

Town of Ancram
Agriculture & Farmland Protection Plan Project Team Meeting
December 1, 2008
6-7 PM

Present: Art Bassin, Don MacLean, Marnie Maclean, Jerry Peele, Dennis Sigler, Bob Wilcox, Leah Wilcox, Peter Paden (Columbia Land Conservancy), Ellen Epstein (Columbia Land Conservancy)

Absent: Doug Brenner, Carl Butler, Barry Chase, Judi Francis, Harold Miller, Frank Martucci,

The meeting was called to order by Art Bassin at 6 PM.

The Committee reviewed and approved the prior minutes. Mr. Wilcox noted that the minutes were surprisingly detailed and complete.

The Committee reviewed issues and concerns identified last month and concluded we had identified the important ones, which are:

1. Shortage of labor/staff
2. Reluctance of the “next generation” to go into farming
3. Scarcity of farm worker housing
4. Low margins and profits
5. High cost of entry and high ongoing capital costs
6. Sustainability of farming
7. Sale of farmland to non-farmers; farmers becoming renters, not owners of land
8. Complaints from neighbors on smells, noise
9. Ag Exemptions Issues – perceived abuses, need for public education and support
10. Marketing challenges – how to best sell farm products locally and regionally

Mr. Bassin welcomed Peter Paden and Ellen Epstein from the Columbia Land Conservancy. Mr. Paden and Ms. Epstein had recently met with John Brennan of the NYS Department of Ag and Markets on issues related to farmland preservation. Mr. Paden and Ms. Epstein discussed their meeting with Mr. Brennan and made the following points:

1. County Farmland Protection Plans have been around for 20 years at the County level, and all but two Counties in NY State have an approved Farmland Protection Plan. Columbia County is one of the two which do not have an approved Farmland Protection Plan. The Columbia County Plan is in draft form, but does not fully cover the content areas the State expected it to cover. The fact that Columbia County does not have an approved Farmland Protection Plan makes it harder for Columbia County farmers and landowners to qualify for State or Federal farmland protection grants (typically the purchase of development rights), which tend to go to areas with Plans which demonstrate a community’s commitment to farmland protection.

2. The State has decided to provide funds to Towns for the development of farmland protection for the first time in 2008. Ancram is one of the first Towns in NY to qualify for a farmland protection grant. The decision to support town farmland protection plans was based on the fact that Counties cannot influence land use, as land use decisions and zoning are local government decisions in NY State. Further, the NYS Department of Ag and Markets felt that local input and local participation would result in better farmland protection planning, as the local level probably knew the most about what farmland in town was most worth preserving, and could better get local community support for the Plan.

3. There have been some recent changes in the Columbia County Planning department with the appointment of a new head of the department which could lead to more focus on the County Farmland Protection Plan. The process of developing the County and Town plans are as important as the resulting Plan itself. The right process has to include a systematic interaction of all interested parties in the Community on the issues, problems and opportunities presented by farming and farmland protection at the Town and County level.

4. Ms. Epstein noted that there were things that a town could do to support a farmland protection plan, including conducting a zoning audit to identify things in zoning which were not “farm friendly”, working with other nearby municipalities to solve joint problems, encouraging more on-farm businesses related to agriculture. Ms. Epstein also commented that stimulating agricultural economic development was a much more practical way to protect farmland and agriculture than relying on the purchase of development rights.

5. Mr. Brennan of the NYS Department of Ag and Markets was quoted as stressing the importance of agricultural economic development as the preferred way to protect farmland, as it kept the land productive and was a more controllable way to protect farmland than purchasing development rights, especially in a period of very tight State budgets and the lack of available funds for the purchase of development rights.

6. Mr. Brennan was also cited as encouraging towns to define what “agriculture” was as broadly as necessary and to make the definitions consistent with what worked for the town depending on its agricultural circumstances. The examples given included thinking about wool getting made into yarn and then into socks, or a farm being an event location and providing catering services.

Following the remarks from Mr. Paden and Ms. Epstein, the committee discussed the issues that had been raised and made the following comments:

1. Ms. Wilcox noted that the new head of Planning at the County will be responsive to County Supervisors, and for agriculture to be given the attention it deserves and needs, the Supervisors will have to be supportive of agriculture and farmland protection

planning. Ms. Wilcox also commented that until last year there had been no Agriculture Committee at the Columbia County Board of Supervisors.

2. Mr. MacLean pointed out that while each town was knowledgeable about local farming conditions, agricultural markets and infrastructure tended to be regional in scope and out of local control, requiring a county wide focus or even a multi-county focus. As an example Mr. MacLean noted that not every town needed or could support a slaughterhouse, so deciding where to locate one was more a regional issue, not a town issue.

3. Mr. Peele commented that mobile slaughterhouses were increasingly popular, which meant that a town did not need to have a slaughterhouse as long as it had the processing facilities, which tended to be less controversial.

4. Mr. Maclean asked what the relationship would be between the Ancram Agriculture and Farmland Protection Plan and the County Plan, as it seemed Ancram might be a bit ahead of the County in the development of a farmland protection plan. There was agreement that Ancram should coordinate with the County and with other towns in the area which were involved in farmland protection planning efforts.

5. Mr. Peele asked what the County and Town plans were going to do. Mr. Bassin asked if Ms. Epstein and Mr. Paden had examples of good town and county plans. Ms. Epstein suggested looking at the Chatham and New Lebanon Plans, and the Putnam County Plan, and provided copies or web site addresses for these documents. The Committee discussed the process and steps needed to develop a town farmland protection plan, which would include interviews with farmers, farm support businesses, agricultural experts and landowners, an inventory of farms, farm employment and farming's economic contribution to the town, etc.

6. Ms. Wilcox commented that agriculture was important to the County economy, and farming was not likely to pick up and move, like a business (Kaz) would. The Committee discussed the publication recently of the County Economic Development Plan, which identified agriculture as one of the five most important economic opportunities for Columbia County.

7. Mr. Paden concluded the meeting by saying a strong farming community was the most efficient way to promote conservation and protect farmland. He indicated that the future of farming in the Hudson Valley was likely to be very strong, as more people were looking for food grown close to home, and large scale operations were becoming harder and harder to make work given environmental and transportation issues. In addition, more young people wanted to farm. Mr. Paden added that Columbia County still had a strong agricultural infrastructure and the most land in farming in the region. Taken together, these things boded well for farming in the Hudson Valley. Mr. Paden said the Columbia Land Conservancy wanted to assist towns promote farming and protect agriculture, and was developing an inventory of landowners who wanted to rent land to

farmers, and of farmers who wanted land to farm, and hoped to expand this service to help encourage farming and farmland protection.

Next Meeting – The Agriculture and Farmland Protection Plan Project Team will meet again on Monday, January 5 at 5PM at the Town Hall.