting and there is less acreage for growing vegetables (not a business)
- There is no leasing of farmland by outside interests in the Town; Kreyer's does all their farming in Clarence and Newstead
- Some newer crops are difficult to start up (e.g., hops) – greater cost and time involved
- Keep sewers out, don't allow subdivision of farmland, and keep neighbors away from farmland – this is the best solution for protection
- Farming transition/succession is an issue as farmers are aging out and younger people are more interested in small scale operations (they don't want to work too hard)
- Farming is starting to shift to new farmers/younger generation who want to work smaller parcels/properties

Increasing interest by solar energy companies was discussed and it was noted that municipalities can still regulate these uses. The Town needs to determine how to modify the solar ordinance or develop an overlay district for solar. It was noted that time was of the essence to get this done.

The Supervisor noted that Tompkins County has good examples of crop planting that can be sustained between solar panels; the lands can also be used for grazing sheep and raising clover.

Dan Howard and the Supervisor said much of the land in the northern part of the Town is zoned Suburban Agriculture and discussed the Town's adoption of an Agricultural zoning classification. They indicated that there have been no requests from property owners to rezone their land from Suburban Agriculture to the new, more restrictive Agricultural classification. The classification should be revised to determine why it has not been employed.

It was asked if there was any interest in a tour of farms in the area. Anyone interested should let Roberta know, as it can be arranged prior to the next committee meeting.

Local farmers in attendance were asked to mark up a map to illustrate where farming is occurring in the Town and what types of crops are being grown where. Many notes were added to the map.

ACTION ITEMS / NEXT STEPS



Next committee meeting is scheduled for Tuesday, June 9th at the North Amherst Fire Hall, unless otherwise notified.

Before the Advisory Committee meets again, the following will be undertaken:

- Prepare meeting #1 summary and distribute to Committee and NYSDAM.
- Committee members to provide suggestions for participant invitations for stakeholders' meeting and provide to Roberta Rappoccio by Friday, March 13th.
- Schedule stakeholders' meeting for April 23rd and post advertisement on Town website.
- Commence preparation of draft sections I through IV of the report.
- Prepare updated map of agricultural parcels, districts and activity in the Town.
- Commence preparation of draft goals, issues and opportunities.
- Conduct Public Outreach Meeting on May 14th.
- Anyone interested in participating in a tour of farms in the area before the start of the next committee meeting should let Roberta know.

Meeting adjourned at 9:15PM.

Respectfully Submitted,

Wendy E. Weber Salvati, AICP



WWS Planning

