

Prop #2 – Farmland Protection

David VanLuven, Town Supervisor (Our Towne Bethlehem, Oct 2022)

Several years ago, a man stopped by my office wondering if the town would be interested in buying land that he'd owned in Glenmont and Selkirk since the 1980s. These properties included the historic 150+ acre Heath Dairy Farm on three corners of Wemple Rd/Rte 9W which had been growing crops for more than 250 years, plus a 122-acre farm off Clapper Rd and 31 acres on Weisheit Rd.

Over 30 years of working as an environmental advocate, I've found that if lands are not protected, they will be developed. It might be in 5 years, it might be in 50 years, but they will be developed. Because of this, if we want treasured green spaces to remain green, we have to take responsibility and pay for them. This isn't saying that developments are bad. Rather, it's a recognition that just because a place has been green for as long as we can remember doesn't mean it will always be. Evidence of this is that the fourth corner of the Wemple Rd/Rte 9W intersection will soon host 96 apartments.

When I first started as Supervisor, I worked with the Town Comptroller to create the Farms & Forests Fund, a designated capital fund that can only be used to protect land. The fund is built through a combination of private donations and a portion of Town budget surpluses, and has grown to \$2.2 million (which can only be spent on land protection).

The landowner has offered to sell the properties to the Town for \$3 million, which is \$1 million less than its appraised value. The Town Board this summer approved the purchase, using available capital reserves from the Farms & Forests Fund, Park Land Set Aside Fund (which can only be used for park projects), and federal American Rescue Plan funds.

The vision for the properties is to keep them in agriculture – except for an 11.5-acre parcel in Glenmont that's beside an 8-acre plot the Town already owns. We'd like to combine these for a future 20-acre park. The remaining farmland properties would be protected with agricultural easements that would allow them to continue growing crops, but **never** grow subdivisions. Then, we could sell the properties to a private farmer (with the revenues going back into our Town capital reserves), work with a nonprofit to create a farm incubator, or continue leasing them for farming.

Opportunities like this are rare. Scenic Hudson noted that this 300+ acre project would be the largest municipal farmland conservation effort in Hudson Valley history.

Whether or not to move forward with the purchase of these lands is now in the hands of voters. On the back of the November 8 ballot, Bethlehem residents will find two referendums: Prop #1 regarding an environmental bond for clean air, clean water, and green jobs; and **Prop #2 regarding whether or not to protect these farmlands.**

The choice is yours, so be sure to turn over your ballot when you vote!

