

RI Agricultural Partnership 5-Year Strategic Plan
4/14/10 Listening Session
Schartner's Farm—Exeter

All written comments transcribed verbatim

* Indicates issue identified through written comments as most significant challenge

✓ Indicates “dittos” and degree of support/agreement on topic during discussions

SERVICES AND TECHNICAL SUPPORT TO FARMERS

What's Working

- previously—not this year—the state would give free rabies shots to goats and certify herd for N.E. shows
- RI Division of Ag
- NRCS—water conservation, nutrient management
- Ken Ayars
- state has offered better support in the last 5 years—Keep it up
- Division of Ag is the most positive part of all DEM—double the ag budget
- Ken Ayars
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- Ken Ayars
- the Division of Ag (Ken Ayars) has done a tremendous job in bringing attention to ag in RI
- return of extension agent
- great work by Farm Bureau in support of agriculture
- Ken Ayars is working—we need more like him
- Farm Bureau is a good org and works well
- support for organic farmers from the Division of Ag
- supportive NRCS
- RI Division of Ag – Ken Ayars
- state and federal reps for RI to provide support to the farms
- positive that meetings such as this take place
- meetings like this to exchange ideas

What More is Needed / Challenges

- efficient nutrient application*
- support services—equipment, agricultural supplies, fertilizers*
- agricultural infrastructure—competitive availability of quality farm products, i.e. machinery, livestock, feed equipment, non-GMO feed and marketing assistance*
- Division of Agriculture—lack of resources—staff, funding*
- access to infrastructure for ag—slaughterhouse, commercial kitchens, grain silo collective, equipment deals/repair, vet services
- water for irrigation—four seasons and high tunnels
- certified kitchen that everybody can use, my kitchen won't pass

- easy to find veterinarian list
- research on how worms can reduce the effects of manure getting into the wetlands
- state of RI Division of Agriculture in bed with Dept of Environmental Management—dangerous; state needs to separate itself
- no central resource center for problem solving
- technical support
- shoot deer to protect crops*
- deer population—get rid of them—permit should be free ✓✓✓
- humane means to help with deer population—perhaps birth control bait traps—opportunity—deer as livestock
- I can't get any help from the government in helping to fix barn yard for cows; they told me they only help the big farmers—not fair—small family farms made this country
- reduce red tape from DC / ties to federal money—possibly provide support to navigate the red tape
- equipment banks ✓✓
- weekly market bulletin—I subscribe to CT and NH's and they are a wealth of information—no RI equivalent, Kristen's ag news is new
- equal treatment and assistance to all farmers' concerns regardless of size or type of farming (organic/traditional)*
- greater relationships and communication between all agricultural stakeholders to leverage and create an empowered voice to then:
 - o unify critical mass
 - o increase lobbying efforts
 - o increase local market awareness
 - o increase local government support; grants; financial support
 - o increase support of RI Division of Agriculture and increased funding
 - o become an integral part of RI E.D.C. and inventory all agricultural entities
...with the overall goal to build profitability and long-term stability of all family farms*
- how to not feel as though there is an adversarial relationship and growing enmity position between the conventional vs. organic producers, when the conventional (us) are serious about responsible resource management, and want good water and air for our descendants too
- farmers need to talk to “environmentalists” and not just talk among themselves—get rid of “silos”
- is there a way to connect professional farming to the city to encourage home gardening*
- Al Benencourt?*
- how to keep a profitable business functioning without following every rabbit trail, new fad, new whim as “the fix” and understanding how to positively advance our particular farms uniqueness and abilities
- how to integrate people born outside US into mainstream farming; many are excellent farmers, live in the city and have many economic challenges, language issues, don't necessarily know how to get things done
- partner with Farm Bureau and other organizations to effect change

- needs identification

BUSINESS SUPPORT

What's Working

- the caliber of the workforce
- tax exemption for farmers
- farm sales tax exemption
- farm sales tax exemption

What More is Needed / Challenges

- there is no practical research and source for business planning to help the small farms*
- profitability in down economy and the cost to change direction (new products)*
- look for new agricultural industries
- not enough competition in the way of credit—Farm Credit is the only source and they are not what they use to be – they are getting away from the farmer and more about the staff with Wall Street salaries—need commercial bank involved and need for competition for Farm Credit*
- financial funding for small scale farm—or financial relief*
- access to low-cost loans and credit for land and equipment*
- low interest loans for equipment and or specialty equipment—upkeep, etc*
- funding for startup and improvements—solar energy, structures*
- easy to understand language on applications (loans, credit)*
- study to create several ag business models considerate of different ag operations
- reduce the amount of grants offered so we all fairly make our own way
- conservation banking—compensation for wetland set-asides/conservation—to reduce grant focus/dependence ✓
- create funds for ag projects in RI foundations
- trying to keep up with labor tax laws and sales tax regulations and changes while working the farm stand, crops, family 18-20 hours per day*
- making a living with the taxes and fees, payroll taxes, land taxes*
- hope the market will improve and taxes will level out*
- reduce taxes for active farms—off road fuel tax and greenhouse fuel tax
- encourage local lenders to include farmers in high-priority lending—community and small business lending—more competition between lenders ✓✓
- increase access to capital—encourage local conventional lenders to participate in working and start-up capital similar to other community lending efforts
- very difficult to get hard working dependable people that will help our farm grow other than going out of the country to find such help*
- taxes and restrictions—payroll taxes, land taxes, business license
- eliminate off-road gas tax
- minimize or eliminate sale tax on farm equipment purchases
- I know of a fruit grower who worries 1) about getting good help during busiest times and 2) who will take over when he can no longer farm*

- labor*
- attempting to farm with our own money when we have a vast amount of farmers using government money; we want to be part of the solution, not a leg of the budgetary nightmare America is currently in
- it grieves us to see farmers becoming the “new” generational, welfare-dependant segment of our nation; where is the independent living?
- favoritism due to subsidization of competitive interest in the market
- governmental favoritism toward operations involved in subsidizing agricultural—control through programs; voluntary rescinding rights in lieu of short term monetary gain or allowing government control since farmers receive exemption*
- how to keep going under adverse conditions in today’s economy; we use recycle materials and scrap to fund the operation; we work for our money and seek out folks of like minds; use it up or wear it out; if it can’t be recycled then it should be removed from the shelf
- affording health insurance/disability support

MARKETING AND PRODUCT DISTRIBUTION

What’s Working

- farmers markets and roadside stands
- strong customer support for farmers markets and local products
- in-state processing of livestock
- farmers markets 5 a week
- farmers markets
- the growth of farmers markets in RI – educating consumers on where their food comes from
- strong support of farmers markets
- farmers markets are doing well and will grow in popularity
- Rhody Fresh
- slaughterhouse in RI
- advertising for Buy Local, Buy Fresh
- farmers markets
- Farm Fresh RI is great
- people love good cider
- growth of ag in RI

What More is Needed / Challenges

- marketing CSAs
- there are some very successful groups that have had good results—Farm Fresh, RICAPE—make sure that we don’t have too many groups fighting for the same funds, work together*
- being able to sell what we produce for the “right” price*
- marketing product—Hay*
- distribution and marketing—four season produce*
- marketing would help for small farmers*

- advertising for your farm products could be at a cheaper rate for the farmer
- promoting agritourism activities
- farmers markets—have fewer stronger ones as opposed to tons of weak ones
- more in-state processing of livestock
- better coordination between Farm Fresh RI and farmers
- allow farm winery to sell their wine at farmers markets
- would Division of Ag be willing to work with DEM and Dept of Health to facilitate the RI fishery to harvest seafood sustainably and process and package their catch (as RI beef/livestock is processed) and allow the fishermen to market their catch locally, rather than selling their fish (whole) out of state—most RI fish never return to RI residents; sustainably harvested fish is much like fish farming—the fish are caught live, smaller fish are released, fish over the limit are all released; draggers—not a sustainable method—draggers kill most all catch, lobsters have a size limit and minimum, all lobsters are fed in fisherman’s traps, small lobsters returned live to the ocean, proper size lobster are kept and sold, shell fish such as quahogs and clams also have size limits—smaller are returned to the wild for harvest where they grow—giving the shell fish time to reproduce, this is farming in the wild
- better advertising for state that farms are alive and producing in RI

AGRICULTURAL POLICY AND REGULATIONS

What’s Working

What More is Needed / Challenges

- too much regulation makes producing fresh, raw goat milk available to consumers impossible*
- poor zoning regulations limit farm activities and limit the sale of farm products on the farm*
- too much government intervention in farm matters i.e. regulations regarding water usage, pesticide, restrictions, taxes and fees for almost anything we want to do*
- state and local regulations on how your farm, people going by the farm want to tell you how to do it; local laws are hurting day to day operation*
- regulations—zoning restrictions*
- local government not wanting to change*
- town government working harder against farming than encouraging farming*
- getting GAP certified is not fair to all crops—some farms get certified for one crop but the whole farm is covered, if I grew only one crop I can’t get certified*
- deer and goose damage permits*
- dealing with DEM*
- farm kitchen regulations*
- over regulation*
- state laws and policies are very, very short sighted regarding using and recycling our organic matter to sustain and protect our soils for healthy plants and animals*

- I need to retail my product from my farm—when I sold my building rights, DEM agreed I could do it, now they are doing everything to stop me—it isn't fair*
- regulators overlapping; bureaucracy; socialism*
- laws concerning wild animals
- governmental regulations and loss of personal freedoms and rights*
- get rid of the deer—get them to homeless shelters, feed the poor and hungry; get the population back to 1940 level*
- getting local town government to accept and follow state guidelines, laws and recommendations
- we cannot grow pumpkins or hay or winter rye because there are too many deer, too many Canadian geese and too much paper work to obtain a permit, tag
- fear of making good management/farm decisions due to encumbrances from community, local/state/federal governments
- municipal government—planning and zoning restrictions on agriculture
- making local government aware and following state laws for right to farm; right to farm laws are written by local government
- local government not open to change
- local government laws and policies; state, town, city laws and policies; political interests—local and regional
- encumbrance on farming practices from urban neighbors
- statewide planning changes are the only way to make the changes in all cities and towns
- adapt zoning for non-traditional agriculture
- ag-specific use codes
- inflexible local zoning—should appreciate the changing nature of agriculture
- create local agricultural commissions with farmers serving on them
- address loss of equity from zoning changes
- include agriculture in statewide and comprehensive plans—include guidelines for towns working with agriculture and farms
- look at state-level Board of Health regulations—make more farm-friendly—i.e. sale of processed meat
- building codes—as relates to farm stands (such as exit signs)—eliminate or change state laws which underline local regulations
- federal/state codes not addressing farming issues
- communication between farmers and planning commission—address issues in a positive way
- statewide agricultural land evaluation committee—Farm, Forest, Open Space assessment improperly implemented—should not allow the increase valuation of the house lot—provide guidance to not allow such drastic increases—possibly cap that house value assessment ✓✓
- local communities need to consider options to preserve capital for farmers—reduce restrictions and expense for improvements ✓
- county-wide agricultural commissions to accommodate small towns/multi-town farms
- need agreement/coordination between officials for consistent application of laws/regulations

- Federal House Bill 787—Army Corps water issue
- water rights*
- right to farm should be expanded to include all “zones”
- RI is a small state—this can be done—all towns could and should work together to support ag; there should not be such a divergence from S. Kingston, to N. Kingston to Exeter
- right to farm should not just be a nuisance law but an actual right of a RI citizen for farm their property in all zones and sell their products of their farm on their farm
- pro farm officials to be required to be part of local government, town council and planning boards; currently our town official or 1 acre of less city people who migrated to the country
- ability to hang signs to allow navigation to farm
- create a state policy that has a long term value for our capital, natural resource of organic matter; try to prevent leaves, grass, brush, and food scraps from going to the land fill
- equity retention—erosion of capital assets due to government*
- change in political party in power—vote

EDUCATION

What's Working

- growing awareness of the value of fresh foods
- ag education programs
- educate the American people that without farming that the United States would be a 3rd world nation overnight if the ag businesses failed
- education in schools

What More is Needed / Challenges

- communication with public (outreach)*
- education of anyone willing to learn; using whatever is available to accomplish this goal; we own no land, we own and use other's land and ask for assistance from local folks who wish to help*
- what are the best/new/novel strategies to connect farmers and commodity groups with the intellectual resources of the University of Rhode Island community; what are the needs? What are the researchable questions? What's the best way to partner?*
- grants for new farming and education initiatives
- cost of education—would like mentoring programs
- how to bring young people into farming
- educate farmers and landowners on how small plots can be profitable
- farm awareness in schools

AGRICULTURAL LAND AVAILABILITY, PROTECTION AND REGULATIONS

What's Working

- the Farm, Forest & Open Space program
- there has been a lot of talk about the development rights program—very negative comments—I disagree completely—the state development rights program is one of the best things to happen to the state
- tax exemption for Farm, Forest & Open Space

What More is Needed / Challenges

- availability of development right acquirement*
- I know at least one person who is looking for land to farm in Charlestown
- access to affordable farmland*
- land utilization (matching open, fallow land with a proper crop)*
- affordable land for farming*
- Army Corps rescinding PC (prior converted land)*
- paying for the high price of farmland and taxes*
- farmland access that is affordable; either a lease with long-term or purchase at reasonable agricultural price*
- land availability and affordability—I would love to stay in RI, however that land that is available to farm on is so expensive. As a passionate farmer who has only been working for others, I would love the opportunity to own and cultivate my own land, however I find myself drawn to less expensive land outside of New England. My biggest concern is not being able to farm in a community with my family who are established already in RI.*
- as an aspiring farmer who will be looking for farmland, access and affordability is my top concern; I hope in the next five years, more land will be preserved through farmland trusts and other conservation efforts*
- land value—farm R.O.I. vs. R.O.I. land developed*
- farmland protection—sale of development rights*
- cost of farmland acquisition*
- availability of land; affordability of land*
- finding affordable farmland in the state*
- land-linking through generations*
- a place (a local-close to Charlestown) to raise worms over the winter
 - o needs to be above 40 degrees
 - o needs to have food for worms—preferably manure—any food scraps, etc
 - o the food source needs to be near the worm farm
- property tax—the assessor has applied the non-farm amenities of the property enrolled in Farm Forest and Open Space program and assessed them on the house site, thus double taxation*
- real estate taxes once development rights have been sold in towns that do not recognize the value of farms and farmland and lack of organization of farmers to lobby Town Councils to exempt those properties*
- tax exempt from property taxes*

- land cost going up—can you still farm it in five years
- land preservation, protection of rural heritage in RI
- land availability
- change inheritance tax laws so farms can be passed on to the next generation*
- federal and state tax laws governing capital gain, inheritance tax, transfer tax; specific: new tax laws for 2011 and beyond governing estate transfers to other generation*
- get rid of death tax; passing down the farm to next generation*
- government regulations; death taxes – House Bill 787*
- state taxes and regulations on land*
- taxes—land and home
- estate taxes—passing farmland and business to next generation without them having to sell assets to pay inheritance tax*
- death taxes for next generation*
- taxes—property and inheritance tax
- transfer of land from non-profits to farmers
- make it affordable for the next generation to either inherit our farm or for someone to purchase our farm where it can be used as a continuous working farm—the inheritance tax on farms should be abandoned as there are few left, we need to preserve what is left of agriculture in RI
- estate taxes, property taxes
- change inheritance tax laws to allow for farms to be passed on without heirs having to sell the land to pay the taxes
- inheritance tax
- property taxes are increased due to the high costs of education and police in town—especially due to early pensions, etc
- pass legislation evaluating death taxes on farms by current use, not best use
- inheritance taxes eliminate to allow next generation to farm and not have to sell to pay tax
- complicated, lengthy and frustrating process to sell development rights
- availability/access
- tax on development/developers
- need fair price—especially for small plots
- need active land link program
- longer-term leasing of state-owned land
- availability/affordability of town, land trust, and state owned land – for renting ✓
- no farm-related names for developments on former farmland
- education/understanding about implication of PDR sale—impacts on subdivision, borrowing capacity, etc
- have advocate for landowner during PDR process ✓
- stabilize return on investment—make long-term ag land financially viable
- ability to sell development rights ✓
- find additional funding sources for development rights
- education—sale of development rights’ permanent effects on collateral, lending potential, etc

- focus on alternative to sale of development rights—create additional profitability ✓✓
- development rights income as venue for IRA
- APR-type program (Massachusetts state farmland preservation program)—preserving affordability for land to remain in production ✓
- change cluster zoning regulations—encourage this over large-lot zoning
- little or no tax on PDR sale—tax implications
- look at term easements, like in Kentucky
- influence of The Nature Conservancy over RI land—implications of a global organizations ✓
- profitable agriculture – not just “open space”
- Farm, Forest, and Open Space—keep house site at same level for 15 years in program regardless of what values do ✓✓
- farming on roof tops
- match farmers with land
- state-wide agricultural tax cap on agricultural land—helps exclude land sale to developers—not everyone is a tax free farm
- better tax breaks for farmers so farmland is not taxed as house lots
- community members trespassing on current use land—address trespassing with education

FOOD SAFTEY AND SECURITY

What's Working

- regulations are good

What More is Needed / Challenges

- minimize or have scale specific regulations for small farms*
- regulations are good, but is it enough; how can we protect ourselves better

SUSTAINABLE LOCALLY PRODUCED FOOD SYSTEM

What's Working

- growth toward four season growing of vegetables
- public wants to buy local and are willing to pay premium
- people growing own food
- people wanting organic
- the only thing and the best thing has always been the fortitude of the undervalued farmer
- strong customer support for local products
- trend toward and support of local
- organic agriculture
- support for locally grown products

- people's desire to buy and pick fresh produce; this has a lot to do with "agri-tourism"
- organic farms
- great new organic farmers
- vermicomposting is a growing business
- worm poop (castings) make an excellent soil enhancer and fertilizer without chemicals—worm "brew" is even better
- worms can eat 35% of what goes into the landfill—it can be done in every household

What More is Needed / Challenges

- getting people in RI to drive past chain stores to shop at farms especially farms well off main roads; excess signage helps, but is confined by local and state laws*
- support organic farms and transition to organic*
- define organic and in-organic farming
- cheap food policy
- promote solar and wind power for farm use*
- new mission on controlling soil fertility
- make urban ag a part of the strategic plan