

**RI Agricultural Partnership 5-Year Strategic Plan
Outreach Interviews
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1. SERVICES AND TECHNICAL SUPPORT TO FARMERS

What's working:

--Interconnectedness and increased communication among service providers which has resulted in an increased ability to meet and anticipate needs.

What more is needed:

--Comprehensive set of training modules—especially for beginning and transitioning farmers; these already exist in many cases, they need to be identified and organized in a user-friendly way.

--Improved web presence, but be careful to not stop distributing information in more traditional ways as many farmers are older and not using the web—challenge of how to get information to these farmers.

--Important to work together—collaborate and pool resources.

--More intensive on-farm services.

--Equipment sharing, perhaps including mobile processing, kitchens, value-added, etc—currently working on feasibility and business planning study—need to find a model that is a self-sustaining business.

--Compile online resources—this is in process. Hopefully include an interactive decision-making tool similar to one available on the RI Small Business site which offers a list of options and at the end gives a list of contacts, courses available, funding, etc.

2. BUSINESS SUPPORT

What's working:

--Small Business Administration (Doug)

--Farm Credit East

--Loans available—even small loans from Farm Credit for new farmers, also low interest loans from FSA.

What more is needed:

--Maximize business tools—get more farmers involved in business planning and farm transfer planning (many tools available through Doug); create a state-wide system to link farmers to the tools. Find ways to show the importance of these tools and how to connect with them.

--Focus on TA, not just FA

--Some farmers possibly not taking advantage of tools because of the time commitment needed and/or the small charge for courses and business support services.

--Labor is a huge issue—shortage of skilled and seasonal labor

--Labor management training

3. MARKETING AND PRODUCT DISTRIBUTION

What's working:

--RI is doing great—Farm Fresh and Noah are great, farmers' markets are great and growing, new grower groups.

What more is needed:

--More visibility for buy local campaigns

--More training on access to markets—focus on TA and courses

--Fresh meat sales—permitting process (DEM and RIRLA are working on this); RI Dept of Health has some concerns and may allow sales to restaurants first (no local boards of health, just state).

--In the buy local campaigns feature farmers, different farm groups/commodities

--More of the same

4. AGRICULTURAL POLICY AND REGULATIONS

What's working:

--Right-to-farm is good

What more is needed:

--More farm friendly zoning, also consistent farm-friendly zoning; public education and outreach—what farms really are and the benefits to a town (North Kingston and Middletown are examples of towns doing a good job).

--Mandatory disclosure—right to farm notice to new residents/neighbors

5. EDUCATION

What's working:

--URI has offered a small farm dream course which will hopefully be offered annually, but other courses are also needed

What more is needed:

--Connect farmers with resources—tell them what is available and motivate farmers

--Community education—some members of the community do not know about farms and the benefits

--Build upon the new sustainable agriculture courses at URI and make them available to all

--Get farmers in schools

--As with most other issues—great need for more staff resources

6. AGRICULTURAL LAND AVAILABILITY, PROTECTION AND REGULATIONS

What's working:

--In large part, the Farm, Forest and Open Space program is working, except for in a small number of towns.

What more is needed:

--More education around farm transfer planning and conservation opportunities
--Funding for land linking services—need seed money to establish a good land link program with staffing—land exists, but access and linking is the main issue
--Training program for towns to demonstrate the importance of the Farm, Forest and Open Space program and why it is important to follow the recommended assessment values. Currently not focused on attempts to change the state law—better to work with towns and assessors.

7. FOOD SAFETY AND SECURITY

What more is needed:

--Educate residents about food production opportunities at home—production on small acres
--Consumer education

8. SUSTAINABLE LOCALLY PRODUCED FOOD SYSTEM

What more is needed:

--Common dictionary of terms/education around terms—local, food system, sustainable
--Hands on training for farmers
--Expanded incubator farms with funding for these programs
--Statements and action from URI to describe the university's mission as it relates to agriculture—a vision for agriculture and extension.
--Support from URI for faculty and staff involved in extension and research—count extension activities toward tenure/raises, etc.
--All ag service providers (URI extension, etc) to evaluate their strengths and weaknesses and find what they should be responsible for; currently many are involved in lots of activities, but may do so poorly because of a lack of resources.
--Service providers should coordinate better with commodity organizations when providing training, etc.

9. OTHER

What more is needed:

--System to create next generation of agricultural leaders (especially in the political realm)—they don't necessarily need to be farmers to benefit agriculture. An individual can make a huge difference—possibly work with FFA, 4-H.
--Important for the legislature to figure out what it wants from the Division of Agriculture
--Combined education for all of agriculture—small/large and organic/traditional
--Revitalized Agricultural Council. This group has legislated authority and many members.

--Better communication and respect between various parts of RI agriculture—organic/traditional, small/large, old/new, etc. Important to recognize that many farmers kept agriculture alive in RI and set the stage for the current renaissance/renewed interested. It is important to not make small/new farmers heroes at the expense of larger/older farmers.