

**TOWN OF LANSING**  
**AGRICULTURE & FARMLAND PROTECTION PLAN**  
**Summary of Findings and Recommendations**  
**July 2015**

**Purpose**

In 2008, the Town was awarded a grant from NYS Dept. of Agriculture & Markets to develop a municipal Agriculture and Farmland Protection Plan. New York State has a constitutional priority to protect agricultural lands and therefore, has enacted the NYS Agriculture District Law and provides funding to municipalities to develop agriculture plans and for purchase of development rights. A committee was formed in 2009 to make recommendations for farmland protection and for strengthening agriculture. Recommendations contained in the plan reflect input from the agriculture committee, other town farmers and rural landowners, town officials, and the community at large at meetings during the past 6 years. The plan provides details on development and other pressures on farming, existing land use policies, farming resources and enterprises, along with recommendations to ensure a viable future for farming in the Town of Lansing.

**Vision for the Future of Agriculture in the Town of Lansing**

Agriculture has a significant impact on the Town's economy and land use. High quality soils and land suitable to farming is a unique resource in the northern part of the town that is protected for farming through policies that direct development away from prime soils. Supportive town policies and broad community support for agriculture create a climate where farming remains feasible and viable. A diversity of full and part-time farms will produce dairy, livestock, feed crops, local foods, horticultural crops, renewable energy resources, and other agricultural products that are marketed locally and through conventional agricultural market channels. The town's farms provide a variety of jobs and thereby strengthen the local economy. Farming practices protect soil, environmental quality, natural resources, and provide scenic working landscapes that preserve the rural character and enhance the quality of life of the town.

**Farming Profile**

Farming is alive and well in the Town of Lansing. Lansing enjoys a long history of continuous farming and can boast having the highest quality soils in the county that support 40 farm businesses, their owners, families and employees that generate a total of \$20 million in agricultural product sales, nearly one third of total agriculture sales for the entire county. Farmers utilize 16,261 acres of land or about one-third of the town's land area. Of the total land in farming, 8,834 acres are owned by 40 farmers and 7,427 farmed acres are rented from about 80 rural landowners. According to the Tompkins County Land Use Land Cover survey (2012), 1,017 acres of inactive agriculture land in the town has come back into production (some for organic farming) in the last 5 years. The increase in farmed land demonstrates the demand for farmland and the viability of farming in the area.

Of the land in farming, 43% is designated prime soil and another 22% as soils of statewide significance, making Lansing the town with the best soils for farming in the county. Good soils for farming result in higher yields, better returns and more viable farms.

Dairy farming is the dominant agricultural enterprise (11 farms) accounting for about \$17 million in agricultural products from milk, cattle, and crops. Dairy farming creates most of the farm jobs. Most field crops raised on town farmland are destined to be consumed by dairy cows, but several crop farmers also sell crops on the commodity market. Organic farming occupies 2,900 acres of the total 16,261 acres (18%) and includes 3 organic dairy farms plus several field crop and vegetable farms.

The next most prominent enterprise after dairy and crops are nursery sales and service. These businesses benefit from the proximity of residential development in the southern part of the town. Horticulture

businesses also provide many seasonal jobs. Direct sales of fruits, vegetables, meat animals, poultry, and agritourism are areas for potential growth provided there is local consumer support. There is a total of 40 farming businesses in the town that employ approximately 100 people.

### **Key Findings:**

- Town population, with growth centered in the Village of Lansing, has continued to increase at a significantly higher rate than other towns in the county. During the past 20 years, housing development outside the village grew at a rate three times faster than within the village. This has impacted farming in many ways – traffic, rising land prices and taxes, rural neighbors unfamiliar with farming activities, trespass issues, making it harder for farmers to find land to rent or buy, etc.
- Rural sprawl poses additional problems for development and delivery of services to residents demanding water, sewer, better roads, lighting, etc. A Cost of Community Services study (1996, Tompkins County Agriculture Plan) showed that agriculture in the town demands 16 cents in services for every dollar paid in taxes, compared to \$1.56 in services demanded by residential development for every dollar paid. Rural sprawl can cost towns much more than keeping land in active agriculture.
- Farmers rent nearly half of the land they operate and depend on rented land for the viability of their farming enterprises. There is uncertainty about the future of rented land given development pressure, rising taxes, and competition among farmers for good farmland. In recent years farmers have been buying additional land but land prices have climbed to a level that is not affordable for smaller farmers. In some cases town farmers have been out bid by farm operations from Cayuga County who now own 3000 acres of Lansing farmland. This has put smaller farmers in a more vulnerable position relative to their future.
- Development rights have been sold on two town farms comprised of 1,446 acres of land (almost 10% of the actively farmed land in the town). Farmer sentiment and understanding of farmland protection programs has shifted from property rights protection to acceptance of ideas that direct development away from actively farmed land.

### **Priority Recommendations:**

- Create a Town Agriculture Committee with responsibility for advising the Town Board on matters pertaining to agriculture and to steer the implementation of the Agriculture Plan strategies.
- Change most of the current Rural Agriculture (RA) zoning district to an Agriculture Zone (AG) and permit uses most compatible with farming.
- Review the definition of agriculture in the zoning code and develop a uniform definition consistent with the diversity of farming enterprises in the town and with NYS Agriculture District Law.
- Encourage in-fill development in South Lansing to reduce rural sprawl and the associated costs of infrastructure development.
- Explore options for keeping critical high quality farm parcels that come up for sale available for farming.
- Identify key farm properties to target for NYS Farmland Protection funding to preserve prime farmland.
- Seek funding and other opportunities to expand and strengthen agriculture and the contribution it makes to the town's economy.

## **IMPLEMENTATION RECOMMENDATIONS**

The Agriculture Plan for the Town of Lansing serves as a **guidance document** for Town officials to consider for the protection of valuable agricultural lands, in particular those with high quality soils that occupy the northern area of the town, and serves as a reference for planning and agricultural economic development.

The recommendations in this plan reflect current conditions and therefore, in order to remain relevant, the plan will require that changes in agriculture and the community over time be monitored.

## **PRIORITY ACTIONS/RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **Form a Town Agriculture Committee**

**Appoint committee** - *define membership, describe duties/charge/mission, establish a regular meeting schedule*

It is recommended that the committee be comprised of at least 5 active farmers, a liaison from the Town Board, a liaison from the Planning Board, Town staff (zoning or planning), and at least 1 rural non-farmer landowner. Farm owners may include: dairy, livestock including horses, field crops, fruits, vegetables, Christmas trees, and other enterprises as defined as agriculture in this document. Liaisons may include representatives from agricultural organizations such as Cornell Cooperative Extension Tompkins County or the Tompkins County Soil & Water District or other such person as deemed relevant to furthering the work of the committee.

### **Set the committee charge**

It is recommended that the main function of the committee be to ensure a means for implementation of the agriculture plan; to prioritize recommendations and set a course for moving forward with plan components; to review and update the plan periodically; to review site plans for proposed developments and to assess and provide input on their impact on agriculture; to provide input to the County Agriculture & Farmland Protection Board on matters pertaining to the Agriculture District; and to host at least one annual farm community meeting to listen to concerns and needs. Additional suggestions for committee roles can be found in the appendix.

### **Encourage farmers to be active on Town boards/committees**

- 1) Recruit farmers to serve on Town Planning Board, Board of Zoning Appeals, and Conservation Committee, others as appropriate
- 2) Encourage farmers to run for Town Board

### **Plan adoption**

- 1) Provide input and recommendations as needed.
- 2) Host public hearing.

- 3) Town Board approval.
- 4) Forward to Tompkins County Agriculture & Farmland Protection Board for review.
- 5) Submit final plan to NYS Dept. of Agriculture & Markets for approval.