



## Bethlehem Forward: Comprehensive Plan Update [www.bethlehemforward.com](http://www.bethlehemforward.com)

### **Agricultural Business Economic Development Focus Group Summary**

Thursday, March 25<sup>th</sup> at 6:00 – 7:30 PM via Zoom

**Goal/purpose of focus group discussion:** To explore how the Town can support and encourage existing and new agricultural businesses in Bethlehem, which will guide policies and recommendations for the 2021 Comprehensive Plan Update.

**Facilitator:** Mary Ann Johnson, Deputy Director, Hudson Valley Agribusiness Development Corporation, [majohnson@hvadc.org](mailto:majohnson@hvadc.org), [www.hvadc.org](http://www.hvadc.org)

**Town/Consultant representatives:** Rob Leslie, Director of Planning [rleslie@townofbethlehem.org](mailto:rleslie@townofbethlehem.org); Karen Shaw, Open Space Coordinator, [kshaw@townofbethlehem.org](mailto:kshaw@townofbethlehem.org); Bill Price, SWBR [wprice@swbr.com](mailto:wprice@swbr.com); Frank Armento, Fisher Associates [farmento@FisherAssoc.com](mailto:farmento@FisherAssoc.com). [www.bethlehemforward.com](http://www.bethlehemforward.com)

**Comprehensive Plan Update Committee Member:** Ed Kleinke, President of Albany County Farm Bureau, [Info@kleinkeassociates.com](mailto:Info@kleinkeassociates.com),

#### **Attendees:**

1. Ryan Kitchen, Kleinke Farm, Glenmont; field crops, seasonal farm store
2. Ethan and Cynthia Wheeler, agricultural entrepreneurs in South Bethlehem
3. Christine and Fabio Ritmo, Nimble Roots Farm, Catskill, lease farmland, Farmlink Network to find leased land and “non-farming partners”, National Young Farmers Coalition leaders
4. Jane Lyman, Lyman’s Sleighbell Farm, Delmar; sheep/wool, former pick-your-own raspberries
5. Nancy Neff, Mead’s Farm, Delmar; livestock, produce, field crops, seasonal farm stand
6. Mike Waldenmaier, Delmar; leases farmland to farmers
7. Mike Zakens, farmer in Selkirk, field crops
8. Jerry Cosgrove, American Farmland Trust, American Agricultural Law Association
9. Ryan and Kristin Penno – veterinarians (equine and small animal) looking to locate business in Bethlehem
10. Mark Verstandig – M & K Greenhouses and garden center, Selkirk
11. Mike Libsch– New Leaf Farm, vegetables and flowers, New Lebanon; vendor at Delmar Farmers Market and Tuesday Farmers Market at Kenwood Methodist Church

### Focus Group Discussion Questions:

**Products or services offered by participants:** vegetables, flowers, beef, wool, berries, horses, veterinary, bee-keeping, farm stand, farm store, value-added products (salsa from tomatillos), hay, corn, greenhouse plants.

**Question #1:** When you think of agriculture in Bethlehem, what two-three words or phrases immediately come to mind; they can be positive, negative, or neutral.

#### Negative

- Soils in Bethlehem are poor, known for clay (known as best for hay or corn).
- Land has been in the family for generations. Current generation not interested in working the land so the family leases land to another farmer.
- Children of farmers/landowners generally not interested in farming.
- Taxes are too high – if leasing land, rental income is not even enough to help with school taxes.
- No respect for property rights – example: teenagers pulling cars onto land and creating ruts in soil that farmer has to repair.
- Couldn't afford land close to Bethlehem (wanted farm to be located in Bethlehem ideally) – purchased land in New Lebanon to start vegetable farm.

#### Positive

- Five generations of family have lived in the Town, shows they like living here.
- Located in middle of Capital Region - market location is good.
- Population of people who are interested in local produce and products.
- Business has been built around the two Delmar Farmers markets.
- Non-crop agriculture opportunities – beekeeping, livestock.
- Historical context of farming in Bethlehem – build on this.
- Farm to table movement is very popular – this is an area for growth.
- COVID has helped, kept people home- shop locally. Last year (2020 season) was good year for sales.

**Question #2:** What are the key barriers to operating, expanding, or transitioning an EXISTING agricultural business in Bethlehem?

#### Barriers

- Competition amongst farmers. Working at odds with each other, instead of cooperating. Food hubs in some communities provides for collaboration. Lot of farmers are not great business people. Need to collaborate more, compete less.
- Selling the produce tends to be a tricky part of farm business. Help and collaboration can go a long way. Hard to afford the land, infrastructure, and then also sell what you grow.
- Affordable money. Regulations (all fees) and taxes. Not a large enough profit margin once fees, taxes, and agricultural inputs (pesticides, fertilizers) paid for.
- Public education – teach the younger generation about farming.

- Town government is problem. Town has an idea of what agriculture is. There is disconnect between what agriculture needs and doesn't need. Desire to preserve it as if it's something that can remain forever. Agriculture happens to use open space as its largest asset.
  - Constant defending yourself and your right to do the things you want to do
  - Puts pressure on landowner.
  - Think they are trying to help with a conservation program, but less is more. Less control/restrictions.
  - Town's fear is that farmland is disappearing and so Town wants to do more and more to hold onto farmland – stifling.
  - Need more ability to have incentive to do what you want; freedom for by-right uses.
  - Constant effort to defend property rights and ability to farm.
  - Trespassing is a problem.
- Traffic on rural roads has increased. Speed/volume of vehicles on road has inhibited farming – tractors on road.
- Worry about whether kids can do farming when suburbia keeps creeping out. Suburb's don't appreciate farming lifestyle, only appreciates opportunity to purchase the produce. Suburban opposition to noises, smells, working late at night – operations are driven by weather.
- Tax burden on rural land is higher but they use fewer services.
- Conservation Easement program, not interested in another government program. Farmers are very independent.
- Town regulations are difficult. Future idea for agriculture activity on the property but fearful of Town regulations and process for approvals.
- Example of chicken coop on farm that was being replaced. Town issued stop work order – overly burdensome and costly to farmer.
- Drainage issues from surrounding developments, which makes portion of agriculture parcels unusable (wet). Residential neighbors didn't want water in their back yard.
- Animals eating crops because there's no place for them to go – pushed out from development.
- As last remaining large land in the Town – land becomes opportunity for utility pipeline placement serving conduit for the public good.
- Don't have consistent internet access (broadband) in rural areas – zoom meetings difficult [also marketing of product].
- Access to startup capital is a process.
- Bethlehem has reputation of being a difficult town.
- Tiresome to fight to prove a use/activity is agriculture and does not need site plan review or building permit.
- Town is very rule-oriented.

**What are some ideas or opportunities for the Town to encourage existing agricultural businesses?**

**Solutions**

- Growers could work to gather to sell produce or setup an organization (cooperative). Collaborate to enhance the opportunities in the Town.

- Teach younger generation – get into schools.
- Surge in children (suburbs) interested in equine riding due to COVID. Businesses tailor marketing to family demographic would also increase interest (exposure) in agriculture. Experience outdoors and farm activity.
- Education on residential side needed – right to farm.
- Right to Farm Law (town specific) – provide security for your investment and Town or neighbors can't take it away.
- Clear definitions of agriculture activity/business in Zoning Law so when farmer pursues the business approval process is predictable for both the Town and the farmer. As by-right use only requires building permit, not site plan review [*R. Leslie comment reflecting on recent equine vet practice proposal*].
- Simplify rules/processes – don't need numerous definitions, use Ag & Markets definitions. Consider agriculture business proposal and look at it from agriculture perspective - find a way to make it work since we are trying to encourage agriculture in the Town.
- Provide education to farmers informing them that they do not have to go through site plan approvals for agriculture businesses when activity is by-right use.
- Farm to table dinner – close down road so agriculture business can have farm to table dinner in field without traffic.
- Figure out a way where taxes aren't the burden.
- Publicize funding/grant programs to help preserve barns.
- Create funding program to help purchase farmland.
- State Law changes:
  - Farmers School Property Tax Credit: for farmers who make 2/3 of income from agriculture. Current Town farmers not eligible since spouse is working full time for health insurance, which is effecting the income criteria. Town encourage State Legislature to sponsor bill to lower the 2/3 income level to make farmers in Town eligible. Would also help Albany County farmers – lot of small farms. Need Senate/Assembly member to sponsor the Bill.
  - NYS Agricultural Assessment (exemption) criteria – difficult to achieve \$10,000 gross income. 50% of farms in US don't achieve that. Lower the criteria (income limit), say \$5,000. Also, lower the timeframe (currently 2 years) to be eligible. This would be supportive of the smaller farms we have locally. "Big ag" lobby is fighting this change because they want small farms to fail.

**Question #3: What are the key barriers to starting a NEW/FUTURE agricultural business in Bethlehem?**

**Barriers**

- Layers of Board approvals, site planning, surveying, etc. is daunting.
- Land access to any new farmer is difficult.
- Affordability of land.
- Access to startup capital.
- Residential neighbors complaining about nuisance from farming (odors, noise, work hours)
- Soils are difficult – lot of amendments to grow vegetables. Young farmers would not be attracted to Bethlehem soils. Experience is to first understand soils on the land.

**What are some ideas or opportunities for the Town to encourage new/future agricultural businesses?**

**Solutions**

- There are a lot of farmers looking for land in the Capital District (like in TOB, where markets are good). Need to make land accessible and affordable; be a welcoming town for agricultural practices (ok with smells, noises, “imperfect”-looking landscape on working land)
- New farmers need access to start-up capital. Need to look at agriculture as a business, like any other business.
- Have you identified areas/parcels in Town that may not be involved in agriculture but could potentially be, and then pair landowner with young farmer? Once land is developed – residential lots, it’s gone forever.
- Land in TOB is too expensive – PDR (local Farms & Forests Fund paired with NYS FPIG grant) could help provide affordable land to a new farm businesses
- Opportunity for small animal – sheep, goats; adequate land for that activity (also, hoop houses, greenhouses to grow plants and vegetables in the colder months).
- Incentivize landowners with good soils to lease land to new/young farmer (Nimble Roots Farm example of leasing land from non-farming landowners/partners) – found a mutually beneficial relationship
- Promote the NYS Farmland Finder (Farmland for the next generation) – matches landowners with farmers needing land.
- Opportunities to repurpose old/historic barns for agritourism uses – grants to help restore farm structures for business purposes (state local?)
- If new farmers think that the general public in the town are not receptive to farming activities (smells, noises, not perfectly beautiful farmland), then new farmers will not feel welcomed and will not choose to locate here – education to public, local Right to Farm law

**Question #4: How can the Town encourage the various supply chain businesses that are important to agricultural business success in Bethlehem?**

- Which supply chain businesses are missing locally, regionally? (examples: meat processing, specialty/value-added processing, exchange system for farm services/equipment, veterinarian, direct markets/delivery systems, etc.)
- Meat processing is a problem. Booked for 2 years out to get USDA certified. To be able to market need USDA certified. Need to go to Massachusetts, Vermont. Guilderland is local, but booked. Region-wide problem.
- Allow slaughter house in Rural Light Industrial district. Currently only allowed in Heavy Industrial district.
- Locating a slaughter house is always a challenge. Infrastructure needs, but not located near anything (impacts).
- Traveling slaughter house (but needs to be USDA certified) – north of Troy existing business, but not USDA certified.
- Restaurants- need produce from local growers (and/or farmland to grow their own produce)
- Commercial kitchens needed for value-added products (example: tomatillos into salsa; processing and packaging)

- Collaborative local/regional product distribution network for farm products to help each other sell their products (example: Hudson Valley Bounty Network via HVADC)

**Question #5 (if time): When thinking about Bethlehem’s future in agriculture, what is the most important thing that needs to happen?**

- COVID created awareness in locally grown produce.
- Good year for growers. People will be back because they appreciated locally grown.
- People see what’s available to them, and appreciate freshness, taste.
- Returning customers. New residents to market to after those who have put their kids through school leave.

**Takeaways/Immediate Action Items**

While some of the solutions for agriculture are long term related recommendations or policies in the Comprehensive Plan Update, there are a few solutions that can be pursued now:

- The Town can start to actively support the two legislative modifications:
  - (1) Farmers School Property Tax Credit
  - (2) NYS Agricultural Assessment (exemption). The Town can engage with the Farm Bureau and other entities to move these needed bills and efforts forward with Senator Breslin and Assemblymember Fahy.

**THANK YOU!!!**

**Ways to continue the conversation – let’s keep it going!:**

- Website: [www.BethlehemForward.com](http://www.BethlehemForward.com)
- Social media: <https://www.facebook.com/BethlehemForward>, <https://www.instagram.com/bethlehemforward/>
- Email: [BethlehemForward@townofbethlehem.org](mailto:BethlehemForward@townofbethlehem.org)
- Rob Leslie- Phone: 518-439-4955 x 1157
- Reach out to Ed Kleinke, Comprehensive Plan Update Committee/Bethlehem Forward member (contact info above)