

Working Landscape Strategies

Prepared by American Farmland Trust

GOAL #1: Maintain large blocks of productive land to support a strong future for farming in Saratoga County.

OBJECTIVE: By 2026, at least 95,000 acres of land in Saratoga County will be enrolled in NYS-certified Agricultural Districts.

OBJECTIVE: By 2026, at least 45,000 acres of productive farmland in four core farm areas will be used for agricultural purposes.

GOAL #2: Support the permanent protection of locally important farms.

OBJECTIVE: By 2026, at least 20,000 acres of farmland will be protected from non-farm development.

Recommendation #1: Establish a Saratoga County Farmland Protection Program as a separate component of the county's Farmland and Open Space Preservation Program. The new program's standards would reflect the unique characteristics of Saratoga County's farmers and farmland and help stabilize and permanently protect land for farming. The new program would have 3 Distinct Components:

1. Permanent Farmland Protection Option – This option is most similar to Saratoga County's existing grants program with the following suggested changes:
 - Remove the current \$100,000 per application funding cap for permanent farmland protection projects. Higher funding levels would better accommodate rising real estate prices and allow for targeting funds to fewer projects that have a greater likelihood of success.
 - Provide a greater percentage of the total project costs for farmland protection projects.
 - Landowners should have to demonstrate a willingness to complete a project with only previously committed funds plus a county award prior to submitting an application.
2. Farmland Entrepreneurship Option –Participants would be offered small grants (between \$25,000 and \$50,000) for the implementation of completed, approved business plans. As a condition of accepting the award, applicants would sign a 10-year deed restriction that prevented non-farm development. This program would encourage new or expanding farm businesses while stabilizing farmland.

Case Study: Massachusetts Farm Viability Enhancement Program

The Farm Viability Enhancement Program awards grants to farmers for implementation of business plans. Funded projects have included: construction of new farm stands to market products, addition of new barns and farm worker housing, and purchase of new equipment. Grants are associated with deed restrictions, preventing the development of farm property for non-farm use for 5 or 10-year periods. Since its inception, 246 farms have received grants to implement business plans, placing 23,430 acres under protective covenant – an average of \$391 per acre.

3. **Farmland Affordability Option** – This option would be a partnership between Saratoga County and municipalities that offered property tax reductions for farmland owners willing to commit to not developing their land for at least 10 years. Interested municipalities would be responsible for managing enrollment, calculating assessment changes and enforcing the deed restrictions, while Saratoga County could annually reimburse municipalities for a portion of the decrease in local tax revenue.

Case Study: Clifton Park, NY

A 1996 “Conservation Easement Law” allows an owner of historic buildings or landowners with a minimum of 15 acres per lot to apply for property tax abatement. In exchange for a 15 to 25 year commitment not to develop the property, the town reduces the property tax assessments of the participating landowners by 80 to 90 percent. As of 2006, 65 parcels representing 2,488 acres were enrolled in the term easement program, reducing the total town tax roll by an estimated 0.0028%.

Recommendation #2: Create a more effective system for leveraging state, federal and private farmland protection funds. Specifically, Saratoga County should consider:

1. Developing a more pro-active approach to cultivating strong applications for state and federal funding. This could include hosting annual county workshops for farmers and landowners about farmland conservation options, town-based meetings for farmers and municipal officials and meetings with priority landowners. Coordination between Saratoga County’s Planning Department, Cornell Cooperative Extension, municipal officials and private partners is needed to undertake such efforts.
2. Expanding technical assistance to towns in completing funded farmland protection projects. Municipalities need assistance in completing these complex farmland conservation projects and navigating state and federal grant programs in a timely fashion. Technical expertise is needed to facilitate communication between municipal representatives, landowners and appropriate state or federal representatives.

Recommendation #3: Maintain strong support for New York State-certified Agricultural Districts and the Right to Farm Protections they provide to local farmers.

1. Encourage the extension of Agricultural Districts throughout Core Farm Areas.
2. Use Agricultural District renewal process as an opportunity to reach out to participating municipalities to provide timely information about farm trends and encourage local discussions about agriculture. County Planning Department and Cornell Cooperative Extension should consider working with municipalities to hold an Agricultural District tour for local officials as part of the renewal process.

Recommendation#4: Work with municipalities to incorporate the unique business and land use needs of farms into their local planning. County Planning Department, Cornell Cooperative Extension and Soil and Water Conservation District staff should work with municipal officials to understand farmers' needs and how to address them through local planning. Such efforts could include the organization of workshops, conferences, farm tours and other trainings for local officials as well as the provision of technical assistance regarding town-specific plans or issues.

Case Study: Planning a Future for Farms in Rensselaer, Saratoga and Washington Counties

In March 2006, partners from Rensselaer, Saratoga and Washington County joined together to host a 1-day conference entitled "Planning a Future for Farms in Rensselaer, Saratoga and Washington Counties". Over 25 speakers from across New York State shared ideas about tools available to communities to plan a future for agriculture on a local level. Approximately 170 people attended from the tri-county region - ranging from town supervisors and local planning board members to farmers and rural landowners - all returning excellent reviews.