

# **AGRICULTURE and FARMLAND PROTECTION PLAN**

A Community Economic Development PROJECT

by

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**ABSTRACT**

The long-standing loss of farming and farmland in Tompkins County, New York has brought about numerous negative impacts on the agriculture industry, farm families, and rural communities. This project addresses causes and influences of this problem with an Agriculture and Farmland Protection Plan. Major outcomes of the project include a set of goals, strategies, and a detailed implementation plan intended to economically strengthen agriculture and to retain farmland. The project has been virtually completed, with procedural steps of public presentations and County adoption expected by March 1998. Implementation is expected to get underway by April 1, 1998.

## **SUMMARY**

### **1. Target Community**

The target community is broadly based and consists of two distinctly different population groups - farmers and the non-farm population of Tompkins County, New York. Each group has an important stake in the consequences of future decline in agricultural activity and farmland. Farming activities contribute significantly to the economic activity of the County and provide food, jobs, taxes, wildlife habitats, clean water, scenic vistas, recreation, tourism appeal, and overall quality of life. Yet these valued qualities remain vulnerable to pressures which have steadily reduced the number of productive farms and total farmland.

**The Primary Community** Most farms do not produce enough income to meet the needs of the farm families. Their livelihoods and a long revered way of life are being lost.

**The Secondary Community** The non-farm population has been losing valuable benefits that result from a healthy agriculture industry.

### **2. Problem Statement**

If no solution is found, continuing adverse conditions impacting farming activities in Tompkins County will further diminish the viability of its agriculture industry, diminish the amount of productive farmland acreage, and decrease numerous valuable contributions of local agriculture to the non-farming community.

### **3. Goal Statement**

The goal of this project was to develop an Agriculture and Farmland Protection Plan with Strategies, Action Steps, and Implementation intended to economically strengthen farming enterprises and retain farmland.

#### **4. Current Conditions**

Loss of farmland has been a long-standing condition in the County. This has reflected and contributed to adverse declines of rural communities, farm families, and other residents interdependent with a viable local agriculture industry. Farm acreage has declined in just 14 years from 123,210 acres (40% of total land area) in 1978 to 91,822 acres (30% of total land area) in 1992. Large farms of 500 - 2000+ acres have remained fairly constant in number (about 50) since 1978. Small farms of less than 50 acres are holding fairly steady in total acreage. Modest growth for some producers is occurring through opportunities in direct-to-consumer food sales that are not served by large scale farming operations. Medium size farms of 50-499 acres are declining in number faster than any other size group. Factors influencing decline of farming and farmland result from weakened viability of farm enterprises coming from numerous negative impacts coming from global competition, taxation, land use conflicts, and lack of public support.

#### **5. Desired Conditions:**

Three Goal areas are identified in the Protection Plan as its basic structure; Agricultural Economic Development, Education, and Government Policies. Measurement criteria for improvements for each strategy are included in the Protection Plan.

#### **6. Project Purpose Statement**

This project focuses on the development of strategies and actions in an Implementation Plan to strengthen farming enterprises and retain farmland in Tompkins County. It is the will of the New York State legislature, the State Department of Agriculture & Markets, the Tompkins County Agriculture and Farmland Protection Board, Southern Tier East Regional Planning and Development Board, and an array of community interests to address the problem embodied in the Problem Statement.

**7. Major Outputs Expected**

The end product is to be a document which describes goals, strategies, action steps, assignments of responsibility, timetables, and measurement criteria. These constitute a Plan to be completed and adopted by the AFPB and the County Board of Representatives and submitted to the NY State Department of Agriculture & Markets by March 31, 1998.

**8. Major Outputs Achieved**

The project is about to be completed and is on schedule for adoption by the AFPB and the County Board of Representatives and then submission to the NY State Department of Agriculture & Markets by March 31, 1998. It contains a fully developed Plan of Goals, Strategies, Action Steps, Assignments of responsibility, Time lines, and measurement criteria.

**9. Outputs partially achieved:**

Remaining procedural steps are to present the proposed Protection Plan at two public meetings in January, followed by a public hearing at the County Board of Representatives in February, and hopefully adoption at that time. Approval appears likely based on a presentation to a key committee of the Board and from solicited and offered comments of County Board members.

**10. Outputs for which no tasks have been initiated:**

There are no intended outputs which have not been initiated.

**11. Conclusion/Recommendations**

**a. Has the Project Changed?** There have been no changes of purpose or goal since this project

began.

- b. Factors Inhibiting Completion of Project.** No factors or conditions have blocked completion of the project
- c. Unexpected occurrences.** Funding for implementation of Protection Plans will not be available as originally projected by the New York State Department of Agriculture & Markets. This weakens the viability of the Protection Plan since local governments are not in a position to add new funding priorities without matching funds.
- d. Suggestions to Others.** Conduct more interviews with significant stakeholder groups and with AFPB members to learn about the barriers or opportunities they believe should be addressed. Ask for changes they would like to see happen from others, and what they (themselves) could contribute if others would make new contributions as well.

### **DEFINITION OF THE PROBLEM**

#### **4. Problem Statement:**

If no solution is found, continuing adverse conditions impacting farming activities in Tompkins County will further diminish the viability of its agriculture industry, diminish the amount of productive farmland acreage, and decrease numerous valuable contributions of local agriculture to the non-farming community.

#### **5. Target Community:**

The target community is broadly based and consists of two distinctly different population groups - farmers and the non-farm population of Tompkins County, New York. Located in the central Finger Lakes region of upstate New York, with land area of 308,500 acres and some 96,000 people, it is best known as the home of Cornell University. Each group has an important stake in the consequences of declines in agricultural activity and farmland.

### **Farmers - The Primary Community**

As of the latest Agriculture Census in 1992, there were some 2000 people employed or self-employed in farming on 441 farms, over half of which are considered part-time operations. Gross annual sales of each farm unit range from \$1000 to some \$1.5 million. Most farms do not produce enough income to meet the needs of the farm families. On a positive note, farmland and its active use for agricultural production contributes to the well-being of residents of the County through provision of food, jobs, taxes, wildlife, clean water, scenic vistas, recreation, tourism appeal, and overall quality of life. Farming activities contribute significantly to the economic activity of the County, producing some \$40 million of exports annually; and farm property taxes contribute more than their fair share of cost of community services according to Cost of Community Services Studies conducted extensively in agricultural areas of the North East, and in Tompkins County.

### **Non-farmers - The Secondary Community**

The non-farm population also has a stake in the viability of agriculture. The contributions of Tompkins County agricultural community to the non-farm community (cited below) remain vulnerable to pressures which have steadily reduced its capacity as a result of fewer productive farm units and less total farmed acreage. Trends, if unchanged, will reduce these important contributions the County population enjoys.

### **Agricultural products**

- Increasing dependence upon food imported from outside the County and State.
- The desire for a quality local food supply is becoming of greater importance to local residents.
- Non-food products such as horticultural and nursery products, cut flowers, potted and bedding plants, medicinal herbs, seeds, straw, pet food, horses, and wool.



## **Quality of Life**

Farming contributes many benefits. A healthy and active agriculture provides fresh food supplies, rural lifestyles, maintenance of open space, and pastoral scenes that appeal to residents and tourists.

## **Economic Value**

Substantial potential improvement for the County's economic net cash flow from two directions: (1) expansion of its exports of agricultural products, and (2) substitution of locally grown food for imported food.

## **Environment**

Agriculture is a preferred land use for protecting natural resources and preserving biodiversity. Our local environment is undergoing an evolution from loss of field and meadow habitats to increased areas of woodland environments that already cover 68% (up from 21% in 1910) of the County land area. Such evolution will change the existing balance of plant and animal life as biodiversity is reduced.

### **3. Major Assumptions:**

- a. The farm community will take action from the proposed initiatives to strengthen farming enterprises.
- b. The non-farm community will gain supportive understanding of the needs and role of farmers on whom they are dependent to retain farmland and other benefits.
- c. That both communities will find mutual solutions to their different interests in farming and farmland.

## **PROJECT GOALS**

### **1. Goal Statement:**

**The goal of this project was to develop an Agriculture and Farmland Protection Plan with Strategies, Action Steps, and Implementation** intended to economically strengthen farming enterprises and retain farmland.

### **2. Current Conditions:**

Loss of farmland has been a long-standing condition in the County. This has reflected and contributed to adverse declines of rural communities, farm families, and other residents interdependent with a viable local agriculture industry.

#### **Number of Farms, Farm Acreage and Farm Size**

Data about farming are reported by the US Department of Commerce every five years through the Agriculture Census. In 1992, it reported there are 441 farm operations in Tompkins County, down 75% from 1950. Of Tompkins County's 308,500 acres, farm acreage has declined in just 14 years from 123,210 acres (40% of total land area) in 1978 to 91,822 acres (30% of total land area) in 1992. The portion that is cropland follows a similar trend, but at a moderately slower pace.

Large farms of 500 - 2000+ acres have remained fairly constant in number (about 50) since 1978. They produce the major portion of County farm product sales, primarily dairy, livestock, and feed crops and account for about 40% of all farmland used in the county.

Small farms of less than 50 acres are holding fairly steady in total acreage, but they are characterized by part-time operations of farms maintaining hay and pasture land for livestock operations and a smaller

number of specialty farm products. Modest growth for some producers is occurring through opportunities in direct-to-consumer food sales that are not served by large scale farming operations.

Medium size farms of 50-499 acres are declining in number faster than any other size group. Stresses on farming result from many factors, but economies of scale in this size range are not very favorable for dairy, livestock, and feed crop operations due to domestic and global market factors, government policies, and technological advancements that reward farmers who can more successfully exploit their advantages. It is this size range of farms that have traditionally provided most of the favorable attributes of farming and farmland and are in greatest need of support.

### **Factors Influencing Decline of Farming and Farmland**

Farming enterprises have experienced weakened viability from numerous negative impacts, such as:

- Narrowing profit margins for most farm products.
- Inequitable property tax burdens.
- Land use competition - to protect or exploit farmland for other uses.
- Increased prices for farmland, driven by speculation for development opportunities.
- Lack of farmer successors due to poor economic incentives.
- Lack of adequate capital and credit to finance new investments and farm ownership transfer.
- Lack of public support for farming, its operators, and their need to be profitable.

### **3. Desired Conditions:**

These are best described in the Protection Plan as Success Indicators which relate to specifically defined Goals, Strategies, and Action Steps. Three Goal areas are identified in the Protection Plan as its basic structure; **Agricultural Economic Development, Education, and Government Policies.**

#### SUCCESS INDICATORS for AGRICULTURAL ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT GOAL

- Agriculture Census data reveals improving trends in retention of farms, farm acreage, and market values of products.
- Increase in the volume of food supplied to area institutions by local farmers.

- Increase in number of County or regional agriculture enterprises that process, package, and distribute locally grown farm products.

#### SUCCESS INDICATORS for EDUCATION GOAL

- Public expresses interest for more access to local farm products and farm experiences.
- Regeneration of interest in Future Farmers of America; increased interest in farming and agricultural careers by youth.
- Funds raised for Ag in the Classroom for several schools.
- Identity and image of agriculture and farming are elevated among non-farm population.
- Increased unity is gained among Ag groups and Ag community.

#### SUCCESS INDICATORS for GOVERNMENT POLICY GOAL

- Town Board members attend workshops on Ag District Law.
- Most municipalities gain recognition as Farm Friendly.
- Changes of farmland assessments at “current use” value are the standard practice in the County.
- Town Boards seek input from the Ag community on issues affecting agriculture and farmland.

### **PROJECT PURPOSE**

#### **1. Project Purpose Statement.**

It is the will of the New York State legislature, the State Department of Agriculture & Markets, the Tompkins County Agriculture and Farmland Protection Board, Southern Tier East Regional Planning and Development Board, and an array of community interests to address the problem embodied in the Problem Statement - to economically strengthen farming and retain farmland. This project focuses on the development of strategies and actions in an Implementation Plan to strengthen farming enterprises and retain farmland in Tompkins County.

#### **2. Major Outputs Expected:**

The end product is to be a document which describes goals, strategies, action steps, assignments of responsibility, timetables, and measurement criteria. These constitute a Plan to be completed and adopted by the AFPB and the County Board of Representatives and submitted to the NY State Department of

Agriculture & Markets by March 31, 1998. The Plan is based upon a set of three goals set forth in the Study of Tompkins County Agriculture published in 1996. These are:

“EDUCATION - To have a supportive climate for continuation of farming through public policies and actions on land use, regulation, and taxation that minimize disincentives for farming”.

“GOVERNMENT POLICIES - To have a supportive climate for continuation of farming through public policies and actions on land use, regulation and taxation that minimize disincentives for farming. Effective response and action is needed from various levels of government.”

“AGRICULTURAL ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT - To strengthen the profitability of farm businesses through programs of education, business retention, and expansion, and the development of diverse agricultural enterprises.”

### **3. Background:**

#### **a. Initial Involvement in the Project:**

The Tompkins County AFPB utilized the opportunity to develop protection plans for agriculture and farmland under New York Agriculture District Law with planning grants to support 50% of the cost of the work. My involvement came about through employment by the AFPB to assist them in the development of the plan with their Board and other participants. My role was as the AFPB staff person to research, analyze, write, communicate, document, plan, coordinate, and produce the documents utilized at all stages of the process, including the final Plan.

#### **b. Participants in the Project:**

Following is a list of participants in the Project, their roles, concerns, and expectations.

Agriculture & Farmland Protection Board members - Primary participant with legal authority to undertake the project. The Mission Statement states their concerns and expectations.

Tompkins County Soil & Water Conservation District and Natural Resource Conservation Service

- Resource groups that contributed information about productive farmland areas. No direct concerns other than relationship to environmental objectives.

Cornell University, Department of Agricultural, Resource, and Managerial Economics - Extensive

background information, agricultural macro-economic data, studies, and contacts with other Counties.

Their concerns were for their role as a Land Grant University operating under UDCA authority and as academic and professional interests.

Tompkins County Environmental Management Council - A citizen action group that supported this

project and contributed views and ideas to be incorporated in the Protection Plan. Concern is strongly focused on environmental protection of water, open space, and bio-diversity.

Planning Associate and Author, Charles Schlough - Staff person with responsibility to conduct

research, facilitate and coordinate all parties in the development of the Protection Plan. Primary concern was with incorporating and balancing all relevant issues and concerns.

Cornell Cooperative Extension - Agriculture Agent/Educator - Host agency for the project and

primary resource and contact with the agriculture community and agricultural information.

Citizens participating in AFPB Task Groups - Personal interest in either general or specific aspects

of the project. Broad based experience and knowledge was represented by 23 individuals, plus 11 AFPB members.

**c. Other Interesting or Relevant Information**

*i. REQUIREMENTS OF STATE LAW*

Agriculture District Law requires that Agriculture and Farmland Protection Plans contain several necessary elements:

1. Goals and statement of purpose.

2. General location of lands or areas to be protected.
3. Analysis of the lands to be protected.
4. Description of the strategies to be used to maintain land in agricultural use and to implement the Plan.
5. Description of other county or municipal land use planning and land use programs.

*ii. CONDUCT OF THE PROJECT*

The principal work of this project was the work of Task groups which met monthly to address each of three sets of goals described in the "Program Goal" section.

Each Task Group first addressed preliminary strategy priorities established by the eleven members of the AFPB in February 1997. These preliminary strategy priorities were derived from the Phase I Study of Agriculture in Tompkins County where they were presented as options for strategies.

Monthly meeting notes and documentation of the work of the Task Groups were made which reported accomplishments and recommendations, and later were incorporated into the proposed Plan.

The end product of the Task Group work was a set of recommendations for Goals, Strategies, and Implementation. It complies with State requirements for the AFPB's Protection Plan. Steps of the process included the following activities:

**Establish Task Groups**

Task groups review instructions for the process and time line for completion.

**Review Preliminary Strategies**

Consider other important strategies and address their relevance.

Bring focus to three or four achievable and important strategies.

Involve specialized individuals from the community in focused discussions relevant to each topic.

Selection of relevant strategies and action to include in the Implementation Plan.

Preparation of an approximate time frame for the implementation of the Plan.

Assignment of responsibilities to persons, organizations, or agencies to carry out the Plan work.

*iii. TIMETABLE FOR COMPLETION OF THE PROJECT*

**March 1997** - Established Three Task Groups: Education, Government Policy, and Agriculture Economic Development. Held orientation meeting with 2 dozen invited citizens along with the eleven member AFPB

**April 1997 - September 1997** - Task Group monthly meetings to develop and explore strategy options.

**September 1997** - Final recommendation reports of Task Groups to the AFPBoard.

**October & November 1997** - Compilation of recommended strategies and action into a final report

**December 1997** - Presentation to the County legislature for acceptance and adoption.

**January - March 1998** - Unscheduled; expansion of timetable if needed.

**March 1998** is the end of funding for this phase.

## **RESULTS**

### **1. & 2. Major outputs and Intended Achievements**

The end product is to be a document which describes goals, strategies, action steps, assignments of responsibility, timetables, and measurement criteria. These constitute a Plan to be adopted by the AFPB and the County legislature. It is to be completed and adopted by the AFPB and the County Board of Representatives and submitted to the NY State Department of Agriculture & Markets by March 31, 1998. The Plan has three goals set forth in the Study of Tompkins County Agriculture published in 1996.

“**EDUCATION** - To have a supportive climate for continuation of farming through public policies and actions on land use, regulation, and taxation that minimize disincentives for farming”.

“**GOVERNMENT POLICIES** - To have a supportive climate for continuation of farming through public policies and actions on land use, regulation and taxation that minimize disincentives for farming. Effective response and action is needed from various levels of government.”



“AGRICULTURAL ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT - To strengthen the profitability of farm businesses through programs of education, business retention, and expansion, and the development of diverse agricultural enterprises.”

The Protection Plan has been completed in draft form, with approval of the AFPB, and is on schedule for completion by March 31, 1998.

**3. Outputs partially achieved:**

Remaining steps are to present the proposed Protection Plan at two public meetings in January, followed by a public hearing at the County Board of Representatives in February, and hopefully adoption at that time. Approval appears likely based on a presentation to a key committee of the Board and from comments of Board members both solicited and offered.

**4. Outputs for which no tasks have been initiated:**

There are no intended outputs which have not been initiated.

**CONCLUSIONS / RECOMMENDATIONS**

**1. Has Project Changed?**

There have been no changes of purpose or goal since this project began.

**2. Factors Inhibiting Completion of Project**

No factors or conditions have blocked completion of the project, however, the project did not address certain issues due to personal positions held by four members of the Board who held voting control.

**2a. Important Issues Not Addressed in the Project**

- The Protection Plan would have been enriched and strengthened if it had identified a role that farmers should and could be expected to contribute toward meeting of the project goal. It is a weakness of the Plan that the farm problem is seen as needing only external solutions.
- The AFPB did not support the Town of Ithaca's Parks, Recreation, and Open Space Plan. It offers a protective mechanism for preserving 4000 acres of farmland by means of the Town's purchase of development rights on those lands. This is the primary practice in twelve States that have developed programs to protect and preserve farmland. Farmer members (who hold the only voting seats) of the AFPB are leery of any efforts that might limit their options to sell land for development at anytime in the future.
- The Declared Policy and Purposes of Agriculture & Markets Law (1927) is not being implemented as it prescribes. If it were, many of the problems of agriculture and the subsequent loss of farmland might not be as severe and would be receiving support of the State and local government and industry leadership. Advocacy to the State is needed for a long overdue review of New York State Policy on agriculture and should be an important feature of the Protection Plan.
- Comprehensive land use planning is needed to identify values of land use areas and needs for residential, commercial, industrial, and agricultural in the future.
- Non-voting members of the AFPB should assertively seek voting rights on the Board. State Law authorizes local discretion on the matter and many other counties with AFPB's have full member voting. The present control by farmers, who are not supportive of interests in farmland beyond their own careers, needs to be balanced by the broader public interests.

### **3. Unexpected developments during the Project**

From the beginning of the project there had been a belief, supported by the NYS Department of Agriculture & Markets that funding for implementation of Protection Plans would be available in a later Implementation Phase. It became known after some 20 months that funding would be limited to purchase of development rights on farmland. Since few counties have conditions that warrant or support such strategies, this came as a setback that will weaken the viability of Protection Plans that feature other strategies more appropriate to local needs. Local governments are not in a position to add new funding priorities without matching funds. The State has been mute on requests for expanded assistance to help support locally initiated strategies.

### **4. Suggestions to Others**

- Broaden the scope of interviews to include several significant stakeholder group members to learn about the barriers or opportunities they believe should be addressed. Ask for changes they would like to see come from others, and what they (themselves) could contribute if others would make new contributions as well.
- Conduct individual interviews with AFPB members to learn of their views, opinions, expectations, and suggestions. Participation as a group has inhibited expression by some members.
- Determine as early as possible the level of commitments from each stakeholder group and key person. Enlist those who are firmly committed to engage adequate commitments where needed.