

# Bethlehem Open Space and Farmland Conservation Survey Results December 2018

## Executive Summary to the Bethlehem Town Board



The Town's [Open Space Plan](#) (Plan) was adopted by the Town Board in December of 2017. Since that time Town Planning staff, along with the Conservation Easement Review Board, have worked to implement the objectives of the Plan. These objectives included continuing to “collect input from the public about conservation priorities”. The Plan specifically suggested conducting “a town-wide open space survey to best identify issues and opportunities”.

Although there were a few “open space and farmland conservation” related questions within the larger 2005 Comprehensive Plan and Bethlehem 20/20 surveys, this information is limited and well over 10 years old. For these reasons, and because the town felt it would be useful to have more than anecdotal information about the community's current preferences to conserve open space and farmland, Town Planning Staff conducted the “Bethlehem Open Space and Farmland Conservation Survey” in August and September of 2018. The survey results were presented to the Bethlehem Town Board at their December 12<sup>th</sup>, 2018 meeting. This presentation can be found on the [Town's website on the Open Space Planning page](#).



- **Survey Goals:** The stated goals of the survey were to learn how residents currently: 1) feel about the conservation of open space and farmland; 2) feel about the loss of open space and farmland due to development in town, 3) rate the importance of various open space and farmland benefits, and 4) identify their interests and concerns about open space and farmland conservation.
- **Survey Development:** The survey was developed through the research of similar surveys from regional towns, including New Scotland, New Paltz, Pleasant Valley, and Clifton Park. Survey questions, format, response collection method, goals, etc. were reviewed by Bethlehem's Conservation Easement Review Board, as well as professionals at Policy Research Associates.
- **Survey Methods:** Survey responses were collected via an online web-based platform through Survey Monkey (which had been used successfully with past Town surveys). The survey was conducted using a non-probability sampling technique, which is valid for exploratory research. Survey results represent the opinions of those who chose to participate (not a random sampling of the population). Paper responses were collected at the Bethlehem Public Library, Delmar Farmers Market, and at Town Hall displays. About 100 paper surveys were collected through these outlets. Responses were collected over a 2-month time period from August 1<sup>st</sup> through September 30<sup>th</sup>, 2018.

- **Survey Promotion:** Survey promotion and outreach included:
  - All Town social media – Facebook, Twitter, Featured News (posted reminders at least three times over the two month collection period);
  - Town E-news for both August and September editions (sent to approximately 2,500 email addresses);
  - Town Fall Park Playbook that is delivered to all 14,000 Bethlehem households;
  - Informational display with paper survey copies and response box at Town Hall and Bethlehem Public Library;
  - Staffed table with paper survey copies at the Delmar Farmers Market and Five Rivers Fall Fest;
  - Articles focused on the survey with survey web address in the Spotlight and Times Union online and print newspapers.
- **Survey Questions:** The survey asked 15 questions and took an average of 3-5 minutes to answer. Questions 1-13 used a 5-point rating scale; questions 13-15 included opportunities for open-ended comments.
- **Survey Response Rate:** The survey collected 1,504 responses. Open-ended questions (13-15) received a total of 3,465 comments. Comments were too diverse to summarize or generalize, so all comments are available for review on the town’s website. Responses to question 14 were geographical or place-based, thus specific places (areas identified by road names, specific farms, etc.) mentioned more than once were searched within the comments, tallied and ranked in order of the number of times mentioned. Places mentioned 5 times or more were listed in a table in order of times mentioned. This table is available within the Powerpoint presentation of the survey results on the town’s website.



## **Summary of Survey Results:**

- Most respondents of this survey identified that they live in the Delmar/Elsmere and Glenmont neighborhood areas, 65% and 15% respectively, which is reflective of population density in the Town. Slingerlands and Selkirk/South Bethlehem neighborhood areas represented response rates of 9% and 7%, respectively.
- Age categories of respondents from 30 yrs. to 70 yrs. were represented fairly evenly with a response rate of about 20% for each of these age categories. Younger age groups, age 30 and younger, were not very well represented with about 7% of this age group responding.

- A summary of the responses to questions 3-12 suggests that a strong majority of respondents feel that it is “highly important” or “somewhat important” to conserve open space and farmland in Bethlehem, for the various benefits.
- Question 3 shows that 79% of respondents feel that it is “highly important” that open space and farmland, in general, be conserved in Bethlehem. Combining the top two response options for question 3, 93% of respondents feel conservation is “highly important” or “somewhat important”.
- With regard to conserving farmland, the conservation of working farmland specifically (farms that produce vegetables, fruits, dairy, honey, wool, forestry, livestock, feed/hay, etc.) is also “highly important” (71%) to the majority of respondents for question 4.
- A majority of respondents feel that the conservation of open space for parkland (more walking/biking trails included) is “highly important” (72%) in question 5.
- Responses were more mixed when asked about the importance of conservation of open space for hunting and fishing with 22% ranking this as “highly important” and 32% ranking this as “somewhat important” (question 6).
- Protecting community character with the conservation of open space and farmland was ranked “highly important” by 74% of respondents in question 7.
- Protecting scenic views with the conservation of open space and farmland was ranked “highly important” by 64% of respondents in question 8.
- Protecting wildlife habitat was ranked “highly important” by 76% of respondents in question 9.



- Protecting water resources (streams, wetlands, groundwater, etc.) was ranked “highly important” by 83% of respondents in question 10 – the highest ranking of any of the questions.
- A majority (70%) of respondents feel it is “highly important” for the Town to support existing farmers, and attract new farmers, to keep land in active farming (question 11).
- Further bolstering questions 4 and 11 about supporting active farmers and working farmland, responses to question 12 show a majority of respondents support locally grown and produced foods and goods, with 70% ranking this as “highly important”.

- Responses to question 13 regarding respondents' level of concern about the loss of open space and farmland to development show that 90% of respondents are "highly concerned" or "somewhat concerned", and 9% are "somewhat unconcerned" or "not concerned".
- Question 13 asked respondents to explain in an open-ended format about their concern, or lack thereof, about the loss of open space and farmland to development. 452 respondents shared their views. [All comments can be viewed in full on the town's website.](#)



- Question 14 asked respondents to suggest their ideas about "where are places in Bethlehem that are most important to conserve". Most responses were geographic in nature, some general, some more specific. When specific places were mentioned (roads, specific farms, etc.) more than once, these places were tallied and ranked in order of the number of times mentioned. There were 30 places that were mentioned 5 times or more in the comments. Examples include: farms and farmland, Kleinke's Farm, Glenmont, Kenwood Av., lands adjacent to Five Rivers, lands adjacent to Rt. 32/Bypass, and Wemple Rd. The 30 most highly ranked places/areas are shown in the Powerpoint presentation of the survey results. [All comments can be viewed in full on the town's website.](#)
- Question 15 provided respondents the opportunity to share their more general "interests, concerns and questions about open space and farmland conservation in Bethlehem" and received 816 comments. [All comments can be viewed in full on the town's website.](#)

## What can we learn and what's next?



A vast majority of respondents feel that it is "highly important" or "somewhat important" to protect open space and farmland in town. The open space and farmland benefits that were rated most highly were water resource protection, public use/trails, farmland for local food, and wildlife habitat protection. The volume of comments provided for questions 13-15, and the breadth and depth of these comments, suggest that more community education and discussion will be useful and productive.

- **What are some of the current barriers to conserving open space and farmland?**
  - Land is expensive and sought after for development.
  - Non-profit land conservancies can't afford to buy land on their own.

- Farming is increasingly challenging due to loss of regional infrastructure, changing markets, and more.
- Town has no funding source dedicated to buying land from interested sellers.
- **Next Steps for the Town in furthering open space and farmland conservation projects and programs:**
  - Provide tax relief options for landowners/farmers with the Conservation Easement Exemption program and Agricultural Assessment.
  - Maximize conservation partnerships to leverage resources and funds for conservation with entities including the Mohawk Hudson Land Conservancy, Scenic Hudson, NYS Agricultural and Markets, NYS and Albany County Farm Bureau, farm lending institutions such as Equity Trust, and most importantly, interested landowners.
  - Provide ongoing opportunities for community education and participation with conservation events, workshops, etc.
  - Help make farmland accessible and affordable for new/beginning farmers to come to town and start successful agricultural businesses.
  - Re-evaluate current parkland fee rate for parkland acquisition via the existing Parkland Set Aside Fund to increase open space for public trails and access to nature.
  - Explore revenue sources to supply a local open space and farmland conservation fund.
  - Provide landowners with a variety of options/choices for receiving fair market value for their land.
  - Integrate the above with current Comprehensive Plan Update process.
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