

Town of Saratoga Agriculture and Farmland Protection Plan



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY Town of Saratoga Saratoga County, New York September 2018



**Agriculture
and Markets**



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Executive Summary

Dramatic Changes in the Agricultural Landscape

In recent years, the Town of Saratoga has experienced a steady loss in the overall number of agricultural land parcels. This has generally resulted in the conversion of agricultural uses to residential uses. Another impact is a decrease in the number of active farms but an increase in the size of the active farms remaining. The competition for vacant or inactive farmland is further complicated by an increasing number of horse farms desiring to operate in the Town. The farmers are often priced-out while the horse breeders and residential developers compete for the land.

The Capital District Regional Planning Commission projects the population of the Town to grow from 5,674 (2010) to 6,130 in 2030. This prediction indicates that the demand for additional housing will likely continue and result in the conversion of agricultural lands to residential uses in the Rural District unless there are more effective strategies in place to protect agriculture. Meanwhile the surrounding municipalities - Halfmoon, Ballston, Malta, Stillwater, Moreau, and City of Saratoga Springs - are among the top 25 communities for



population growth in New York State since 2010. As these communities run out of buildable land, the pressure on the Town of Saratoga will very likely increase.

The most significant tool the Town has that controls development and expansion into the Rural District is its farmers. Their love of the land and passion to keep farming a viable business drives the effort to preserve lands for farming or other agricultural use, while limiting the conversion to residential use. The sheer bulk of land that remains actively used for agriculture is clearly the most effective tool to offset development pressure.

Agriculture provides a great benefit to the Town of Saratoga economically, environmentally, and socially. One of the strongest reasons to retain as much farmland in active production as possible is that it is good for the local tax base. Studies have repeatedly shown that farms pay more in taxes than they receive in services, keeping property taxes low for other property owners in the Town.



There are a host of other community benefits as reported by the American Farmland Trust's *Planning for Agriculture in New York*:

- Economic: Farms provide jobs and support the local economy.
- Health/Nutrition: Farms produce fresh local foods.
- Scenic: Farms provide rural character and scenic landscapes.
- Tourism: Scenic working farms attract tourists and dollars to New York.
- Environmental: Well-managed farms help protect water quality and natural resources.
- Cultural: Farms connect us to our community heritage and historic places.
- Recreation: Some farms provide access for hunting, fishing and other outdoor recreational activities.



The Town Response

The Town of Saratoga leadership continues to be highly supportive of the agricultural community. This is evident in the strong and effective local Right-to-Farm Law, Zoning Code, and Subdivision Regulations. The commitment to sustaining agriculture in the community is also evident in the farmers and agribusiness owners who serve the public by participating on local boards and making sure that agriculture is considered in all town matters. In today's market conditions, these tools may no longer be enough to protect agricultural



lands from falling into non-agricultural uses. Through this Farmland Protection Plan, the Town is supporting agriculture as a strong community priority. The Town is further interested in determining what lands should be preserved for agriculture and what land use and land preservation tools are available to most effectively preserve these lands.

Build Out Analysis

A town-wide build-out analysis conducted for the Town revealed that, based on current zoning density requirements, a total of 3,447 new residences could be constructed on the remaining agricultural and vacant land available for development. When the analysis is extended to include development on available agricultural and vacant lands the number of potential residences increases to 6,107. The analysis is intended to explore the question of what could happen if existing land development ordinances remain unchanged and what impact might that development have on the community? By providing a glimpse of a potential future, a build-out analysis shows how new development could expand far beyond existing infrastructure and raises important questions on how to truly preserve remaining farms in the Town of Saratoga.

Grant Opportunity

The Town of Saratoga was awarded a grant from the NYS Department of Agriculture and Markets under the Farmland Protection Implementation Grant program (Farmland Protection Program) to review the state of active agriculture and develop a municipal agriculture and farmland protection plan.

Through this plan, the Town intends is to gain an understanding of the effectiveness of current agricultural land protection strategies, investigate the value of updating some of the land use and zoning regulations, and consider adopting various strategies to help protect the future of agriculture in the Town. This plan presents a summary of potential land preservation tools and strategies available to the Town to most effectively preserve priority lands.

Vision for Agriculture

The vision for the future of agriculture in the Town of Saratoga is to provide a set of tools and strategies to assist in retaining as many farms as feasible in the active business of agriculture throughout the Town of Saratoga. Utilize a “Planning with Agriculture” approach that focuses future development in the growth corridors. These actions must be carefully balanced with maintaining the rights of the farmers and agricultural producers to leave their options open for future use of that land.

Recommended Actions for Planning and Zoning

1. Reduce the zoning density required for “agricultural pursuits” as defined in the Town of Saratoga Zoning Code in the Rural and Rural Residential Districts from 10 acres to 5 acres to encourage a wider diversity of crop and animal farming operations that require less land.
2. Update *Town of Saratoga Right-to-Farm Law* to include detailed standards and procedures for the resolution of disputes between neighbors.
3. Revise the definition of “Farm” to “Farm Operation” and add other terms in the definitions in the Zoning Code to be more inclusive of contemporary farm life and agri-business. A full list is provided in the Zoning Audit in Appendix C.
4. Require physical or spatial buffers between residential uses and agricultural uses during the subdivision process to reduce potential land use conflicts. The burden of the buffer is on the developer, not the farmer. The width, length and type of the buffer is dependent on the nature of the border lands, with the need for the buffer based on the discretion of the Planning and Zoning Boards.



5. Expand the *Conservation Subdivision Development* Law by adding language that permits alternative designs that integrate residential and agricultural land uses with the intention of maintaining some level of active agriculture on the property.

6. Adopt average density provisions that permit a greater range of land use flexibility for minor and major subdivisions that are not considered under Conservation Subdivision Development. This would offer strong benefits for farmers who want to sell off a few lots while keeping as much land in productive agriculture as possible.

7. Change the zoning district and revise the official Zoning Map to reflect a name change from “Rural District” to “Rural Agricultural District” for greater public acknowledgement that this district is primarily intended for agriculture.

8. Encourage the state to expand the definition of “Land included in agricultural assessment” to include lands that provide critical protection to adjacent farmland such as land that supports environmental, habitat, wildlife movement corridors, and riparian buffers.

9. Consider increasing the density requirements in Quaker Springs and Grangerville to encourage hamlet growth.

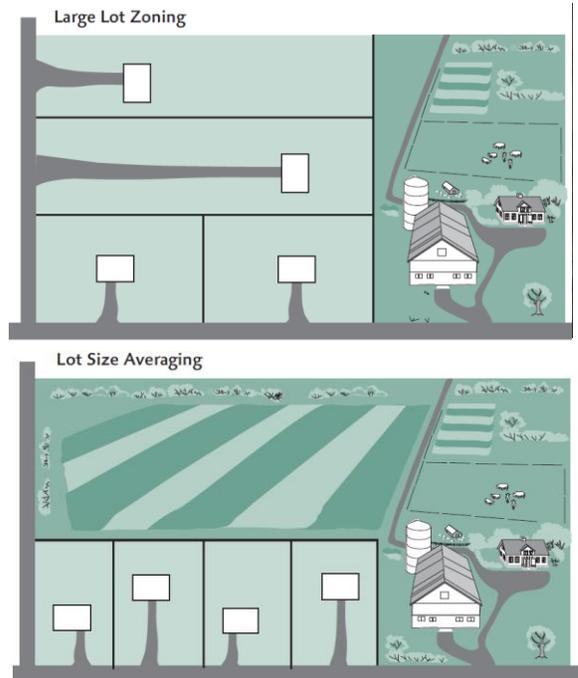
10. Apply for additional grant assistance through future NYS Agriculture and Market’s funding programs to incorporate the revisions from this plan into the Town of Saratoga Zoning Code.

Recommended Actions for Purchase of Development Rights and Transfer of Development Rights

11. Continue to actively participate in Saratoga County’s Purchase of Development Rights (PDR) Farmland Protection Program and coordinate with the Saratoga County Farmland/Open Space Preservation Program and Saratoga PLAN for funding assistance.

12. Conduct a study to determine the feasibility of a Transfer of Development Rights (TDR) program for the Town. This study would assess the implications of TDR on real property taxes and infrastructure. Apply for a grant through future NYS Agriculture and Market’s funding programs.

13. Support an expanded use of flexible conservation easements that provide farmers more options to hold on to their land and protect farmland affordability. These options include:



Easement with pre-emptive purchase right; easement purchase; buy-protect-sell (with optional lease-to-own); and ground lease.

14. Consider establishing a real estate transfer tax up to 2% that the buyer of real estate is required to pay when purchasing improved or vacant property for transactions over a determined limit that would exclude lower income housing units. The funds generated would be deposited in a dedicated *Community Preservation Fund* used to purchase development rights including affordability provisions, or to purchase in fee and hold farmlands that would have otherwise been developed or ceased agricultural production. Such a fund might also be utilized as a revolving loan fund to assist farmers with agricultural improvements.

Recommended Actions for Agricultural Economic Development

15. Establish a permanent *Agricultural Advisory Committee* in the town that will provide the needed support to the agricultural community, resolve any Right-To-Farm law disputes, and assist in carrying out agricultural protection initiatives. Their work would include establishing a mentoring network of local experienced agricultural professionals through the *Agricultural Advisory Committee* to provide one on one coaching and training to new farmers.

16. Develop a partnership between local agri-businesses and local schools to introduce students to regional and state programs that offer agricultural business programs. Consider the development of a *Farm Business Development Center* designed to encourage young residents to go into agricultural careers and grow the development of smaller niche farms.

17. Reach out to schools, churches, business community and other partners to develop a Pilot Food and Business Incubator Program to attract beginning farmers to innovative food system planning. Potentially utilize models from the *National Incubator Farm Training Initiative*.



18. Coordinate with local and regional chambers of commerce, Cooperative Extension, and others to develop an *Agritourism Plan* designed to identify and promote agritourism sites, services and events for visitors. The plan would include development of a marketing program to package the agri-businesses along the corridor and develop a set of driving tour itineraries that highlight farm businesses that wish to attract agri-tourists.

19. Seek partnership opportunities with the Town of Northumberland and other neighboring communities on mutually important farmland protection and business growth initiatives. This could potentially lead to a regional *Farmers Market Cooperative* like the Adirondack Farmers' Market Cooperative that sponsors six farmers' markets in the Adirondack region featuring "producer only" small, family operated farms or small home-based artisans producing hand-

crafted items businesses with an allowance of 30 percent from other NYS local producers to round out product offerings. In addition to providing an economical market place for growers, bakers and craftspeople to sell their goods, it is an activity center in the market locations that stimulates other activities for the merchants in the market area and benefits the whole community.

20. Develop a distinctive agri-corridor along Route 29 between Grangerville and Schuylerville. The concept is to concentrate various agri-businesses that serve as a catalyst for economic development between Saratoga Springs and Schuylerville/Victory. This can be accomplished by the Town's implementation of a *Zoning Overlay District* for this portion of the corridor that incentivizes new agri-businesses while complementing existing businesses. This overlay district could be furthered strengthened by the development of a *Rural Corridor Form-Based Code* for that overlay district that would provide development standards to control the access and parking, landscaping, and configurations of buildings that define and shape the overall aesthetics of Route 29.



21. Support the establishment of an off-road *Fish Creek Hike-Bike Trail* that would give bicyclists a safe alternative away from rural roads where there is active agriculture. This initiative would help support agribusinesses along Route 29 and commerce in the villages of Schuylerville and Victory.

Recommended Actions to Support Agricultural Businesses

22. Encourage the state to support reducing the requirement to receive an agricultural assessment from \$50,000 to \$10,000 in annual gross sales of agricultural products on land parcels that are less than seven (7) acres.
23. Create a digital *Agricultural Bulletin Board* on the Town's website to include links to information for farmers to support all activities related to the business of agriculture. Create a section that permits farmers to advertise for crops or services that are needed. Also provide a comprehensive list of grant opportunities and financial assistance with direct links to services.

Moving Forward

The recommendations above provide the foundation for the Town to take the next steps in farmland preservation. To put the recommendations into action, the plan will have to be approved by the Town Board, Saratoga County Agricultural Protection Board, and the New York Commissioner of Agriculture. The required *Public Hearing* is scheduled for October 10, 2018. Following approvals, the Town can begin setting in motion the recommendations, many of which do not require funding. The recommendations associated with zoning revisions can be referred to the existing committee that is actively overseeing an in-house effort to address zoning improvements throughout the town. Section 7 contains a complete implementation strategy for each of the recommendations. The two most effective ways to implement the Agriculture and Farmland Protection Plan is to make the Plan's implementation an agenda item and officially designate a person to represent agriculture for the Town and file a report to the Town Board on a regular basis

