

SECTION 6 PROMOTING LOCAL FARM VIABILITY

Towns can play an important role in increasing the visibility and improving the viability of local farms. Towns are establishing festivals to showcase local farm products, providing space for farmers' markets, working with schools to bring local foods into their cafeterias and developing local farm product guides. Such steps illustrate support for local farms, educate community members and support the economic viability of farms.

Municipalities can also do more through agricultural economic development. Although towns may appreciate the economic activity of local agriculture, farmers generally have been on their own to seek state or federal assistance for diversification, marketing, business planning and infrastructure needs. Yet, like other small businesses, farm businesses need local officials to understand their business needs, to help seek opportunities for product and market development, and to be advocates on their behalf with state and federal officials.

Be a Farm-Friendly Town Government

Towns can incorporate agriculture into their town identity in a number of ways. Below are several suggestions, any of which may help a municipality attract new farmers and retain their current farm businesses and the land they steward.

Include Farmers in Decision-Making

Involving farmers in local decision-making helps ensure their varied interests are understood. Consider forming an agricultural commission or advisory board to serve as the local voice of agriculture (see page 13). Recruit farmers for other local boards and commissions, including the economic development commission. If an agricultural commission or advisory board exists, encourage that board to work closely with other town boards to develop common goals.

Conduct Outreach to Farmers about Tax Exemptions, Conservation Options and Regulations


Towns can reach out to farmers in a number of ways. Consider conducting a survey of local farms to better understand their business and land use needs and

concerns. Provide farmers information about local tax exemptions or land conservation opportunities. Seek input from the agriculture community about proposed changes in zoning regulations or new ordinances that might impact their farm operations. Collaborate with state agencies such as the Connecticut Department of Agriculture or nonprofit organizations such as the Connecticut Farm Bureau Association to hold workshops on topics important to local farms.

Help Residents Understand Agriculture

Towns can make use of a number of different communication media to help educate residents about local farms. Brochures can inform residents about a local right-to-farm ordinance, what they can expect from living close to farms, about the value of buying local products from local farms, and the need to exercise patience when farmers take their tractors onto roads. A town Web site



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The town of Lebanon held a Land Preservation Options Conference in January 2007 as part of its effort to work with landowners to preserve farmland. Representatives from several organizations such as Connecticut Farmland Trust, the Connecticut Farmland Preservation Program and the NRCS attended the conference. Town officials continued their outreach by mailing letters to explain tax incentives associated with farmland preservation and agricultural businesses.
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can include links to local farm businesses or information about farming activities. A local historical society or school project could develop a program about a town's agricultural history to air on a local cable channel.

In 2007, the town of New Milford created a brochure that describes the community's agricultural heritage, the importance of farmland, strategies to protect agricultural land, steps that residents can take to support farms and a proposed Farmland Preservation Fund.

The town of Lebanon has created a "Featured Farm" section on its town Web site to highlight agriculture in the community.

Lease Town-Owned Farmland to Farmers

For towns that own farmland, consider the long-term lease of that land to a farmer. Access to land is particularly important for beginning farmers who are crucial to the continuance of a local agricultural identity. Towns might also consider providing creative incentives and assistance in locating grant and loan opportunities for emerging farm enterprises on town-owned land (see "Encourage Agricultural Use of Town-Owned Farmland" on page 39).

The town of Granby has owned Holcomb Farm – a CSA, Nature Center and Arts Center – since 1990. A nonprofit organization was created to run the farm, including the CSA that grows produce on 27 acres for members who pick-up the fresh food each week during the growing season.

Encourage 'Buy Local' Opportunities

Farmers' Markets

Farmers' markets provide a place for farmers and other members of the community to connect and remind residents that great food and agricultural products are grown in their town. Farmers' markets are a valuable outlet for farm products since direct retail offers higher returns than wholesale marketing. Towns can play an instrumental role in the success of a local farmers' market. Although not every town can or should hold a farmers' market, those communities with the appropriate setting, such as a town green, along with willing farmers and a strong customer base can be a recipe for a successful farmers' market.



Jennifer McTiernan of CitySeed with Chef Jacques Pépin.

How a town can help grow a farmers' market:

- Offer a free, centrally located space to host the market.
- Facilitate connections between markets, local businesses and development groups
- Collaborate with or use town resources to hire market managers to create a long-term vision for the market
- Avoid moving the market over temporary concerns
- Coordinate decision-making regarding the market between town boards and commissions in order to avoid conflicting instructions to the market
- Invest in marketing and signage to advertise the market during the season
- Work with the local board of health to adopt reasonable standards on the sale of value-added farm products
- Facilitate a relationship between the market and local police
- Ensure that nearby street lights work so the market is well-lit later in the season
- Require reasonable insurance policies
- Invest in farmers' market facilities or provide space for a farmers' market in a location where other businesses also can benefit.

The town of Coventry has played an important role in supporting the Coventry Regional Market, which holds various events to celebrate agriculture each week such as a "Garlic and Herb Festival" and "Old Fashioned Corn Roast & Contra Dance." Initially the town helped secure a location and provided seed money, and the town continues to cover the market's insurance and offer other support. With more than 4,000 patrons each week, the market has outgrown its location and is now held at the Hale Homestead in Coventry.

The town of Hamden received an Agriculture Viability grant from the Connecticut Department of Agriculture to start a new farmers' market in the summer of 2007; grant funds were used for infrastructure improvements – paving and landscaping – as well as marketing. The market operates on Friday afternoons in conjunction with the town's Summer Concert Series.

Farm-to-Institution

Schools, hospitals, nursing homes and other institutions are major food buyers. Encouraging them to increase their purchases of locally grown food products can help support the health of residents and the local agricultural economy. Although school and hospital administrators face a variety of regulatory hurdles in order to switch to local farms for products, town officials can facilitate discussions and encourage stakeholders to work toward these goals. Town officials can also publicly recognize and applaud institutional administrators that are successful in this endeavor. Towns can encourage ‘buy local’ principles as they set their own bidding and purchasing procedures for food service programs under their administration.

Currently more than 65 school districts regularly purchase produce from local farms for use in school lunches. Towns that want to start a Farm-to-School program in their school district can get assistance from the Connecticut Department of Agriculture, which can help link school systems with local farmers and has promotional materials for farm to school programs (see Appendix D: Resources).

Bloomfield public school district purchases apples, squash, corn, potatoes and broccoli as well as other fruits and vegetables from four local farms.

Public schools in South Windsor purchase produce including strawberries, green beans and asparagus from six different Connecticut farms.

Glastonbury public schools purchase apples, plums, pears and peaches from a local orchard in addition to assorted vegetables from a local farm.

The Connecticut Department of Agriculture’s Farm-to-Chef Program assists restaurants and institutions — such as hospitals, corporate dining facilities, colleges and universities — in finding sources of Connecticut grown products. The program also provides educational workshops, newsletters and networking opportunities.

Over 235 culinary professionals and 95 producers and providers in Connecticut currently receive information and assistance through the Farm-to-Chef Program.

New Milford Hospital and Lawrence & Memorial Hospital, both part of the Farm-to-Chef Program, have made a commitment to serving local and sustainable food by signing Healthcare Without Harm’s Healthy Food Pledge.

Firebox Restaurant in Hartford worked with the Farm-to-Chef Program to help line up sources of local product prior to its opening in 2007. The restaurant remains an active member of the program and prominently features supplying farms on its menu.

Highlight Local Farm Products and Destinations

Local product guides are an increasingly popular way to highlight local farms and food products. Brochures often include maps identifying farm stands, pick-your-own farms, farmers’ markets and other retail opportunities, along with their hours of operation and available products. The same type of information can also be placed on a town Web site to reach an additional audience. Developing a local product guide may be a good project for a town agricultural commission or advisory board. This same information could be broadcast on local TV to reach additional audiences and promote farms.

The town of Woodstock’s Web page has a “Woodstock Grown” section that lists farms in town, the products they sell and their contact information.

“A Guide Map to Agriculture in the Last Green Valley” displays farms, farm museums, farmers’ markets and other agricultural destinations in the 26 Connecticut towns that comprise this region.

Celebrate Agriculture

Festivals and Fairs

Festivals and fairs are a great way for communities to celebrate local agriculture. Some fairs may feature agricultural exhibits, displays, demonstrations, and parades. Other festivals may highlight one local product, such as a strawberry festival in June or a cider festival in the fall. Towns can host fairs and festivals or provide financial or logistical support to nonprofit organizations that do so. In addition, several annual agricultural events are held in

Several towns and venues host one-day open-air market events that feature local farm products alongside local artisans. These include the Wadsworth Mansion in Middletown and the Florence Griswold Museum in Old Lyme.

venues around the state, including the *Connecticut Tour des Farms* (organized by Eastern Connecticut and King’s Mark Resource Conservation and Development Councils), *Dinners at the Farm* (organized by River Tavern and Feast Market) and the *Celebration of Connecticut Farms* (organized by Connecticut Farmland Trust). Community officials may wish to work with event sponsors to bring these events to their town.

Celebrating Agriculture is an annual event held in Woodstock that was developed to promote community education and participation in agriculture, as well as the sale of local farm products in the Quinebaug Shetucket Heritage Corridor. The event features agricultural displays, food and entertainment.

The town of Suffield incorporated agriculture into its annual “Suffield on the Green” celebration by adding a farmers’ market to the other town groups already represented, including the police and fire departments, local schools and boy scouts.

The 2007, Celebration of Connecticut Farms was held at Belltown Hill Orchards in South Glastonbury and featured local food, wine, celebrity chefs and more. Visit www.ctfarmland.org for more information.

In 2007, the 5th annual Connecticut Tour des Farms hosted two rides: one through the orchards of South Glastonbury and one through the diverse farms of Guilford. Go to www.tourdesfarms.org for more information.

Ten Dinners at the Farm took place around the state in the summer of 2007 – unique dinners featuring local farm products. Go to www.dinnersatthefarm.com for more information.

Recognition Awards

Local officials can offer recognition awards to farmers or to community members who actively support local agriculture. Consider awarding a “Farmer of the Year” or “Farmer Appreciation Awards” at events to highlight agriculture.

Agriculture and the Classroom

The connection between farms and schools can go beyond the farm-to-school lunch program. Agricultural commissions can reach out to younger residents of town by organizing school field trips to local farms. Teachers can work with local farmers or the agricultural commission to develop projects around a school garden, locally grown farm

The Bloomfield Schools Farm-to-School Program is a unique collaboration between three departments of the public school system. Agriscience students start vegetable seedlings in their on-site greenhouse and eventually move the plants outside into their 20 raised beds. Chefs from the Food Services Department harvest the vegetables for use in school lunches. Culinary Arts Students also harvest the vegetables to use in their classes.

products or a town’s agricultural heritage. Local officials seeking more information should contact Connecticut Agriculture in the Classroom (see Appendix D: Resources).

CASE STUDY: TOWN OF MADISON — PARTNER TO FARMERS

In addition to monitoring and regulating the town’s aquaculture farmers, Madison’s shellfish commission has gone beyond this role to partner with local farmers. The town leases the rights to fish certain town waters and is working to expand shellfish areas and restore old beds by reseeded. Recently 20,000 clam seedlings were placed in a protected growing area in coastal waters; these will likely be released into the wild in the fall of 2008.

In 2006, the commission was awarded a \$22,300 Agriculture Viability Grant from the Connecticut Department of Agriculture to re-establish the town’s oyster beds described above. Funds are being used to develop a shellfish grow-out facility at the town dock to raise clams and oysters. Commercial fisherman and aquaculturalists have contributed a portion of the towns’ match for the grant by putting a bulkhead at the dock to protect the new facility. Oyster seed, a hand-held GPS system, and salinity and water temperature testers will also be purchased with the grant to ensure the shellfish are raised in an appropriate environment.

After 10 years, hard shell clams (quahogs) are only 80 percent grown and can live for 50 years. Therefore the steps taken today by the shellfish commission are helping to ensure that local aquaculturalists will continue to have a viable industry for years to come.



