

Background



Apple blossoms

photo courtesy of Ulster County Tourism

BACKGROUND

During the last forty five years, Ulster County has lost significant amounts of agricultural farmland. From 1950 to 1995, farmland acreage declined from 227,497 acres to 71,900 acres. The number of farms also declined from 2,552 in 1950 to 485 farms in 1995. During the last ten years, the county has lost 130 farms.

In 1992, in agreement with the state agricultural districts law, the County's Agricultural Districting Advisory Committee was transformed into the Agricultural and Farmland Protection Board. In addition to reviewing agricultural districts, the Board received new authority to deal with agricultural preservation issues. Membership was then expanded in accordance with state formula and the County Legislature appointed new Board members.

On February 22, 1996, Daniel L. Alfonso, Chair of the Ulster County Legislature, signed an agreement authorizing the Agricultural and Farmland Protection Board to apply for Farmland Protection Funding from the New York State Department of Agriculture and Markets for financial assistance in the preparation of this agricultural preservation plan. A grant to Ulster County in the amount of \$49,000 was awarded by the State to be matched by local dollars.

The Board has created many opportunities for public input. Six public meetings were held in which public and governmental officials were invited. The first county-wide agricultural and farmland protection public meeting was held in December 1996. Public meetings were then held in each of Ulster County's four agricultural districts throughout January and February, 1997. An additional county-wide public meeting was held in March 1997.



December 16th public meeting; Bob Somers, Jerry Cosgrove and Bill Smith

photo courtesy of Ulster County Cornell Cooperative Extension

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All public meetings were advertised through direct mailings to farmers; press releases sent to nine newspapers, six radio stations and two television stations. Posters were also mailed to all Town Clerk offices and hung in a multitude of retail store windows throughout the county (See Appendix A, page 2).

Fifty people attended the first public meeting in Kingston. Ulster County Agricultural and Farmland Protection Board members were introduced and their mission stated. Presenters included Bob Somers, chief of the Agricultural Protection Unit for New York State Department of Agriculture and Markets; Jerry Cosgrove, director of the New York field office for American Farmland Trust; and Bill Smith, pesticide education leader for Cornell University. Public comments and concerns were invited.

Several comments at the first meeting strongly opposed creating additional regulations for farmers. Others expressed concern for the pressures relating to increasing residential development near active farming operations. Many individuals thought high New York State taxes were the major impediment to successful farming.

The meetings in the agricultural districts were each attended by 16 to 35 people. These meetings allowed every individual time to speak. After each person's comments were recorded, the attendees then prioritized the issues. The majority of concerns were then organized and assigned a broad based issue heading (See Appendix A). Three resounding issues emerged from the public meetings: agricultural education, agricultural viability (which includes marketing and taxation/regulation) and land use/protection.

Working committees were then formed to explore each of the three issue areas. Worksheets of goals, objectives and strategies for achieving the objectives were developed by each committee.

Additional information was solicited from farmers via a short agricultural survey. Of 231 possible contacts, 81 individuals responded (See Appendix B).

The last county-wide public meeting was held in Kingston on March 25, 1997. One-hundred and twenty-five people attended. Lydia Reidy of Cornell Cooperative Extension and chair of the Agricultural and Farmland Protection Board; Gerry Davidson, Executive Director of Ulster County Development Corporation; Joe Munster and Peter Carofano of Ulster County Tourism; Herb Hekler, director of Ulster County Planning Department; and Gary Capella of Ulster County Soil and Water Conservation District expressed each of their organization's commitment to agriculture and support of the Agricultural and Farmland Protection Plan.

Representatives from each of the three working committees presented their group's findings to date at this meeting. Chris Kelder, dairy farmer from Accord and Agricultural and Farmland Protection Board member, presented the education committee report. John Gill, corn and vegetable farmer from Hurley, presented information for the agricultural viability committee. Michael Moriello, attorney, apple farmer and Agriculture and Farmland Protection Board member from New Paltz, discussed the land use committee goals and objectives.

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Following the plan reports, audience comments and suggestions were sought. These comments were recorded and many have since been incorporated into the plan.

With the completion and acceptance of this plan by the Ulster County Legislature and the commissioner of New York State Department of Agriculture and Markets, Ulster County will be eligible to apply for farmland preservation implementation dollars through New York State Department of Agriculture and Markets.

This plan is presented as a blueprint; a fluid, vital working document that changes as life itself does. It is intended to guide policy-making for agricultural and farmland protection practices in Ulster County.