



## SECTION 3 GETTING STARTED

Each Connecticut town is unique, with its own economic, geographic, cultural and even agricultural identity. As a result, an initiative or policy that works in one community may not work in another. Yet, in developing a plan or initiatives to support local farms and protect farmland, all communities should begin with two basic steps: communicating with local farmers and identifying the community's agricultural resources.

To improve their understanding of local agriculture, some towns have mapped their agricultural resources and surveyed town farmers. Others have established town agricultural commissions to provide formal input from the agricultural community or tasked an existing town board or commission to help town officials plan for agriculture. Fortunately, there is funding available from the state to assist towns in taking these two important steps and in developing subsequent farm and farmland-related initiatives. This state program, the Agriculture Viability Grants Program, administered by the Connecticut Department of Agriculture and established in 2005 through *Public Act 228*, has already helped a number of municipalities around the state plan proactively for agriculture.

### Municipal Grants from the Connecticut Department of Agriculture

Municipalities may apply to the Agriculture Viability Grants Program for funding to plan and implement local farmland preservation strategies, institute agriculture-friendly land use regulations or develop marketing initiatives to support local farm businesses. Grant rounds are held annually, with proposals due in November and grants awarded in January; towns are eligible for matching grants of up to \$50,000. Grants can also be used to invest in small capital projects but not to acquire land. (see Appendix D: Resources).

**Agriculture Viability Grants** awarded to municipalities in January 2008:

- Ashford – \$20,000, GIS mapping of farmland and open space
- Branford Shellfish Commission – \$26,239, Enhancement of recreational shellfishing and commercial harvesting communications
- Coventry – \$5,509, Farmers' market promotions
- Guilford – \$10,000, Identification and prioritizing of key farms and farmland and recommendations to agriculture committee
- Hamden – \$17,310, Farmers' market improvements
- Lebanon – \$38,100, Land Use Leadership Alliance meetings
- Lebanon – \$25,000, Farmland preservation resident attitude survey, an appraisal of farm preservation property, expansion of farmers' market
- Litchfield – \$21,360, Educational methods by Litchfield Hills School System of nutrition, locally grown foods
- New Milford – \$29,475, Promotion and education on benefits of eating locally grown foods to children, youth and their families
- New Haven – \$7,907, Farmers' market promotions
- Somers – \$24,100, Planning for Agriculture in Connecticut Outreach Program
- Stonington – \$16,160, GIS training for aquaculture
- Stratford – \$12,500, Feasibility study for commercial docks for shellfish and commercial fishing
- Suffield – \$18,750, Help the Farms Initiative, promote farmers' market, GIS layers in town and farmland preservation
- Thompson – \$9,500, Digitizing GIS layers, open space analysis and agricultural brochure
- Thompson – \$38,100, Land Use Leadership Alliance, promotion of innovative land use strategies
- Thompson – \$50,000, Loss of Farmland Fiscal Impact Study and Willingness to Pay Survey
- Waterbury – \$42,961, Farmers' Market on the Green promotions and enhancements.



**For a full listing of grant recipients since 2006, go to: [www.ctplanningforagriculture.com](http://www.ctplanningforagriculture.com).**

## Town Agricultural Commissions

Farmers have multiple interests in a community; they are simultaneously businesses, taxpayers, landowners and residents concerned about the economic, environmental and fiscal well-being of their community. Because their interests span the work of many town boards and commissions, it is often difficult for farmers to be substantively engaged on all the issues that potentially affect them taken up by local town officials.

As a result, several Connecticut municipalities have created a formal town commission or committee to both provide farmer input into town policies that impact local agriculture and to help develop initiatives that will keep farming in the community viable. “Agricultural commissions” are typically advisory commissions created by ordinance, with no regulatory or enforcement authority. The size and make-up of agricultural commissions have varied by town, but most have five to seven members who are farmers or are involved in a farm-related business. A commission may also include a designated slot or slots for members of other town boards with related interests, such as the planning and zoning commission, open space committee, inland wetlands commission or economic development commission. It is important that key municipal officials — a town planner, administrator, selectman or mayor, for instance — be involved in or regularly updated on the work of the commission, in order to make an effective link between an advisory body and local government.

As an alternative to a formal agricultural commission, a municipality may consider appointing an informal advisory board or group of representatives to serve as the voice of agriculture in municipal affairs. Towns with few farms or insufficient farmer interest in a formal commission may wish to consider forming a region-wide agricultural commission that could serve multiple municipalities.

Agricultural commissions can provide a valuable voice for agriculture in town affairs. While their functions may vary by town, most agricultural commissions are established to help identify issues of concern to farmers, to raise public awareness of the benefits of local farms and working lands, and to identify ways in which towns can support the business and land use needs of local farms. An agricultural commission can help to see that the needs of agriculture are considered and integrated into town policies and regulations. For example, an agricultural commission can provide input on a POCD or on zoning regulations, or identify farmland that the town may wish to help protect. A commission can facilitate the resolution of farmer-neighbor conflicts, sponsor farmers’ markets or town celebrations of agriculture, and serve as a clearinghouse for information on state and federal agricultural programs.

Agricultural commissions can also collaborate with other town boards. Good communication ensures that

*The town of North Branford established an agricultural commission in May 2007.*

*The commission provides information to various town boards and commissions, resolves conflicts between farmers and neighbors, and serves as the general voice of agriculture in town.*

*In 2006, the town of Guilford created Connecticut’s first agricultural commission, charged with supporting agriculture in Guilford through “education, regulatory guidance, and promoting the economic viability of farming.”*

*In August 2007, the commission began a review of the impact of town ordinances and regulations on local farms.*

*Based upon this review, commission members will recommend changes to those ordinances and regulations to the board of selectmen and other town boards and commissions. These recommendations will be made available to other towns.*

*The Granby Agriculture Commission, which held its first meeting in the summer of 2007, has focused efforts on the creation of a farm map to help customers locate local farms.*

*The commission is comprised of seven members who are appointed by the board of selectmen.*

*Among other roles, the commission is charged with searching out and supporting opportunities for young and new farmers.*

*In Massachusetts, there are over 100 local agricultural commissions.*

*A state “AgCom” Web site ([www.massagcom.org](http://www.massagcom.org)) features an excellent description of agricultural commissions, their role, steps for getting started and useful links to related resources.*

*The Massachusetts Department of Agricultural Resources also provides information for AgComs (<http://www.mass.gov/agr/agcom>).*

boards and commissions inform one another about their current activities. Cross-table dialogue offers the opportunity for agricultural commissions to address potential issues proactively — before problems arise. For example, agricultural commissions can:

- help town assessors understand appropriate *Public Act 490* procedures;
- provide input to planning and zoning commissions on zoning regulations and individual projects;
- collaborate with finance committees and boards of selectmen to establish town farmland protection funds;
- work with open space committees to incorporate farmland into town open space plans;
- encourage boards of selectmen or city councils to work with neighboring towns on regional agricultural projects and to engage state legislators on legislation of interest or concern to town farmers; and

- work with zoning enforcement officers, boards of selectmen or boards of health to help mediate neighbor complaints.

As agricultural commissions become more established, their members will undoubtedly find additional opportunities to work with other town boards and committees. For a new commission, making sure that town boards are aware of the commission is an important first step and suggesting joint meetings with them to discuss items of mutual concern and possibilities for working together can help pave the way for productive relationships.



## Understanding Agriculture in Your Town: Identifying Resources and Needs

Understanding local agriculture is at the core of developing effective town policies that can sustain and support farming in the community. Farms in Connecticut are diverse, and each has different business and land use needs. Communities that have an understanding of their agricultural sector are better equipped to make decisions that will support local farmers, farm businesses and farmland preservation. As many farmers manage land in multiple towns, it is also important to understand the extent to which the policies of neighboring communities are affecting local farms.

### Mapping Agricultural Resources

A valuable first step for a community is an inventory of local farms and farmland parcels to identify the quantity and quality of farmland that exists locally and how it is being used. A mix of tools, such as Geographical Information System (GIS) data, aerial photography and local tax maps and data can be used for this task.

One critical data layer for this effort is agricultural soils. The soil resources of Connecticut have been mapped statewide by USDA's NRCS and are available in digital form. Based on NRCS criteria, "prime" farmland is land that has the best combination of physical and chemical characteristics for producing crops. Farmland soils of "statewide importance" include those soils that nearly meet prime soil characteristics and can produce high yields of crops with a higher level of management. Prime and statewide important farmland may be in cropland, pasture, hay, forest or other land but not urban built-up land or water. A statewide map displaying concentrations of prime and statewide important farmland soils is shown on the back cover of this guide.

A town can also choose to identify "locally important" farmland soils. This can be done in consultation with

the NRCS. In general, "locally important soils" have slightly more limitations for agriculture, such as surface stones, but may nonetheless be vital to farm operations. Recognizing the value of local soil resources can help communities plan for the needs of agriculture and may identify land containing these soils as eligible for the federal Farmland Protection Program (see Case Study: Town of Lebanon, page 16).

Another important data layer to include is the occurrence of agricultural soils and other important natural resources. For example, farmland may also be in a public water supply watershed, provide critical wildlife habitat or wildlife corridor, or contain flood plain that helps reduce flooding elsewhere in town. Planning for the protection of multiple resources and understanding their interconnectedness can help engage additional stakeholders and provide sources of funding and support for agricultural planning that meets multiple community objectives. The online Community Resource Inventory provided by the University of Connecticut's Nonpoint Education for Municipal Officials (NEMO) program can help identify these other resources. The Web site (available at: <http://nemo.uconn.edu/tools/cri>) allows local officials to develop an inventory of the natural and cultural resources in their community and includes a map of prime and statewide important farmland soils.

*In July 2006, the city of Middletown was awarded an Agriculture Viability Grant to "develop a plan for farmland and open space preservation."*

*To focus town resources and facilitate applications to state and federal farmland protection programs, the town hired a consultant to develop an inventory of farmland and help establish priorities for farmland and open space protection.*

*Town officials have hosted workshops to discuss the inventory process and proposed prioritization with local farmers.*

*A report based upon the inventory and feedback from farmers will focus on best methods to preserve farming and farmland.*

*As part of the town of Woodstock's 2002 Plan of Conservation and Development Update, the conservation commission mapped the town's critical cultural, natural and agricultural resources. Several maps depicted the importance of agriculture to the community, including: land in agricultural use, land use, land cover, productive forest soils, important agricultural lands, important farm soils and major viewsheds.*

## Identifying Issues and Concerns

Another basic step in planning for agriculture is to understand the needs and concerns of local farmers. While a town agricultural commission can provide valuable input, effort should be made to gain the input of all residents who farm on a full- or part-time basis. This can be done through a town survey or through forums or listening sessions with local farmers. It is very helpful for town officials to understand what farmers see as the challenges, needs and opportunities they face in both the short and long run. Do they or another member of their family plan to be farming in 10 years? Are they considering expanding or changing their farm business? How many different parcels of land do they farm? How far do they have to travel to these parcels? Are they looking for additional land to own or rent? What are the biggest challenges they face, and how can the town help address them?

In developing a survey or setting up a listening session, remember that getting farmer involvement can be challenging during certain times of year. Winter is often the best time to engage farmers; planting and harvest seasons (spring and fall) the worst. Advance feedback from one or two key farm leaders on meeting logistics and agendas can help ensure that events are well attended and most effective.

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***In 2006 the agricultural commission in Carver, Massachusetts, hired First Pioneer Farm Credit to assess the economic importance of agriculture to the town. First Pioneer mailed a survey to town farmers and farmland owners. Questions covered land protection status, age of the farm owner or operator, future business plans and concerns that could impact long-term viability. The survey found that 50 percent of local farmers do not have a farm successor and do not expect to remain in business for more than 20 years. Forty-nine percent of respondents plan to expand or diversify their farm operation. These results have informed the work of the agricultural commission, which now includes farm succession training and promotion of value added and retail opportunities.***<sup>16</sup>  
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In identifying local issues and concerns, it is important to identify the priorities of non-farm residents. A survey may be a useful tool for this task as well. Residents might be asked to rate how much they value farms, to indicate what they believe farms contribute to the character of their community and how much they might be willing to pay to protect and support local farms. A survey may also be used to gauge potential interest in a farmers' market and/or other opportunities to connect consumers with local producers.

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***Surveys conducted by the University of Connecticut demonstrate a strong willingness to pay for farmland protection in local communities. For example, the community of Woodstock would be willing to pay over \$9,000 per acre to purchase an easement on dairy farmland that was at "high risk" for development.***<sup>17</sup>  
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***In 2003 the Quinebaug-Shetucket Heritage Corridor commissioned the University of Connecticut to conduct a survey of the region's residents to measure their opinions of locally grown food. Connecticut residents (78 percent) responded that knowing fresh fruits or vegetables were grown locally would make them more likely to purchase the produce. On average, residents consider locally grown food to be not only healthy (76 percent), but also fresher (88 percent) than non-locally grown or produced foods.***<sup>18</sup>  
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## Review of Current Policies and Regulations

The local regulatory environment can influence a variety of aspects of agricultural operations, including land use practices, farm retail and marketing options, and property tax burdens. A town agricultural commission or advisory group can work with other relevant town committees to review and recommend changes and updates to a town's POCD, planning and zoning regulations, subdivision regulations, tax reduction programs and other policies that impact agriculture. For specific policy suggestions and town regulations to be reviewed, see Sections 4 and 5.



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## Converting Information to Action Steps

Converting the information gathered from the above steps into recommendations and actions is a logical task for a town agricultural commission or, for those towns with no agricultural commission, for a subgroup of an existing board or a specially designated advisory group. In developing next steps, town officials can look to a number of resources for additional help and expertise. These include the University of Connecticut Cooperative Extension, NRCS, Grange and Farm Bureau boards, land trusts and other organizations (see Appendix D: Resources).

It is important to include other local stakeholders in this process as well. Town staff and members of local

boards that have jurisdiction over issues that affect farming and farmland — such as the planning department, zoning and wetlands enforcement, inland wetlands commission, conservation commission, planning and zoning commission, town assessors, the economic development commission and others — should be consulted and involved. Ensuring a transparent process and access to information to the entire community fosters buy-in from residents, farmers, local officials and other stakeholders.

<sup>16</sup> Rick Hermonot and Jon Jaffe, *First Pioneer Farm Credit, ACA, Report on the Economic Impact of Agriculture on the Town of Carver, Massachusetts, March 2006.*

<sup>17</sup> Robert Johnston, *University of Connecticut, and Joshua Duke, University of Delaware, The Value of Farm and Forest Preservation in Connecticut, 2007 and What is Our Willingness to Pay for Open Space Protection? Results and Implications from a Study of Four Connecticut Communities, 2007, available online at: [http://easternrncd-ct.org/pdf/RobertJohnston\\_Presentation.pdf](http://easternrncd-ct.org/pdf/RobertJohnston_Presentation.pdf).*

<sup>18</sup> *Center for Survey Research & Analysis, Locally Grown: An Agricultural Survey of Connecticut and Massachusetts Residents, 2003, available online at: [http://www.workinglandalliance.org/OtherDocs/Q\\_Slocallygrown.pdf](http://www.workinglandalliance.org/OtherDocs/Q_Slocallygrown.pdf).*

## CASE STUDY: TOWN OF LEBANON — TAKING A PRO-ACTIVE APPROACH

Lebanon is one of the largest farming communities in the Connecticut. The town has the greatest amount of active farmland — approximately 10,000 acres — and the only actively farmed town green in the state. Yet town officials are increasingly aware that without additional planning and public support, agriculture in Lebanon may become a thing of the past.

In the past two years, Lebanon has developed an aggressive and systematic approach to farmland preservation and supporting farming locally. This approach has been spearheaded by a first selectman, a town planner devoted to farmland preservation, and the town's conservation commission, which functions as the town's agricultural commission.

In 2006, Lebanon created a system to evaluate and prioritize potential farmland preservation projects. Parcel size, percentage of prime soils, development pressures and view from town roads are some of the variables considered in the rating system that will guide the expenditures of local farmland protection funds. In 2007, the town became the first in Connecticut to officially recognize and designate locally important soils, which has increased the number of acres eligible in Lebanon for the federal Farmland Protection Program.

In January 2007, the town held a "Land Preservation Options Conference" with more than 100 landowners, conservation groups and public officials in atten-

dance. In addition, a follow-up session was held with property owners to discuss conservation tax benefits. The town planner's office has also mailed information to landowners about conservation tax benefits and other farmland preservation information. Through these efforts, several property owners have chosen to place conservation easements on their land and hundreds of additional acres are being preserved.

Lebanon is also focusing on the economic viability of local farmers. In 2006, using a \$50,000 grant awarded through the Department of Agriculture's Agricultural Viability Program, the town started a farmers' market, posted signs at the entrance to town that show support for farms and added information about local farms to the town Web site. The town also mailed brochures to town residents explaining the fiscal benefits of farmland and other open space.

To quantify the value of its local farms, Lebanon worked with the Green Valley Institute to conduct a COCS study based on its 2007 budget. The study showed that residential development is not likely to lower taxes, as residential properties require \$1.12 in community services for every dollar paid in local taxes, while farmland and other open space require only \$0.17 per dollar of taxes paid.

The most recent actions taken by the town in support of agriculture include enactment of a subdivision moratorium and an annual appropriation for farmland preservation. Beginning in 2007, Lebanon set aside \$100,000 annually in its town budget for farmland preservation activities. The moratorium will allow the planning and zoning commission time to revise zoning and subdivision regulations to preserve Lebanon's agricultural heritage.



Lebanon First Selectman Joyce Okonuk

