

Erie County, New York

FARMS FOR THE FUTURE

Executive Summary

An Agricultural and Farmland Preservation and Protection Strategy

**Prepared by Erie County
Department of Environment and Planning
In cooperation with
Erie County Agriculture & Farmland Protection Board
and
Erie County Farm Bureau**

For information on obtaining the entire strategy text, contact the Erie County Department of Environment and Planning, 95 Franklin Street, Buffalo, NY 14202; 716-858-8392

Executive Summary

Agriculture is integral to a diverse, sustainable county economy and community. The acceptance of this tenet is central to a strategy for the protection and preservation of agriculture and its farmlands. The steady decline in the number of farms, farmers, and farmland acreage is a response to social and economic forces in our communities. We should all be aware of the consequences of this continued trend and the losses, direct and indirect, to our communities.

Erie County agriculturalists are determined to preserve and protect Erie County agricultural and farmland resources. An Erie County Agricultural and Farmland Protection and Preservation Strategy, Farms for the Future, is a means to unify, document, and broadcast the agricultural and community goals necessary to stabilize and transfer the practices and benefits of agriculture to Erie County. Agriculture should continue to be a major contributor to County economics and the community. It is invaluable as an employer, as a source of affordable food and raw materials, as a provider of open space, as an environmental steward, and as a component of sustainable county development.

Farms for the Future was developed by the Erie County Department of Environment and Planning, in cooperation with the Erie County Agricultural and Farmland Protection Board, according to New York State Department of Agriculture and Markets Law Article 25AAA. Article 25AAA, established in the Agricultural Protection Act of 1992, includes instruction to farmland protection boards on the planning grant application process and the minimum requirements of the final plan.

The Erie County Agricultural and Farmland Protection Board, formerly the Erie County Agricultural District Board, was approved by the Erie County Legislature March 18, 1993. As set out in Article

25AAA, the Board is composed of representatives from County farms and agribusinesses, Legislature, Planning, Real Property Tax, Cooperative Extension, Soil and Water Conservation District, and the Western New York Land Conservancy.

Farms for the Future provides the basic information regarding Erie County and agriculture -- agricultural land uses and economics, community contributions, conversion pressures, industry prospects, etc. Information is drawn from census data, current events, assessments, publications and Erie County Agricultural and Farmland Preservation Board experience.

A Community Strategy

No single person, government or mechanism can prevent farmland and open space conversion. Meeting the goals of this strategy will require a combination of community energies, creativity, and commitment. These are the primary goals of Erie County's Farms for the Future.

- To protect agriculture and farmland using the resources available to allow the industry to be profitable and flourish.
- To preserve farmland and associated agricultural lands using techniques which assure that these lands are kept in that state as long as possible.
- To secure the support of the community and governments through the education and promotion of agriculture as a neighbor and as a major economic contributor.

The Erie County Agricultural and Farmland Protection Board has assembled a basic five point strategy, or framework, on which to pursue its agriculture and farmland preservation and protection goals. It begins with assembling and seeking the support of our affected community such as: farmers and farm families, agribusinessmen and women, farm organizations, neighbors, civic and religious organizations, businesses and industries, non-profit land conservation organizations, environmental and conservation groups, and government representatives and their staffs.

Point 1. Establish a working group extension of the Erie County Agricultural and Farmland Protection Board for the purpose of executing this strategy.

Point 2. Identify agricultural and farm lands, regions, areas, properties, businesses, other units or resources requiring maintenance, preservation, or protection.

Point 3. Encourage the immediate employment of recommendations, concepts, tools, and activities to further the strategy goals of protection and preservation of farmland and a healthy, sustainable agricultural economy.

Point 4. Identify high priority areas and/or opportunities for agricultural and farmland preservation

within Erie County. Where conflicts exist, identify solutions and paths to implementation.

Point 5. Develop a package of concepts and tools for the preservation and protection of farm and agricultural lands to be considered at the town level.

Erie County and Its Agriculture

There are 17 legislatively approved agricultural districts in Erie County totaling 234,000 acres. This acreage is inclusive of actively owned and rented farmland, and green or buffer areas. These lands are well suited for a variety of agricultural commodities due to the lake-moderated climate, ample moisture, and fertile lake plains and valley soils. Major enterprises include dairy, fruits and vegetables, forage and hay crops, nursery and greenhouses, horses and other livestock.

Production agriculture in Erie County was valued at \$70.9 million in the 1992 agricultural census. There are an estimated 1,200 farms, 99% of which are family owned and operated. Employment figures indicate over 3,800 people directly employed in agriculture. Associated agribusinesses supplying feed, seed, equipment, technical and financial services are directly tied to the health of local agriculture, and add significantly to the total agricultural contribution to the economy.

In addition to its direct economic contribution, agriculture is a major source of open space in the county. The advantages are shared by all residents in the form of clean air, water, and scenic views.

Strategic Lands and Resources

A major purpose of Farms for the Future is to accurately, and by consensus, delineate strategic agricultural lands and resources. **The recognition of these lands as strategic farm areas will stabilize and support the agricultural industry, and aid in protecting and preserving farm, agricultural and open lands, and natural resources.**

A work group representing agricultural, municipal, and community interests will more thoroughly inventory agricultural, and agriculturally related, land and resources. A system for categorizing and prioritizing the agricultural lands, natural resources, businesses, and industries will be recommended and implemented. Designated strategic lands will be slated for attention as necessary.

An Analysis

Agriculture is in competition for the very land it is tied to in a county of 986,000 people. The majority of metropolitan Erie County residents share urban and suburban priorities which impact agriculture's present day operations and future prospects.

Erie County's Farms for the Future findings indicate pervasive land conversion pressure despite agriculture's economic impact on the county. The negative influences of the diminishing local farm

population, New York's high property taxes, current development trends, and general public disinterest of agriculture as a discipline have permanently fragmented important masses of farmland. The number of Erie County farms will continue to decline in the future without orchestrated farmland protection intervention.

Additional details are provided in the Farms for the future document in five discussions:

- 1) the value of strategic lands to the economy;
- 2) the value of strategic lands to open space;
- 3) conversion pressure;
- 4) the consequences of farmland conversion; and
- 5) community desire to protect and preserve agricultural lands.

Concepts and Recommendations

There is no instant or singular remedy to stall or prohibit the conversion of farmland and associated agricultural lands, or to stimulate the local agricultural industry. Where agriculture and farmland preservation has been successful in the United States, it has been successful due to the employment of a combination of mechanisms, policies, and economic support; and due to the cooperation and commitment of a broad base of the community at large.

The Erie County Agricultural and Farmland Protection Board urges concerned and involved parties to pursue **the combination of initiatives which best support the goals of this strategy and best serves the local community**. The Board will simultaneously pursue the supporting umbrella recommendations which will aid in the administration of New York agricultural district and farmland protection legislation.

The Farms for the Future concepts and recommendations have been categorized accordingly:

Policy,
Land Conservation and Stewardship,
Education and Public Relations,
Land Use Planning and Implementation,
Taxation and Compensation,
Economic Development of Agriculture, and
Business, Retirement and Estate Planning.

The concepts presented are those ideas or principles which are supportive of agriculture and farmland

protection. The recommendations are points for action. There are options, tools, or activities in each section as appropriate. Examples include topics for educational information exchanges and workshops, policy subjects, land use planning mechanisms, and economic support of research and technology. Many options are simple, effective and have no implementation costs associated with them. Other options are highly sophisticated and may be expensive or require assistance beyond the scope of local services.

The following is a summary of concepts and recommendations. For further information, please refer to the Erie County Farms for the Future document.

Policy

CONCEPT: The philosophy and goals of agricultural and farmland protection must be supported by the complementary policies of all levels of governments and organizations.

RECOMMENDATION: Adopt county, town, and organizational resolutions, positions, policies, laws and ordinances, to support or enhance the protection and preservation of agriculture, farmland and associated agricultural lands.

Land Conservation and Stewardship

CONCEPT: Land stewardship assures future opportunities for future generations.

CONCEPT: Land conservation methods vary widely, but each has the goal of protecting land, in perpetuity or for a prescribed length of time, as working farmland, forest, shoreline, natural resource area or other open space.

RECOMMENDATION 1: The owners of farm, agricultural, and other open lands should become familiar with land conservation tools and utilize the method or combination of options best suited to their personal goals.

RECOMMENDATION 2: Land conservation options should be included in county-wide education and information exchange opportunities directed to farmers and landowners.

RECOMMENDATION 3: Municipalities should encourage the private conservation of land by implementing limited development strategies in critical preservation areas.

RECOMMENDATION 4: A continuing stewardship dialogue on the future of farming and farmland, should be maintained among towns, conservation groups and the Erie County Agricultural and Farmland Protection Board.

Education and Public Relations

CONCEPT: The backbone of any agriculture and farmland preservation strategy is public education and promotion.

RECOMMENDATION 1: Education and public relations must occur on three fronts if protection and preservation goals are to be met. These include the following:

- a) Farmers, farm families and agribusinessmen must be made aware of all of their options and resources so that they can make the best choices for themselves and the future;
- b) Local governments and their staffs must be informed of the desire and need for farmland protection, and how to correctly administer agricultural and farmland protection laws;
- c) The community must be educated as to the important role agriculture plays in local sustainability and the value of farms as neighbors.

RECOMMENDATION 2: Agricultural service agencies, consultants, and governments must gear up to provide assistance to Erie County agriculture.

Land Use Planning and Implementation

CONCEPT: Land use planning tools, supported by state and local pro-agriculture policies and individual land conservation plans, are a powerful combination for preserving farm and open land.

CONCEPT: For the purpose of these recommendations, "development" means the conversion of farmland or associated agricultural lands to any other use.

CONCEPT: Land use changes affect agriculture whether there is active agricultural production in a municipality or not.

RECOMMENDATION 1: Municipalities should be represented, and participate as necessary, on a work group extension of the Erie County Agricultural and Farmland Protection Board for the purpose of implementing the Farms for the Future strategy.

RECOMMENDATION 2: Municipalities should participate in conjunction with the Erie County Department of Environment and Planning and the Erie County Agricultural and Farmland Protection Board in the development of the county-wide designation of farm and agricultural lands.

RECOMMENDATION 3: The Erie County Department of Environment and Planning, the Erie County Agricultural and Farmland Protection Board, and municipalities should develop a model farmland protection approach. This approach should be tested at the municipal level and promoted county-wide.

RECOMMENDATION 4: Strategy participants should be active in an on-going discussion regarding agricultural land use, agricultural policy and economics.

Taxation and Compensation

CONCEPT: Farms and other agricultural businesses require regular capital investment to remain efficient and competitive.

CONCEPT: Local government can provide nominal tax benefits for agricultural land owners through proper application of agricultural assessments as well as other economic development incentives.

RECOMMENDATION 1: NYS Ag & Markets and the Advisory Council on Agriculture should be encouraged to follow through on its study of property taxes in New York and to propose practical remedies.

RECOMMENDATION 2: Local government officials, staff, and assessors must be instructed on agricultural assessment practices. This will result in assessments which are derived in a consistent manner throughout Erie County.

RECOMMENDATION 3: The Erie County Agricultural and Farmland Protection Board will support taxation and compensation programs which most wisely conserve agricultural, farmland and financial resources.

RECOMMENDATION 4: Farmers, farm families, agribusinesses, and land owners must educate and influence local, state, and federal representatives to assure that the agricultural sector is fairly represented in the formulation of taxation and compensation policies.

RECOMMENDATION 5: Tax information and education resources must be made usable and available through federal, state, and local experts at no or low cost.

Economic Development of Agriculture

CONCEPT: The agricultural sector of the economy must participate in local, regional, and state economic development planning and implementation activities.

RECOMMENDATION 1: The Erie County Department of Environment and Planning, the Erie County Agricultural and Farmland Protection Board, and NYS Ag & Markets should evaluate the best and most efficient scale on which to pursue agricultural economic development.

RECOMMENDATION 2: The County and State should equitably include the agricultural sector in economic development plans and budgets, as it is a necessary and major part of a diverse and sustainable economy.

RECOMMENDATION 3: Elected officials, farmers, cooperatives, associations, and trade organizations should be persistent in enforcing the need for retaining and expanding viable markets for locally produced food and fiber.

RECOMMENDATION 4: Adequate funds, both public and private, must be provided for basic research, technology transfer, and complementary natural resource conservation effects which support agricultural production.

Business, Retirement and Estate Planning

CONCEPT: Successful agricultural enterprises have a comprehensive business plan which is followed and regularly evaluated for improvement.

CONCEPT: Retirement is an important transitional stage which requires goals and early planning.

CONCEPT: Estate planning is as important as business planning when it comes to agriculture and farmland preservation.

RECOMMENDATION 1: Develop a written comprehensive business plan, or review, update, and consolidate existing plans.

RECOMMENDATION 2: Enable farmers and land owners with transition planning resources and retirement income options.

RECOMMENDATION 3: Develop a written estate plan, or update and modify an existing estate plan to insure the efficient, legal transfer of agricultural and open lands.

RECOMMENDATION 4: Educate legal and farm advisors and estate planners of the many opportunities to preserve and conserve farmland rather than selling it for non-farm use.

Conclusion

The development of Farms for the Future has provided a premium opportunity for cultivating relationships among Erie County Agricultural and Farmland Protection Board members, between Erie County and the New York State Department of Agriculture and Markets, and between community agricultural and non-agricultural sectors. The resulting document provides a platform for organization and support, aimed at a positive strategy containing a selection of possible solutions for farmland protection and preservation.