

Plan On It

A Dutchess County Planning Federation eNewsletter

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Agriculture is a Business, Not Just a Pretty View

By Noela Hooper, Senior Planner

Anyone interested in planning is familiar with the catch phrases we use to describe problems and potential solutions: sprawl, smart growth, sustainability, and many others. In recent years, an entire vocabulary of such phrases has been coined to describe the issues surrounding one of our most basic needs — the production, distribution, and consumption of food, locally and globally. Terms such as foodshed, farmshed, and food security have made us all more conscious of agriculture and the critical importance of access to healthy food. And if you have picked your own apples, or bought local produce at a farmers market or local supermarket, you are a locavore.

“Protect our rural character” is a phrase that appears in the opening paragraphs of most Dutchess County comprehensive plans. Although we acknowledge our agricultural traditions, we tend to include farmland under the general heading of open space, and cite its protection as a means to conserve viewsheds, control encroaching development, or protect the environment. What is often overlooked is the agricultural industry itself, and the significant contribution our farms and farmers continue to make not only to our rural ambience but to our economy.

Farmland Is Economic Development

Responding to changing economic conditions, many Dutchess farmers are direct-marketing to consumers at pick-your-own operations, farm stands, local farmers markets, restaurants, and in the New York metropolitan area’s network of 51 thriving Greenmarkets. And although the number of dairy farms in Dutchess has declined from 300+ in its heyday to fewer than 25 now, pasture has been converted to hay production in support of the County’s booming equine industry, and some dairy farms have been converted to specialty livestock operations.

Did You Know?

Agriculture is among New York’s largest and most vital industries, encompassing 25 percent of the State’s landscape and directly generating more than \$4.5 billion for the state’s economy each year. In 2007, the income generated directly by farms, combined with income generated by agricultural support industries and by industries that process agricultural products, totaled \$31.2 billion.”

— “[Economic Benefits of Open Space Preservation](#)”, Office of the State Comptroller, March 2010

Farming clearly has a positive impact on our local economy:

- The overall market value of agricultural production on the County's 656 farms rose 41% from \$31,712,000 in 2002 to \$44,866,000 in 2007, with these local farms returning 60 to 70% of their revenues to the local economy.
—2007 Census of Agriculture, USDA Agricultural Statistics Service
- The Culinary Institute of America's most recent annual expenditure of more than \$600,000 included 780,000 eggs, 6,800 pounds of mesclun, 36,316 pounds of mushrooms, 24,650 pounds of tomatoes, 8,800 ears of corn, and 16,320 gallons of milk, all purchased from farms within a 40-mile radius of the school in Hyde Park.
—Paul Wigsten, CIA Farm Liaison and Produce Buyer
- In 2010, 113,810 total acres of Dutchess County farmland qualified to receive an Agricultural Assessment based on annual production income: \$10,000 for 7 acres or more, or \$50,000 for less than seven acres.
—Dutchess County Office of Real Property Taxes, 2010

Meeting New Challenges

Partnerships among the County, State, municipalities, and local land trusts have protected important farmland throughout Dutchess County, but purchasing the development rights on all the farmland we'd like to protect is not feasible. As increased attention is paid to the business side of the industry, the focus shifts to basic economics — profitable farms are less likely to be converted to suburban neighborhoods. Local and regional organizations — and farm owners — have launched initiatives designed to support the Hudson Valley's trend toward smaller farms with diversified niche markets, and to attract the next generation of farmers.

Hudson Valley Agribusiness Development Corporation ([HVADC](#)) Executive Director Todd Erling cited the proximity of our diverse and productive food system to the lucrative NYC market, the upward trajectory of demand for organic food, and growing awareness of food safety issues as positive indicators of the strength of the region's agricultural economy. In partnership with the Northern Dutchess Alliance and Dutchess County Tourism, HVADC has launched [Dutchess County Bounty](#) to promote and support networking connections between local agricultural producers and culinary businesses.

The preservation of agricultural land and farming is dependent on the strength of the local agricultural economy. A critical mass of agricultural support activity must be preserved to help make farming a viable business enterprise.

— Buy Local: Supporting the Industry, [Farming on the Edge Report](#), American Farmland Trust 2009

Tourism is a \$470+ million industry in Dutchess, and the County's local farms and farmers markets are popular destinations for visitors. In 2007, Dutchess County Tourism launched [Dutchess County Farm Fresh Link](#), a One-Day Getaway program in partnership with Metro-North Railroad that brings metro-area visitors to Dutchess farms, farmers markets, wineries, and restaurants that use local produce. According to DCT Director Mary Kay Vrba, annual attendance has risen from the first season's 500+ to 1,330 visitors in 2010.



A busy last day of the season at the Arlington Farmers' Market, October 2010.

Farm consultant Mark Doyle, a member of the Board of Directors of HVADC, has stated that the growing demand for food system security and healthy food has increased the popularity of local farmers markets, but the high costs of distribution and lack of local processing facilities have a negative impact on producers and consumers. The beginnings of several solutions to these issues include:

- [Farm to Table Co-packers](#) in Kingston, a full service packaging facility that offers an incubator kitchen where new products can be tested;
- [Basis[®] Farm to Chef[®]](#), which allows larger buyers such as restaurants to select produce from specific farms in the regional system, and;
- [Hudson Valley Fresh](#), a not-for-profit cooperative of dairy farmers in Dutchess and Columbia Counties whose products are locally produced, locally processed, and locally sold.

A new generation of farm operators interested in sustainability has been attracted to the region's [Community Supported Agriculture \(CSA\)](#) movement. Speaking to the Northern Dutchess Alliance, Benjamin Shute of Hearty Roots Community Farm in Tivoli explained a difficulty facing new entrepreneurs — they may not be able to afford to purchase land outright, but are unable to secure long-term leases on farmland owned by other landowners.

The Glynwood Center's [Keep Farming](#) program focuses on community support for the industry, HVADC helps prepare business plans, and [Cornell Cooperative Extension Dutchess County](#) and Cornell University's [Beginning Farmers Program](#) offer farm business management training and technical support.



Plankenhorn Farm, member of Hudson Valley Fresh, a consortium of nine local dairy farms producing premium quality dairy products.

What We Can Do

The infrastructure of Dutchess County's agriculture industry is two-fold: productive farmland that cannot be replaced once it has been developed, and the network of farms and farm businesses facing and adapting to the challenges of fluctuating economic conditions, the decline of support services, new technologies, and changing consumer demands. The challenge for planning is also two-fold: communities that recognize the importance of their agriculture industry need to use their municipal authority not only to protect their farmland from encroaching development, but also to recognize the unique requirements of operating a farm business and insure that local regulations do not restrict those operations unnecessarily.

Farmers are often overlooked as a planning resource, but communities where farming contributes to the economy should take advantage of their farmers' first-hand knowledge of the industry and its challenges by establishing an Agricultural Advisory Board, and including them in business organizations and on municipal boards.

In addition, Agricultural Districts Law protects farmers against local regulations that unreasonably restrict farm operations located within an agricultural district. The [NYS Department of Agriculture and Markets](#) provides clear guidelines and counsel to help municipalities resolve conflicts and support their farm operations.

Support Your Local Farmers

"Rural character" is more than a catch phrase — it defines many of our towns and it depends in large part on the ability of our farmers to make a living and our municipalities to make a commitment to support their endeavors. Our farmland is the production line for an extraordinary variety of food for humans and feed for livestock. Unlike a factory, once farmland has been converted for residential or commercial development, it can't be rebuilt — its intrinsic cultural, environmental, and economic value is permanently destroyed. At the same time, if we do not support our farm businesses, the next generation of farmers will look elsewhere for opportunities.

You are unlikely to meet the person who manufactured your car or your kitchen sink. Here in Dutchess County and throughout the Mid-Hudson Valley, however, you do have the opportunity to know exactly who grew the apples you picked, which farm produced the tomatoes you bought at the farmers market, who tended your Christmas tree, which farms grass fed your beef, and which dairies bottled your milk. Take advantage of the rural character that we treasure and celebrate the harvest!

MORE INFORMATION

Farming/Chef Resources:

[Basis® Farm to Chef®](#)

Cornell's [Beginning Farmers Program](#)

[Cornell Cooperative Extension Dutchess County](#)

[Dutchess County Bounty](#)

Dutchess County's [PMG Open Space & Farmland Protection Program](#)

[Farm-to-Table Co-Packers](#)

[Hudson Valley Agribusiness Development Corporation](#)

[Hudson Valley Fresh](#)

Glynwood Center's [Keep Farming](#) Program

NYS Dept. of Agriculture and Markets [Agricultural District Program](#)

Consumer Resources:

[CSAs/Farmers Markets](#)

[Dutchess County Farm Fresh Link](#)

[Hudson Valley Fresh](#)

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This newsletter was developed by the Dutchess County Department of Planning and Development, in conjunction with the Dutchess County Planning Federation.

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