

# **Erie County Agricultural and Farmland Protection Plan**

Prepared by the Erie County  
Agricultural and Farmland Protection Board

with assistance from:



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Photographs taken by Diane Held

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## Executive Summary

Too often the production of our food is taken for granted – a process that happens somewhere, somehow, by someone. But food is essential to our very survival. In Erie County we are fortunate to have diverse, productive, vital farms near a sizable population. We have prime soils, a climate moderated by a large body of water, farmers with years of experience, as well as new farmers eager to take on the challenge of growing food. And in recent years, an emerging interest in local farms and local foods has boosted agriculture’s visibility as an economic driver creating new opportunities for farmers both in rural and urban areas of the County. As we look ahead to a rapidly increasing world population with limited additional arable land, we can be grateful for the resources we have in our backyard. And we can take seriously our responsibility to use, care for, and protect those resources to the best of our collective abilities.

In 2010 Erie County embarked on a process to develop a new Agricultural and Farmland Protection Plan to guide County efforts to support farms and protect farmland. The State of New York, Department of Agriculture and Markets provided key funding for the project, and the Erie County Department of Environment and Planning led the local effort to gather and assess public input with guidance from the Erie County Agricultural and Farmland Protection Board. American Farmland Trust assisted by Agricultural and Community Development Services, and Stuart I. Brown Associates were the hired consultants facilitating the public process, developing maps, assembling information, and compiling the written Plan.

The result of this almost two year process is an Agricultural and Farmland Protection Plan intended to direct Erie County’s agricultural planning for the next decade. The Plan provides a picture of agriculture as it is today, outlining the loss of farmland over the last few decades. There were substantial opportunities for public input as the Plan was developed – in total eight public meetings were offered, and recommended actions from the Plan, and later the entire Plan, were viewable on the County website.

Public support for agriculture and for the planning process was very positive. While agriculture has many challenges – and during this 20 month planning timeframe county farms experienced very damaging frosts and a significant drought - farmers and consumers alike see opportunities in Erie County to improve farm profitability and connect farms with the consuming public by addressing interest in local farms and local food.

Included in the Plan are:

- an analysis of agriculture and development pressure in the County,
- summaries of the various public meetings and individual interviews that were conducted as part of the process,
- summaries of other planning documents specific to agriculture that are currently being used in the County,
- information about the “tools” in the “toolbox” that Erie County does and can use to support farms and protect farmland,
- and a set of strategies with goals and recommended actions for implementation.

Erie County lost substantial farmland since the early 1970s when the population of the county peaked. Sprawling development pushed out from the City of Buffalo first into the inner ring suburbs, and in the past decade or two, into the second ring suburbs. Agriculture continues to be a significant contributor to the County economy providing \$117 million in agricultural sales in 2007, but much of the farmland is now located in an outer ring of land adjacent to neighboring agricultural counties: Niagara, Genesee, Wyoming, Cattaraugus, and Chautauqua.

The 8 public meetings held throughout the planning process and 21 interviews of farmers, agribusiness owners, and economic development staff elicited input about the strengths, opportunities, weaknesses, and threats to agriculture in the County. While there were challenges to farm viability shared during this process, the defining tone was one of opportunity – opportunities to strengthen agricultural markets, to bring new consumers to local agriculture, to improve agricultural land use planning, to encourage a next generation to farm and to work on farms.

The Erie Niagara Framework for Regional Growth, and municipal Agricultural and Farmland Protection Plans for the Towns of Brant, Evans, and North Collins jointly, and Eden and Clarence separately, build on each other and share many common goals and recommendations including using a variety of tools to slow conversion of farmland to other uses, and to improve farm profitability. Planning **for** agriculture in the County is happening in some areas. The County Plan supports these current town Plans, and provides opportunities to support other towns in Erie County. A study done by University of Buffalo, Department of Urban and Regional Planning students, *Room at the Table*, informed food system discussions during development of the Plan. Eight maps produced as part of the planning process will be used to guide agricultural planning efforts by the Department of Environment and Planning including upcoming phases of the Erie Niagara Framework for Regional Growth.

In addition to these formal agricultural plans, other efforts to protect farmland and support farms have occurred throughout the County. Over 3,000 acres of farmland in the County is permanently protected with agricultural conservation easements, allowing farming but no development on the land. A few towns also offer term easements that reduce property taxes in exchange for a term conservation easement to limit development on the land. Erie County has the 10<sup>th</sup> highest number of acres in state-certified, county-approved agricultural districts among the state's 50 counties – no small feat for an urban county. And 23 of the 25 towns in the county adopted Right to Farm Laws. Lastly, a group of southtowns municipalities established an agritourism trail that is continuing to expand and develop.

Focusing on agricultural economic development holds significant promise for Erie County farms, particularly with regard to direct marketing opportunities. While efforts have been small and dispersed throughout the county, opportunities abound to improve farm viability and profitability with coordinated economic development efforts. Direct marketing of local farm products to City of Buffalo and suburban consumers is growing but untapped markets exist.

The final section of the Plan outlines two main strategies with specific goals and actions for implementation. This is the culmination of the planning process designed to address agriculture's challenges and opportunities as documented through the public process. The Erie

County Agricultural and Farmland Protection Board, with guidance from the Department of Environment and Planning, reviewed public input and drafted the strategies, goals, and actions. The final step will be implementing the actions documented here. A general timeline for addressing various actions is incorporated into this section.

**Strategy I: Keep land in agricultural production by protecting farmland, helping a new generation to farm, and improving the viability of all farms in the County.**

**Goal A:** Retain 95% of the 149,356 acres in the county in agricultural production as reported by the 2007 USDA Census of Agriculture.

**Priority Action** to protect farmland and stabilize the land base:

- Determine the feasibility of developing an Erie County purchase of development rights program.

*Support Actions* to protect farmland and stabilize the land base:

- Support the state-certified agricultural district program with right-to-farm provisions.
- Collect agricultural assessment data by town in order to inform agricultural planning efforts.
- Assist towns that wish to adopt term and/or permanent easement programs.
- Develop a ditch maintenance program which supports preservation of prime agricultural land.

**Goal B:** Retain 95% of the 1215 farms in the county as reported by the USDA 2007 Census of Agriculture. (Note: The Census of Agriculture defines a farm as producing and selling \$1,000 of agricultural products in a year.)

**Priority Action** to help a next generation to become established on new and existing farms through training programs, promotion, education, and incentives.

- Determine the feasibility of developing a community college agricultural training program for workforce development.

*Support Actions* to help a next generation become established on new and existing farms through training programs, promotion, education, and incentives:

- Research and develop programs that will help to build an educated and trained workforce for local farms by:
  - encouraging BOCES to include agricultural workforce training;
  - developing a formal county apprenticeship and internship program;
  - researching the institution of a farm workforce development program that could benefit new immigrant populations and farms;
  - supporting all youth agriculture programs;
  - and, encouraging agriculture programs in city, suburban, and rural school districts.
- Urban agriculture:  
Support Buffalo's Green Code zoning update in order to expand urban farming opportunities.

- New farmers:
  - Determine the feasibility of developing a property tax abatement program for new farmers.
  - Promote western New York as a place to farm.
  - Promote existing training programs that are targeted to small and beginning farmers.

**Goal C:** Establish five new agricultural programs (from the list below or others) that can improve the viability of farms in Erie County.

**Priority Action** to improve farm viability and increase investment in agricultural economic development projects.

- Incorporate agritourism into countywide tourism efforts.

*Support Actions* to improve farm viability and increase investment in agricultural economic development projects:

- Establish a shovel-ready Agribusiness Park in the county to attract food and agricultural processing businesses.
- Capital:
  - Create an IDA Agricultural Specialist position.
- Aggregation and Distribution:
  - Research the feasibility of creating a food hub in the region for farm product aggregation and distribution.
  - Identify a coordinating agency (Erie County IDA, Buffalo Niagara Partnership) to issue a request for proposals to provide aggregation and distribution services.
  - Research development of an innovation center for the western New York region
- Marketing:
  - Develop a county program to help farmers market their agricultural products and to assist with identifying new market opportunities.
  - Develop a regional agricultural brand.

**Strategy II** **Inform the public, local leaders, and elected officials about the benefits that agriculture provides and support policy and legislative changes that will improve farm viability.**

**Goal A:** Fifty percent of the towns in Erie County will document the importance of agriculture to the local community either in their comprehensive plan or through other local planning efforts.

**Priority Actions** to educate local leaders and elected officials about the benefits that farms provide to local economies and to the quality of life of county residents:

- Erie County will calculate the value of agriculture to the local and regional economy as part of a complete economic analysis of agriculture and its multiplier effects.



- Erie County Dept. of Environment and Planning will offer regular trainings for local leaders and volunteers.

*Support Actions* to educate local leaders and elected officials about the benefits that farms provide to local economies and to the quality of life of county residents

- Periodically host farm tours for local officials and leaders.
- Encourage towns to use Memorandums of Understanding (MOUs)

Goal B: Twenty percent of food products purchased by county institutions will come from local and regional farmers.

**Priority Action** to support policies that will help farms to provide affordable, local food to county residents:

- Develop a county Food Policy Council that includes a formal role for the Agriculture and Farmland Protection Board.

*Support Actions* to support policies that will help farms to provide affordable, local food to county residents:

- Work with the Food Policy Council to develop a local food procurement policy for county institutions. Promote local food purchasing by schools.
- Promote farmers markets in the city and county to attract more people to existing markets.

Goal C: Establish an annual county-wide, agricultural event.

**Priority Action** to educate and inform the public about farms and food production:

- Celebrate Erie County farms with a county-wide agricultural event for the general public.

*Support Actions* to educate and inform the public about farms and food production:

- Work with the Erie County Agricultural Society to promote the Farm2Table school program.
- Provide support for Erie County Farm Bureau's efforts to encourage Agriculture in the Classroom

Goal D: Implement at least four new public policies, or support ongoing policies, that protect farmland and support the viability of farms in Erie County.

**Priority Action** to support partner agricultural organizations, such as Farm Bureau, American Farmland Trust, and others, with advocacy efforts that focus on:

- Adequate county funding for Cornell Cooperative Extension and the Soil and Water Conservation District

*Support Actions* to support partner agricultural organizations, such as Farm Bureau, American Farmland Trust, and others, with advocacy efforts that focus on:

- Increasing the penalty for termination of agricultural assessment.
- Regional planning, especially between Erie and Niagara Counties.

- Identifying, drafting when appropriate, and advocating for county, state, and federal agricultural policy and legislative changes.

***Priority Actions:*** General

- At five year intervals, formally review progress in implementing the Agricultural and Farmland Protection Plan.
- Develop an interactive, web based application of the Erie County Agricultural and Farmland Protection Plan.

DRAFT

# Introduction

In 2010, the New York State Department of Agriculture and Markets awarded an agricultural planning grant to Erie County. Led by the county Department of Environment and Planning and the county Agricultural and Farmland Protection Board, this public process resulted in a new Agricultural and Farmland Protection Plan to guide county planning in the next decade. This document provides a snapshot of agriculture in 2012, and identifies actions for the county and others to act upon in order to protect farmland, support the viability of farms, and boost economic development.

Erie County's first Agricultural and Farmland Protection Plan (AFPP) was developed in 1996. While much in the world has changed in the past 16 years, there is also plenty that has stayed the same. Consider a sample of the topics of concern and interest that were generated by the county Agricultural and Farmland Protection Board over 16 years ago:

- *The decreasing farmer share of the consumer food dollar due to:*
  - *consumer expectation of low food prices,*
  - *disproportionate marketing, packaging, and middleman cuts,*
  - *off-season and outside market competition.*
- *Local marketing problems:*
  - *lack of specific markets and outlets,*
  - *dated brokering system,*
  - *lack of maintenance of food terminal in the City of Buffalo,*
  - *mixed messages from major grocer operations.*
- *Local farm trends:*
  - *aging farm population,*
  - *increasing education levels required for success,*
  - *shortage of workers with farm experience, lifestyle competitions.*
- *Temptations and pressure exerted on farmers and agricultural landowners from unsolicited speculators, developers, and realtors interested in purchasing farms and farm parcels.*
- *Environmental regulatory pressures will continue to increase in the foreseeable future; compliance costs are high and financial assistance for environmental compliance is scarce.*
- *Federal and state labor laws are greatly increasing hired labor costs; compliance is complicated and time consuming.*
- *There are a number of municipal ordinances which are counterproductive to right-to-farm laws and agricultural activities in the County. A number of these ordinances list agriculture as a permitted use with a host of other developments within the same zoning district.*

Excerpt from *Farms for the Future*

Many of these issues are mentioned today when local farmers are asked to identify areas of need for agriculture. But there has been progress.

Beginning in 1998 and continuing today, the Towns of Marilla, Amherst, Elma, and Clarence partnered with the Western New York Land Conservancy to permanently protect over 3,000 acres of farmland by placing agricultural conservation easements on the land to keep it available in perpetuity for farming. In 1999, Erie County passed a Right-to-Farm Law <http://www2.erie.gov/law/index.php?q=erie-county-right-farm-law>, and later, the county Farm Bureau undertook an effort to encourage adoption of municipal right-to-farm laws in every town in the county. To date, 23 of 25 towns have these laws in place. The towns of Brant, Evans, and North Collins jointly, and Eden and Clarence separately, developed Municipal Agricultural and Farmland Protection Plans (Marilla is in the process of doing so). In 1992, 145,679 acres in the county were actively farmed<sup>1</sup> and 235,000 acres were in state-approved, county-adopted agricultural districts<sup>2</sup>. In 2007, 149,356 acres were actively farmed<sup>3</sup> and 258,689 acres were in state-approved, county-adopted agricultural districts<sup>4</sup>.

A resurgence of interest in farms and local food has also changed the nature of agricultural planning since the last county AFPP was developed. No longer is farming viewed as just a rural business. Now many cities, including Buffalo, have urban farms. Sixteen farmers markets in the county offer local farm produce to city, suburban, and rural consumers who are eager to have access to farm products grown nearby. More restaurants and institutions are buying produce directly from farmers. And growing recognition of the value of agriculture to local economies and the state economy has changed the nature of discussions about economic development. Agriculture has a seat on Governor Cuomo's Regional Economic Development Council with the hope that funding for agricultural projects in the region will follow.

So why develop this plan? While there are bright spots in county agriculture, there are also unmet needs. Supporting farm business viability and protecting the land base needed to farm provides a host of benefits. Farms contribute to the local economy – in 2007 the market value of agricultural products sold in Erie County was over \$117 million<sup>5</sup>. Farms also provide jobs, use less in services than they pay in property taxes, maintain wildlife habitat and water quality when well managed, create beautiful scenic vistas, highlight the cultural heritage of many rural areas in the county, and offer fresh, local food to county residents. But farming can fall prey to the variability of markets and weather, regulations, and low profit margins, all of which may contribute to a decision to sell the farm for development. Strengthening land tenure, improving profitability, and building support among consumers and elected officials will ensure that agriculture remains viable in Erie County, and contributes to the well being of all county residents. This plan is intended to guide efforts to that end.

# Analysis of Local Conditions

## Agriculture in Erie County

Erie County is an urban county, close to one third of the county population resides in the City of Buffalo, but also has a substantial agricultural base. This is not unusual, given that farms historically located within easy access of population centers. Today, because of the steady push outward from cities, 70% of the vegetables, fruit, milk, and eggs in the United States are grown in urban-edge areas like Erie County.

### Value of Agriculture to the County Economy and Open Space Value

Farms in the county are diverse and include: dairy, vegetable, greenhouse, fruit, cash crops, horse, maple syrup, poultry, a variety of livestock, Christmas tree, and aquaculture. Table 1 highlights farm sales by grouping. Dairy farm sales top the list with nursery & greenhouse sales second, and vegetables third. In total, Erie County farm sales were just over \$117 million in 2007.

**Table 1: Farm Sales, Erie County**

	<b>\$1,000</b>	<b>% of Total</b>
<b>Livestock &amp; poultry*</b>	<b>75,404</b>	<b>64.43</b>
Milk & dairy	51,451	43.96
Cattle & calves	6,302	5.38
Other animals & products	968	0.83
Hogs & Pigs	210	0.18
Sheep, goats & products	84	0.07
Aquaculture	23	0.02
<b>Crops, including nursery &amp; greenhouse*</b>	<b>41,627</b>	<b>35.57</b>
Nursery, greenhouse, floriculture & sod	17,690	15.12
Vegetables & melons	9,590	8.19
Fruits, tree nuts & berries	6,317	5.40
grains, seeds, dry beans & dry peas	5,322	4.55
Corn	3,434	2.93
<b>Total Sales*</b>	<b>117,031</b>	<b>100.00</b>
Products sold directly to individuals	1,703	1.46

*Source: 2007 Census of Agriculture(adapted from report: Room At the Table)*

*\*due to data suppression, not all sales figures are represented*

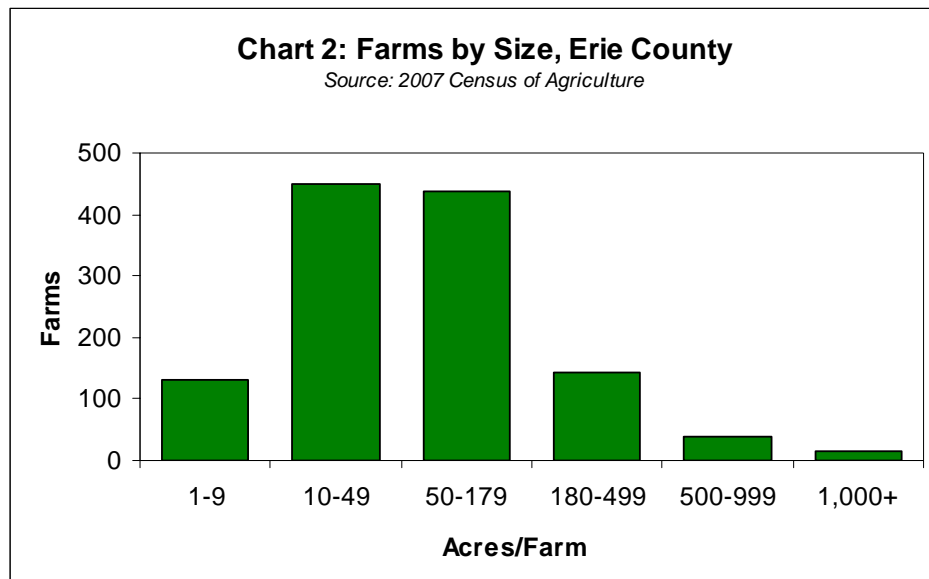
The 2007 Census of Agriculture reported that Erie County had 1,215 farms with 149,356 acres in production covering 22% of the county's land base. The number of farms decreased by 6% from 2002 to 2007 (although Erie County has ranked consistently in the top 5 counties with the highest number of farms in the state), and there was an 8% loss of farmland in the county (Table 2).

Most of the farms in Erie County are small – 62% of the farms grossed less than \$10,000, and almost half of the farms work less than 50 acres. All of these farms as a group contribute substantially to the county economy and agricultural landscape. But if just a few of the larger farms are lost to development, there is a considerable impact too: 38 farms in the county worked 500-999 acres; 16 farms worked 1000 acres or more; and 49 farms grossed \$500,000 or more (Table 2 and Chart 2).

**Table 2: Agricultural Statistics, Erie County**

*Source: 2002 and 2007 Census of Agriculture*

	2002	2007	Percent Change 2002-2007
<b># of Farms</b>			
	1,289	1,215	-6%
<b>Land in Farms (acres)</b>			
	161,747	149,356	-8%
<b>Market Value of Products Sold (average per farm)</b>			
	\$71,654	\$96,322	34%
<b># of Farms by Value of Sales</b>			
less than \$10,000	828	756	-9%
\$10,000- \$99,999	298	271	-9%
\$100,000-\$499,999	127	139	9%
\$500,000 or more	36	49	36%



### Conversion Pressure and Consequences

Decades of a spreading, sprawling population leaving the City of Buffalo and moving to the suburbs has had a profound effect on the agricultural landscape of Erie County. At one time, numerous farms were within easy reach of the city of Buffalo, located in what are now the inner ring towns of Amherst, West Seneca, Cheektowaga, and Tonawanda. As the population of the County grew, and moved out from the city, these farms were in the direct path of development and these towns now have few to no farms remaining. The second ring towns of Lancaster, Clarence, Elma, Hamburg, and Orchard Park were once active farming towns but the lure of open space with tracts of developable land also made them appealing as residential communities. Much of the land converted to housing in these towns was once farmland.

In the 2003 Brookings Institute report, *Sprawl Without Growth: The Upstate Paradox*, Cornell University's Dr. Rolf Pendall reported that urbanized land in upstate New York, including Erie County, increased by 30 percent in the 15 years from 1982 to 1997 but the population only grew by 2.6 percent in that same time period.<sup>6</sup> Even in the most recent decade from 2000 to 2010, which includes a significant recession and decrease in home building, the housing density in the second ring towns increased at a faster rate than the growth in population (Chart 1). The Town of Orchard Park's population grew by 5.1% while the housing density increased by 10.9%, the Town of Hamburg had a population increase of 1.2% and a housing density increase of 6.6%, and the Town of Elma saw no growth in population yet housing density increased by 6.5%. Notably, the City of Buffalo had a 10.7% drop in population while the Towns of Clarence, Lancaster, and Orchard Park all added residents. These statistics can indicate development patterns that equate to sprawl without growth.

**Table 3: Population and Housing Changes, Erie County***Source: 2000 and 2010 U.S. Census*

<b>County/Town</b>	<b>Population</b>	<b>Population % Change</b>	<b>Housing Density % Change</b>	<b>Housing Density (occupied houses per square mile)</b>
<b>Erie</b>				
2010	919,040	-3.30%	0.60%	367.48
2000	950,265			365.28
<b>City of Buffalo</b>				
2010	261,310	-10.70%	-8.30%	2,771.82
2000	292,648			3,022.66
<b>Hamburg</b>				
2010	56,936	1.20%	6.60%	567.72
2000	56,259			532.66
<b>Clarence</b>				
2010	30,673	17.40%	23.20%	211.27
2000	26,123			171.42
<b>Lancaster</b>				
2010	41,604	6.60%	10.00%	438.07
2000	39,019			398.23
<b>Elma</b>				
2010	11,317	0.00%	6.50%	129.28
2000	11,304			121.33
<b>Orchard Park</b>				
2010	29,054	5.10%	10.90%	296.05
2000	27,637			266.94

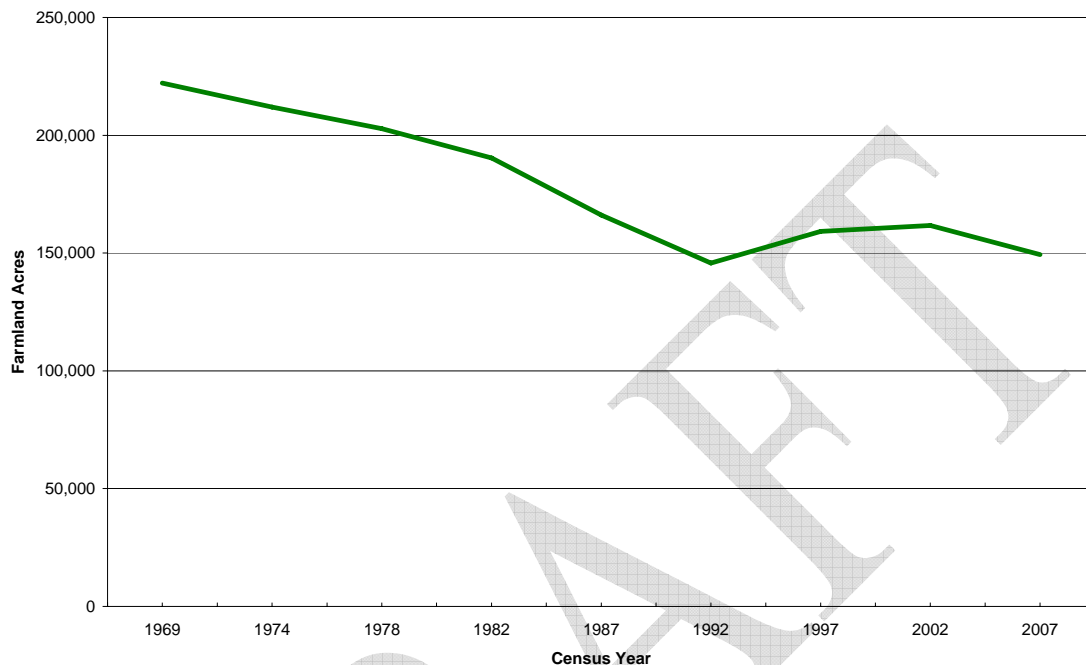
Too often farmers are faced with the choice to keep land in agricultural production or to sell it for development. When agriculture is not profitable, farmland is at risk of being sold and converted to other uses. Farmland conversion may occur when an entire farm is sold, or when a farmer chooses to sell lots in order to raise needed cash. This is not a sustainable method to remain in business but may fill a temporary need. Selling a portion of a farm's land can be accompanied by unwanted long term consequences. New neighbors arrive, who may not be well versed in what to expect when living near a farm, and the potential for farmer-neighbor conflicts grows substantially under these circumstances. Road frontage is sold first leaving back fields that can be hard to access with large farm equipment. Land values rise, making it difficult for remaining farmers or new farmers to afford to purchase farmland in the area. And, the 'swiss cheese' effect of smaller, separated farm fields creates farm management challenges.

While farmland owned by working farms in Erie County is susceptible to conversion due to sprawling development, farmland owned by rental landowners is at even greater risk. Generally, a non-farm landowner does not have a farmer's motivation to keep land in agricultural use. According to the 2007 Census of Agriculture, 31% of the farmland in Erie County is rented, approximately 46,000 acres. This is the least stable farmland and most at risk of conversion.



As noted in the Introduction, land in agricultural production increased in the County from 1992 to 2007, but that does not fully represent the trend. Graph 1 depicts the trend in farmland acres from 1969 to 2007.

Graph 1: Farmland Acres, Erie County



Farmland steadily decreased in the County from 1969 until 1992 after which there was an upward trend for the next decade. But from 2002 to 2007, the land in farms dropped significantly by 8%, nearing the 1992 lowest documented level. This is cause for concern and warrants a focus on protecting the remaining farmland in the County.

#### Changes in Erie County Agriculture

Protecting farmland becomes open space protection without farmers and farm businesses to work the land. The number of farms in the County peaked in 2002 at 1,289 dropping to 1,215 in 2007, according to the Census of Agriculture, but Erie County remains in the top handful of counties statewide for number of farms. It has been well reported that the farmer population in this country is aging and statistics for Erie County reflect that. The need for a next generation to farm in the County is apparent when considering Census of Agriculture reported data: the number of farmers under 35 in the County in 1997 was 101 and in 2007 was 52, while the number of farmers over 65 in 1997 was 254 and in 2007 was 372. Spreading to western New York from other areas of the country and the state, like the Hudson Valley, is a growing interest in farming as a career among young people and also as a second career among retirees. Encouraging this interest can provide the County with new farms and farmers to work the land and grow food, and to enhance the well established farms that comprise the backbone of Erie County agriculture.

With this renewed interest in farming comes new ways to farm and to market farm products. While many Erie County farms market agricultural products through wholesale avenues, more farms are choosing to sell some or all of their farm products directly to the consumer. Sixteen Farmers Markets operate in the county, with new markets added each year. Some of these markets have been established by local companies for employees shopping convenience and to encourage healthy food purchases. There are now at least four Community Supported Agriculture\* farms in the county and additional CSAs located outside county borders, with members in Erie County. And a few farms in the County market directly to school food service directors and restaurant chefs.

*\*Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) farm:* Farm owners sell member shares prior to the growing season. Members receive an allotment of vegetables, fruit, eggs, meat, milk, cheese or any combination of those, each week during the season. Because members purchase shares up front, farmers have capital to invest for the growing season and everyone, the farmer and the members, shares in the risks that can affect crop yields – weather, pests. In part because the investment needed to begin a CSA can be significantly less than other types of farms, this is a popular model for beginning farmers.

Urban agriculture has also taken root in the City of Buffalo: from the Massachusetts Avenue Project (MAP) where youth are growing, marketing and distributing produce on the west side; to Queen City Farms, a 3 acre farm growing and distributing locally grown food to families in need; to the Community Action Organization's Green Entrepreneurial Center, where food and jobs are grown; to Wilson Street Farm, a family-run operation on over 40 vacant lots providing fresh, local produce to east side residents. These urban farms not only provide local food to city residents, but they also connect the consumer and the farmer, and help to create an appreciation for where food comes from.

# Public Participation

The process for developing an Agricultural and Farmland Protection Plan is guided by statute in Article 25 AAA, Section 324 of the New York State Agriculture and Markets Law. It is a public process and as such Erie County held an initial public meeting (attended by 56 people) to explain the planning process and to gather input for a SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats) analysis. Twenty one individual interviews of farmers, agribusiness owners, and economic development personnel provided direct input into the Plan. And six focus group meetings held in various locations of the County (attended by over 100 people and held twice in the City of Buffalo, once in each of the Towns of Eden, Alden, Newstead, and Concord), captured public input on key questions posed to a cross section of County residents. Input and ideas from farmers, landowners, urban and rural residents, organizations, and elected leaders was critical to this planning process. Opportunities for comments on the written Plan included online posting of the draft strategies, followed by online posting of the entire Plan with a 30 day comment period culminating in a public hearing.

## **Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats (SWOT) Analysis**

To begin the process of developing an Agricultural and Farmland Protection Plan for Erie County, an initial public meeting was held. At that meeting, attendees shared their thoughts about the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats to agriculture in the county. This list was a starting point for the Agricultural and Farmland Protection Board to assess Erie County's agricultural needs. The strategies and actions listed later in this Plan directly address the needs that were generated through public input identified here and in later sections. The complete SWOT chart is available in the appendix. Following is a summary of the SWOT analysis.

### *Strengths*

The tie to local food production in Erie County is visible. With many small, direct market farms, consumers have a variety of options to purchase farm products from the farmer. Agritourism venues can be found throughout the county as well, and offer opportunities for the public to connect directly to local farms. Planning efforts that promote the many benefits provided by farms help bolster farm viability. Education offerings from Cornell Cooperative Extension, ease of farm product transportation, and availability of business capital round out identified strengths of Erie County agriculture.

### *Weaknesses*

In general, children, consumers, and local officials lack a complete understanding of agriculture and the numerous ways that farms positively affect quality of life and the economic strength of the communities in which we live. Policies in both rural and urban locales often do not adequately address the needs of farming as a land and business use. Poor food choices and the perception that low cost is best are key factors in what farm and food products are purchased and from whom. Farmers in general, and beginning farmers in particular, often struggle with debt management, as well as marketing and distribution needs.

### *Opportunities*

In this SWOT process, participants were extremely positive about the opportunities available to grow, support, and build a strong, vibrant farming economy in the County. There were vastly more comments in the 'opportunities' section of the SWOT chart than in any of the other three sections.

Expanding local food purchases and consumption were cited in a variety of ways. This was considered a win-win for the consumer and the farmer. Building marketing and promotion efforts for farm products from Erie County and Western New York was key to making this happen. Developing a workforce for farms through apprenticeships and internships as well as more traditional educational avenues was mentioned frequently along with attracting and training new populations to work on farms. Keeping land in agriculture with tax incentives and farm friendly land use policies, and increasing renewable energy production led to discussion of opportunities to focus economic development efforts on agriculture. Attracting new food processors, growing agritourism, and assisting farmers with grant and loan applications can boost farm viability. Instituting food policies that promote local food purchasing and consumption, and developing aggregation and distribution processes to better connect farmers with institutional buyers will also help keep farms in business. Opportunities to farm in the City of Buffalo are blossoming, and Erie County is beginning to attract new farmers - people new to farming who are choosing western New York as the location for their farm business. Promoting this area as a place to farm and clearly outlining the economic benefits to having farms in local communities will help local leaders make decisions that support farm viability and by extension improve their communities and respond to growing interest in availability of local foods.

### *Threats*

Viability is the overarching threat to farms and most of the remaining threats fit somewhere beneath that: sprawling development and poor planning that consume prime farmland; regulations and restrictions that make it difficult and expensive to operate a farm business; and, the need for a next generation to operate existing farms, start new farms, and provide a workforce for local farms. Funding to address these threats and concerns is difficult to attract, particularly because the benefits that communities reap by having farms located nearby are not well publicized or understood.

### **Focus Group Sessions**

Six focus group sessions, open to the public, were held throughout the planning process. In the first three sessions, participants were asked to share their thoughts about the opportunities and barriers for agriculture in Erie County as well as what issues were most significant for food and farming in the county. The second set of meetings elicited input from attendees on topics related to a draft set of recommendations being considered by the Agricultural and Farmland Protection Board. The compiled notes from these sessions are available in the Appendix.

Questions posed to attendees and their responses fell into six main areas for action: protecting farmland, encouraging a next generation to farm, supporting farm viability, increasing the

availability of local food, educating leaders, and educating the public. The main themes and comments mirror the themes captured in the SWOT analysis and are incorporated into the strategies and actions of the Plan.

*Healthy Kids, Healthy Communities youth representatives from the Massachusetts Avenue Project (MAP) participated in the November 2011 focus group session in Buffalo. Following are their responses to specific questions posed to them about their involvement in the MAP farm:*

*What do you like about farming? What is great about being on a farm?*

“You can eat good food on the farm”

“Food tastes different than the food at the stores, food tastes better”

“I like the chicken on the farms, its tastes really good”

“I can make money on the farm”

“I like playing in the dirt”

“You can learn as you go”

“It’s a better job than one my friends do, a lot of my friends work at McDonalds, and their food is nasty”

“McDonalds is not real”

“The farm is real, I know where my food comes from”

“You know where your food comes from”

“I feel like I have a real connection to the land”

“I get a country experience”

“It’s like a new community, doing this with my friends”

*What do your friends think about you working on a farm?*

“Some of them think it’s weird, I say farm and they’re like there are not any farms in Buffalo”

“When I say it’s my job, they don’t really think it’s a job”

## **Individual Interviews**

Twenty one farmers, agribusiness owners, and government and agency representatives were interviewed in the summer and fall of 2011. Interviewees were asked to share suggestions of how the county could support agriculture, as well as to give input on current challenges and opportunities for local farms. As a group, the interviewees were positive about the future for agriculture in the county but there were also areas of concern.

### **Summary of General Interview Highlights**

*Regulations of all types – environmental, labor, food safety, and transportation – were by far, the most mentioned challenges to agriculture and were mentioned by all categories of interviewees.* The shared sentiment was that current regulations are burdensome for farmers, and that continuing to add new regulations will negatively affect farm profitability. Specific regulatory areas mentioned included Good Agricultural Practices (GAP), federal immigration policy, over-the-road equipment size restrictions, North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), tort reform, nutrient management, and wetlands. County trainings to help farmers understand and address regulations would be useful particularly for smaller farms. Larger farms identified regulatory relief as pertinent to their ability to continue in business. High taxes were also cited as a burden for farms. There was interest in establishing a program to further reduce property taxes on agricultural land.

*"Regulations are too oppressive and expensive."*

*Educating a variety of audiences was identified as a need almost as frequently as regulatory relief.* Helping the public understand agricultural practices and the production of food was considered essential to growing an informed consumer base for local farms and essential for the long term success of agriculture in Erie County.

Opportunities to educate local officials and farmers on agricultural topics pertinent to each audience were mentioned as another educational avenue. Farmers could benefit from trainings on farm management, technology, and neighbor relations. Cornell Cooperative Extension (CCE) was identified as an existing entity charged with educating both the public and farmers. Providing adequate county funding for CCE was deemed important in order to capitalize on an organization that already exists to deliver programs.

Educating youth, in order to train a next generation of farmers and farm workers, was considered as to be critical. FFA and 4-H were directly cited as valuable programs that need to receive more focus in Erie County. And, instituting formal internship and apprenticeship programs could help to provide the hands-on education needed in farming.

*"Education is key to help people understand where the farmer is coming from."*

*"4-H to me is very important – through Cooperative Extension – and it needs funding"*

*Cultivating a next generation of farm owners and workers is critical to the future of agriculture locally.* While some of the farm interviewees were already incorporating a next generation into

the business, others had not yet identified who would “take over” the farm and this was mentioned as an area of concern. Assistance with helping a next generation and beginning farmers with locating land, capital, and/or farms to work into via ‘sweat equity’ was deemed important. It was pointed out that farms are often multigenerational businesses with a tie to the land and therefore will remain in their current location – they are not businesses that will readily move out of state or offshore. It is important for the county to support the business of farming with that in mind. Related to this was frustration with finding and keeping a local labor force and the burden of onerous labor regulations. Attracting new populations, the Amish were specifically mentioned, for a domestic labor force deserves consideration.

*“Farm succession is going to be an issue in the next ten years.”*

*“Farms need to be profitable in order to have a next generation.”*

Concern for availability and affordability of farmland was cited as an ongoing challenge for county farmers. The continued sprawl and spread of the population from the city of Buffalo and inner ring suburbs has decreased the quantity of available farmland as well as increased the price of the land that is available. This is a barrier to entry for beginning farmers and creates added pressure for existing farms that are looking for additional land for crop rotations or expansion. In a few county locations, competition for land among farms is intense and creates frustration among the farmers. In other areas with significant development pressure, non-farm landowners are reluctant to agree to long-term leases with farmers because they wish to maintain the option to sell the land to the highest bidder. Some of the farmers interviewed chose to purchase farmland in these areas in order to ‘protect’ the highest quality land from development.

*“Some of our best land has gone to houses. Once the ag land is lost, it’s lost.”*

*“Purchase of development rights could help Erie County a lot.”*

Erie County farmers are embracing new business opportunities. Some have adapted their farms to capitalize on the growing consumer interest in purchasing local foods. Others have diversified their businesses while a number have specialized and expanded their operations. A few farmers were looking ahead to opportunities that may come with alternative energy development. And, it was noted that recognition should be given to the value of having a core group of farms to support the variety of agricultural service providers located in the county. The ripple affect when farms go out of business is often acutely felt in rural areas that also lose these agricultural support businesses.

*“Look at investment as part of doing business because there is too much emphasis on success just being tied to the number of jobs created.”*

## Summary of Agricultural Economic Development Interview Highlights

*Access to a skilled and ready labor force is key to the future of agriculture and a major concern for many farmers.* Since many laborers are immigrants or new citizens from agrarian backgrounds, they tend to have a basic understanding of farming. Concerns regarding this labor force revolve around language and communications, ability to attract and maintain given shifting federal immigration policy, timing to market, and the development of advanced skills (including acquisition of driver's licenses, chemical applicator's licenses, etc.). Despite a generally high level of contentment with the labor force, farmers remain concerned that a significant upturn in the economy will draw down the labor pool as highly mobile, entry-level labor turns to landscape and building trades which often pay higher wages.

*Market access refers to the ability to reach the real or potential marketplace for farm or agribusiness products.* It assumes a fit between what is produced and what consumers want to buy, but it is essentially the system of connections from farmer to consumer. An area with good market access has a mixture of market outlets from retail to wholesale and the means to supply them. Presence of retailers such as Wegmans and Tops does offer development opportunities.

Erie County is close to large population centers but lacks the level of integration with retailers and the consuming public that has been achieved in other large marketplaces. Complicating this, local consumers tend to favor cheaper food products than markets in eastern New York and New England, making it difficult to achieve significantly higher price margins for local foods across the board.

*A weak U.S. dollar is shifting the balance of agricultural trade particularly with Canada and creating an opportunity for Erie County to serve as an aggregation, processing, and manufacturing center for export oriented activities into Canada.* As well, a weak dollar offers opportunity for Erie County to proactively recruit farm, food processing, biotechnology, and food distribution activities from the nearby Province of Ontario.

*Competitiveness in the food industry is often predicated on being a leader in product and market development.* The dairy industry is the most recent agricultural sector to aggressively pursue product development to grow market share. Given the importance of the dairy industry to the region, it would be important to support research and development activities as a means to both attract new entrants to the manufacturing sector as well as to enhance demand for locally sourced milk. As a centerpiece of such a strategy, the region may consider the creation of a dairy center modeled after the Wisconsin Dairy Center.

*Generally speaking, credit access is strong across all agricultural production sectors, particularly for operators with strong credit histories.* Where project finance becomes an impediment is where operators have limited credit history, no management experience, or the operator is entering into an untested marketplace. In these cases farm operators have difficulty securing financing or do not understand where/how to access grants and economic development funds. For limited resource organizations additional needs include grant writing and match support.



*There are many economic development and finance organizations in the region and all seem supportive of agriculture and food development. However, none of these organizations offer direct support for agriculture and allied industries nor do they house the necessary expertise to fully implement a program of work in this field.*

*Direct market retail and wholesale activities are on the rise both locally and nationally and anchor local business operations such as Eden Valley Growers. Having marketing and aggregation facilities in-place also enhances the ability to achieve better market access and a larger share of the local and/or regional product market. Certain agricultural subsectors, such as beef and other meat animals, lack a true aggregation and marketing support structure which forces players in these sectors to seek such activities outside of the area. This limits profit taking potential and shifts the economic gains from industry development to other areas.*

*The region, particularly the southern towns, supports agritourism activities. This approach has been well received by farmers, consumers, and tourism officials and offers room for expansion and growth. In particular, development of seasonal events, agritourism trails, and creation of destination venues are all considered viable means to expand tourism and direct market opportunity.*

#### Summary of Agricultural Economic Development Interview Recommendations

*Interviewees were interested in having the county work directly with farmers and farm organizations in a number of capacities:*

- Expanding microenterprise loan opportunities and funding.
- Marketing and promotion of local agriculture and local foods.
- Marketing training for farmers.
- Helping to navigate the IDA process and assistance with understanding and negotiating a variety of contracts.
- Providing small grants and cost-share funding for on-farm projects.
- Funding and support for municipal and intermunicipal projects such as agritourism efforts.
- Infrastructure planning and improvements. Working with municipalities to discourage growth in agricultural areas and to encourage road and ditch maintenance.
- Facilitating farmer meetings with state and federal elected officials. For example, scheduling annual roundtable meetings as was done in the past with Congressman Jack Quinn.
- Celebrating agriculture in the county with a public event.

**\*Note:** All quotes are from interviewees.

## Recommendations from Relevant Agricultural Planning Documents in Erie County

This Agricultural and Farmland Protection Plan (AFPP) has not been developed in a vacuum – it is connected and has relevance to planning efforts undertaken at other times and other places in the County. The Erie Niagara Framework for Regional Growth is a regional planning document that identifies agricultural land use as a key component to consider in regional planning efforts. The AFPP will inform further phases of work that develop from the Framework for Regional Growth.

Three town planning documents guide agricultural planning in the County as well. The Towns of Brant, Evans, and North Collins (jointly) were the first municipalities in the County to develop a town level agricultural and farmland protection plan, followed by the Town of Eden and the Town of Clarence. These plans are specific to the towns but mesh well with identified goals and actions in the County AFPP.

*Room at the Table: Food System Assessment of Erie County* is a recent report developed by a group of students in the University of Buffalo Urban and Regional Planning Department as a graduate degree project and done under the direction of Dr. Samina Raja. The report examines the County food system from farm fields to waste products and all the steps in between and concludes with recommendations for improving the system.

Following are summaries of the aforementioned planning documents.

### *Erie Niagara Framework for Regional Growth*

The Erie Niagara Framework for Regional Growth, completed in 2006 by Erie and Niagara Counties, establishes basic policies and principles to guide the future growth and development of the region. The Framework delineates Developed Areas, Developing Areas and Rural Areas, as well as Regional Centers, Growth Corridors and Rural Centers (see map). Policies and strategies address the goals for these areas.

The conservation of agricultural land is a key policy for the Developing Areas. Relevant strategies include:

- Support local planning that designates areas appropriate for development and conservation, minimizes conversion of agricultural lands and avoids “leap frog” patterns of development.
- Minimize conversion of significant agricultural lands
- Channel growth to areas with existing sewer and water service
- Where extensions of public sewer and water service are needed to address health issues, restrict tap-ins for new development in areas designated for agricultural use

Strategies for Rural Areas include:

- Expand efforts to strengthen the rural economy, including the conservation of agricultural lands and rural economic development initiatives
- Identify and conserve agricultural lands; Support zoning that reduces permitted development densities, require cluster development to maintain rural character and protect resources, and discourage continued subdivision of rural road frontages.
- Encourage the contraction of sewer district boundaries that extend into areas designated for agricultural use

The Framework directs that Erie County's capital project review policies encourage investments that support agriculture and open space preservation, and discourage investments that would hinder agricultural or open space protection. It recommends that the counties develop Type 1 Action lists pursuant to the New York State Environmental Quality Review Act (SEQRA) that include major subdivisions or developments in Agricultural Districts in Developing or Rural Areas. It recommends additional scrutiny in Erie County reviews of subdivisions of 3 to 5 or more lots of any size in unsewered areas. Subdivisions with lots larger than 20-25 acres and soils that are suitable for agricultural production would be exempt from this review.

The Framework for Regional Growth also states that County policies regarding sewer and water districts should limit sewer district expansions in agricultural districts; contract sewer districts where there is no actual service in agricultural districts; limit water district expansion in agricultural districts; apply strict restrictions to tie-ins where water districts are extended to address health issues.

Framework for Regional Growth recommended actions to preserve agricultural lands include:

- Establish priorities for the conservation of lands that are under development pressure and have high quality agricultural soils
- Coordinate the activities of Niagara and Erie County Farmland Protection Boards.
- Identify priority agricultural lands based on agricultural value
- Establish a Purchase of Development Rights program/ Participate in New York State and Federal programs
- Increase coordination among agencies active in agriculture and land conservation
- Strengthen the economic viability of farms through financial incentives, marketing assistance, model legislation to support agricultural activities, public education and technical assistance. Publicize the economic benefits of agriculture to the economy, in addition to its value for open space protection
- Prepare model zoning regulations to encourage conservation subdivisions and the conservation of agricultural lands.

### *A Regional Farmland Protection Plan for the Towns of Brant, Evans, and North Collins*

The Regional Farmland Protection Plan for the Towns of Brant, Evans, and North Collins was developed in 2000 and includes regional goals and actions. This 3 town planning effort recognized that a regional approach to support farms could have more impact than a town-by-town planning process. Since development of the plan, a group of 9 municipalities in the southern portion of the county, the Southtowns Community Enhancement Coalition, have worked together to develop an agritourism trail.

*Regional Goal 1: Foster Collaboration*

*Regional Goal 2: Promote Understanding of Agriculture*

*Regional Goal 3: Encourage Policies that Protect Productive Farmland*

*Regional Goal 4: Cultivate a Viable Agricultural Economy*

### *Town of Eden Agricultural and Farmland Protection Plan*

Eden is a rural, farming town located in the Southtowns of Erie County. It is one of Erie County's medium sized towns (population) but is a major contributor to the county's \$117 million in agricultural sales. The Town of Eden Agricultural & Farmland Protection Plan, completed by the Town in 2010, includes an analysis of local conditions, a parcel rating system to prioritize farmland protection parcels, and recommendations to support agriculture and protect farmland. The Plan also includes an assessment of its land use regulations and recommends modifications to improve support for agriculture.

*Recommendation 1: Stabilize the town agricultural land base and maintain land in active agricultural use. Maintain 95% of the current active agricultural land in production through the next ten years. Support Eden farmers as stewards of the land and other natural resources.*

*Recommendation 2: Maintain a supportive business environment for farm operations.*

*Recommendation 3: Educate the non-farm public about agriculture. Facilitate an ongoing dialogue between the farm community and other Eden residents. Encourage appreciation of the agricultural resources located in the Town.*

### *Town of Clarence Agricultural and Farmland Protection Plan*

The Town of Clarence was developing an Agricultural Plan at the same time as Erie County, with plan approval in 2012. Clarence is located in the northeastern portion of the county and has had significant residential growth in the last few decades. With a population increase of 17% from 2000 to 2010, community commitment to support farms and protect farmland was needed if

farming was to remain in the town. In 2002, a \$12.5 bond was passed by public referendum to fund the Greenprint Program to permanently protect farmland and open space in Clarence.

*Strategy A: Protect farmland: Sustain no net loss of farmland in the Town of Clarence during the next decade, from 2012 to 2022. The number of farmland acres in the town in 2012 totaled 4,344.*

*Strategy B: Plan for infrastructure: Institute infrastructure planning that formally and routinely considers the needs of agriculture with regard to drainage, roads, utility lines, water, and sewer in any town zoning districts that allow farms.*

*Strategy C: Promote agriculture: Inform the public about the variety of contributions farms make to the town, and what agricultural practices to expect in a farm community. Include youth and youth agricultural programs in town efforts to promote farms and agricultural events.*

#### Room at the Table: Food System Assessment of Erie County

This assessment estimated that Erie County's food system generated \$9.9 billion in sales in 2009 and provided 82,000 jobs in the county. Building this system has enormous implications for everyone in the County. Assessing opportunities to improve the food system resulted in a set of recommendations summarized in the Appendix.

#### Plan Goals

1. Ensure economically viable and sustainable agriculture in Erie County.
2. Promote access to local food in the county.
3. Ensure lasting food security in the county.
4. Promote overall health and wellness of Erie County residents.
5. Educate the general public about the Erie County food system.

## Planning for Agriculture in Erie County

County and town planning can have a significant impact on agriculture by strengthening economic opportunities for farms, protecting farmland, encouraging appreciation for agriculture, and building support among local leaders. This section describes some of the tools that, when used to proactively plan for agriculture, help protect valuable farmland and support the viability of local farms.

### Agricultural Economic Development

Agricultural economic development helps keep land in agriculture by encouraging region-wide economic development activities that support local farm profitability. Agriculture contributes to communities through job and tax base creation as well as to the farmer and agribusiness industry through wealth creation. Without economic balance, liquidity, and profitability agriculture cannot exist. Understanding that this economic balance must be maintained to keep agriculture in the community is critical to any agricultural land protection effort.

In Erie County, this balance is even more delicate given the urban nature of the county which requires a jobs driven economic development strategy and the transitional requirements of its rural, agricultural sector as it adapts to changes in agricultural markets. These agriculturally related transitional requirements have three primary drivers. This first is supporting continued growth of agricultural entrepreneurship. The second is to provide assistance to intergenerational land transfer in the face of rising farmland costs. The third is a change in international trade flows which offer investment and development opportunities across western New York's food and agriculture sectors.

Agriculture is a significant economic contributor to Erie County's rural economy. Because of this, it is increasingly important to advocate for agriculture's economic and business development needs. This is particularly true given the high multiplier effects\* (1.54 in output and 1.8 for employment<sup>7</sup>) associated with agriculture within the County and the region, which highlights the need to leverage upstream and downstream activities such as crop protection services and food manufacturing.

\*Multiplier effect: Every time there is an addition to employment or sales in an industry it can create a circular flow in the local economy whereby additional sales and employment are created. This is a multiplier effect. The size of the multiplier effect depends upon the regional economy's inter-relationships, or each household's decisions to spend or save. When income is spent, this spending becomes someone else's income, and so on. Households decisions to spend this income often get allocated outside of the economy and are thus lost for re-circulation. Many in the economic development world seek to attract and retain companies with high multipliers, in order to maximize the income, sale, and employment effects that these businesses have on a locality.

Articulating the needs of agriculture in this plan will help to develop Erie County's agricultural economy. This is not to say that agriculture is unrepresented in planning documents, as it is clearly a target industry for Buffalo Niagara Enterprise and has a role in the Western New York Regional Economic Development Strategic Plan

(<http://regionalcouncils.ny.gov/themes/nyopenrc/rc-files/westernny/FINALPLAN.pdf>).

However, the effect of these plans is limited by poor implementation due to external influences

such as regulatory structure, environmental management needs, financial conditions, and land-use trends. Having diverse plans that split the interests of agriculture and its partners does not serve agriculture well. A coordinated approach to agricultural economic development in the county and the region is necessary in order for the concerted efforts of industry, government, and the community to have an affect.

It is also important to recognize that the industry's development needs do not impact all sectors in the same manner. High development pressure tends to be good for equine and nursery farm businesses while it often has direct negative impacts on livestock and dairy farms. Interviews were conducted across a range of sectors to understand how local conditions were influencing economic success. Highlights of expressed concerns and needs are presented below:

- Development pressure, land fragmentation, and competition for land with non-operating uses put a premium on agricultural land that makes it less profitable to farm and difficult to expand. As a result, there is direct pressure for farmers – particularly new and expanding farmers – to grow their operations elsewhere.
- For agriculture to expand over the long term, workforce conditions must improve. This can begin with educating and training agricultural entrepreneurs and the agricultural workforce.
- Buffalo is increasingly being targeted to the relocation of transportation, marketing, and manufacturing opportunities for agriculture, but farmers have not been active participants in recruitment.
- Increased intermixing of residences within agricultural production areas fuels the possibility of nuisance claims against farmers, which can have negative impacts on earnings and farmer retention. Increasing communication and understanding of agricultural practices, as well as adoption of farm-friendly local ordinances, are pressing needs.
- Marketing infrastructure needs to be improved. It should include a combination of economic development attraction efforts with on-site development, modernization, processing, product development, and scale-up of existing operations.
- Tax policies at the local, state, and federal levels influence landowner decision making significantly, particularly during intergenerational succession planning and during investment decision making. For many local farms, this results in a short-term planning horizon or increased pressure to transition out of the industry.
- Regulatory structures need to improve to be more farm-friendly to include:
  - Better integration of local, state, and federal regulatory policies to encourage on-farm and off-farm value added production and distribution.
  - Standards for road signage to link agritourism venues in a manner similar to wine trails.
  - Agricultural practices protections in town-level land use codes.
- Agricultural finance, though not currently a limiting factor for commodity agriculture, must become more adaptive in order to meet the needs of new and beginning farms.

The previous list of economic development issues has many solutions already within the grasp of industry and government programs at the local, regional, and state levels. These solutions are not often applied to agriculture or fail to be fully implemented in support of agriculture. Many times this is the result of the regional nature of western New York's agricultural sectors because

there is no clear lead jurisdiction. This is not an uncommon phenomenon in agriculture, which has led some regions to coordinate agricultural development efforts across multiple political jurisdictions.

The need for economic development cooperation to support agriculture is not new in most rural areas. Successful rural responses, however, are few. Notable among these are Hudson Valley Agribusiness Development Corporation (HVADC) in Hudson, New York (<http://www.hvadc.org/>) and 3CORE in Chico, California (<http://www.3coreedc.org/contact/>). Both of these organizations offer regionally supported business development and finance programs as well as regional planning and policy coordination.

With a limited budget, HVADC's Agribusiness Incubator Without Walls has serviced more than 50 agribusinesses in 4 counties, with a technical assistance budget of just \$50,000. These businesses have invested more than \$3 million in the local economy over the last three years. One start-up business in the program added nearly 40 new employees in its first year of operations and still relies on HVADC to assist with growth and development. HVADC supports this growth by augmenting its internal staff with outside experts to ensure that this high growth business get the resources it needs.

3CORE is known best for its innovative financing programs which have supported the growth and development of nationally famous brands such as Sierra Nevada Brewing and Sierra Nevada Cheese through programs like equipment purchase-leaseback\*, purchase order finance\*, and industrial development bonding\*. 3CORE also runs a recognized business incubation program that targets very small companies with less than 5 employees, with the hope to spur wealth creation in unincorporated, rural areas.

\*Purchase leaseback is a financial arrangement by which the purchaser of equipment enters into a lease agreement with the seller who is still able to use the equipment but no longer owns it.

\*Purchase order finance is a financial arrangement whereby a purchase order is used to secure short-term credit in order to fulfill the order.

\*Industrial development bonding is a means by which the revenue expected from a development activity is used to secure construction financing.

A sample of HVADC and 3CORE programs can be found in the following table:

<b>Program Areas</b>	<b>3CORE</b>	<b>HVADC</b>
Finance Programs	<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>
Community Planning – CEDS	<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>
Planning - Other	<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>
Business Coaching	<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>
Business Planning	<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>
Business Incubation	<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>
Marketing Support	<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>
Regional Branding		<b>X</b>
Business Resource Center	<b>X</b>	



The programs offered by both organizations were in direct response to community identified needs. Each of these organizations works collaboratively with other community and economic development organizations on an annual basis through what is known as a Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy update to ensure that they are responsive to community needs.

The best land protection, regulatory, and legislative strategies will fail without a viable marketing component to agriculture. Erie County is well positioned to create strong market opportunities utilizing its agricultural resources. These resources are in proximity to a large population with strong food markets, an existing tourism industry, and a role as a transportation hub for regional and international trade. Erie County needs to commit to improving farm viability since most of the tools are already in place: an active Industrial Development Agency, a robust regional business alliance in the form of the Buffalo Niagara Enterprise, and communities committed to protecting farmland and supporting farm profitability.

What is missing from the economic and business development sector, as it relates to agriculture, is a consolidated voice, and a mechanism that ensures that the interests represented by this voice find their way into policy and program implementation. When communities in the Hudson Valley reached this same conclusion in 2001, they started a multi-year process that lead to the creation of HVADC in 2006. Erie County can certainly lead western New York down a similar path.

### **Hudson Valley Agribusiness Development Corporation**

The Hudson Valley Agribusiness Development Corporation (HVADC) was formed in 2006 to promote balanced, market-based solutions leading to enhanced agricultural entrepreneurship, rural economic growth, and community development within the member Counties of Washington, Columbia, Ulster, Dutchess, Orange, and Sullivan.

HVADC is uniquely positioned in the Hudson Valley to improve the viability of agribusinesses given its flexible program design, focus on individual business development activities, and broad membership. Its members include the Counties outlined above, as well as local financial institutions, farmland protection boards, philanthropies, and individuals. HVADC was created to enhance agriculturally related economic activity to create jobs, increase investment, and promote the integration of agriculture within the broader economy.

HVADC's menu of services are carefully designed to promote the Hudson Valley as an attractive, viable region for agriculture while fostering growth and development in the agricultural sector through creative programming and marketing, promotion, and the provision and coordination of financial and other resources. Specific services offered include:

- Agricultural Development Support for Communities
- Agribusiness Technical and Professional Services
- Agribusiness Incubation
- Project Planning and Development Services
- Capital Access Services and Programs

While these services are all well defined on HVADC's website ([www.hvadc.org](http://www.hvadc.org)), they are perhaps best understood through brief case descriptions:

**Farm To Table Co-Packers** – HVADC, in cooperation with Ulster County IDA, assisted Farm-to-Table Co-packers with the development of their processing facilities in Kingston New York. Project assistance included accessing private, state, and federal grants and loans to equip the company's new facilities. HVADC also created a purchase-leaseback financing program for Farm to Table Co-Packers to install an "Individual Quick Freeze" line (IQF). The IQF line has been used extensively by local farmers to process high quality frozen vegetables and fruits for use in winter sales.

Farm to Table Co-Packers is currently working with farmers in the Black Dirt region of Orange County to develop a branded line of IQF vegetables for the wholesale trade. HVADC has also entered into a license agreement with Farm to Table Co-Packers to provide facilities and technical assistance to HVADC's incubator clients. HVADC is currently working with Farm to Table Co-Packers to redesign the IQF line to increase efficiency and profitability.

Through the support of HVADC, FTC has created 30 new jobs and invested nearly \$1.8 million dollars in its new operations.

**Wholesale Distributor** – HVADC raised funds for the relocation of a family owned food distribution business and the adaptive re-use of its former facilities. Portions of the original facilities were of interest to several local entrepreneurs and the town for their adaptive re-use potential as a center for local food processing and distribution. HVADC completed the adaptive re-use study for the facility and created a re-development strategy linking the needs of the town, farmers, and the food industry.

### 3-CORE

3-Core is an economic development planning agency for three counties, Butte, Tehama, and Glenn, in the Northern Central Valley of California, created to support the development of entrepreneurial businesses in the region. 3-Core's primary mission is to provide financing, counseling, and community development through direct support programs.

Project financing that is customized to the needs of local entrepreneurs is a centerpiece of 3-Core's programming. 3-Core uses a combination of existing federal and state lending programs as well as privately financed loan programs, such as Community Reinvestment Act funds, and equity instruments to achieve its goals.

Managing such a complex set of programs requires a streamlined partnership to keep deals moving quickly. Among 3-Core's many partners are the Small Business Administration, the Golden Capital Network, Wavepoint Venture, the North Valley Community Fund, and the Capital Access Program of the California State Treasurers Office.

From 1996 to 2009, 3-Core loaned more than \$30 million and facilitated direct equity investments through a 20 percent California State tax credit. Since 2009, significant challenges arose in keeping the financing programs open in large part due to the faltering economic conditions in the U.S. and California. Small businesses in the region were hit hardest, causing 3-core to aggressively seek to increase both funding availability and flexibility for this sector.

The solution came in the form of the 3-Core Loan Confidence Fund (LCF). The LCF is a loan guarantee fund that is created by a partnership of 3-Core, its borrowers, the California State Treasurer, local donors, and the North Valley Community Foundation. The fund uses a credit enhancement to encourage commercial lenders to participate in small business and agricultural loans by funding a loan loss reserve to reduce the banks' exposure in non-performing loans. The LCF is funded as follows:

1. 3-Core sets aside 2 percent of the face value of every loan it makes in the LCF.
2. Each 3-Core borrower also contributes 2 percent of the face value of 3-Core loans in the LCF.
3. The State of California matches the borrower's contribution 1:1.
4. The North Valley Community Foundation raises private funds from private donors to fund the LCF. Qualified donors can treat certain LCF investments as a program-related investment (PRI).
5. The North Valley Community Foundation holds the LCF funds in qualified investments (predominately CD's).
6. North Valley Community Foundation donors may elect to receive interest payments from the investments or reinvest in the LCF.
7. As the LCF fund grows, 3-Core is able to provide a greater level of credit enhancement thereby stimulating loan growth.

Using the LCF, 3-Core has been able to finance four agriculturally related businesses. These are Sierra Nevada Cheese, Orland Meat Products, Mill Creek Veterinary Hospital, and Maisie Jane's (dried fruit and nuts). More information on these businesses and their finance needs can be found at [www.3coreedc.org/success\\_stories/](http://www.3coreedc.org/success_stories/)

### *Purchase of Development Rights: Stimulating Local Economies and Protecting Farmland*

Purchase of development rights (PDR), or purchase of agricultural conservation easements (PACE), permanently protects farmland from development by placing a deed restriction, called an agricultural conservation easement, on the land. The land remains in private ownership and can be sold or transferred to a next generation. This voluntary process compensates the farmer for the value of the development rights and limits the use of the land to farming in perpetuity (forever).

In 1996, New York State started the Farmland Protection Program and instituted a competitive application process to annually award grants to counties and municipalities to assist in the purchase of development rights on farmland. These grants funded 75% of the purchase and the county/municipality funded the remaining 25%, or the farmer/landowner donated that value. Since its inception, the Farmland Protection Program has saved 303 farms in 29 counties (including Erie County), protecting 73,000 acres of farmland in New York. Since 2009, no new state grants have been awarded but open projects have been reviewed and ushered through the real estate closing process. The USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) also annually awards PDR grants, through the Federal Farm and Ranchlands Protection Program (FRPP), that fund up to 50% of the development rights purchase.

Survey results, reported by the New York State Department of Agriculture and Markets in 2009, found that 86% of the farmer respondents who received funds from grants to purchase development rights, invested the money in or outside of the farm and paid off debt.<sup>8</sup> Farmland was purchased, barns were built, and money was circulated through local economies. This was farm viability, agricultural economic development, and farmland protection all rolled into one effort.

Since New York's program began, four towns in Erie County permanently protected over 3,000 acres of farmland by purchasing the development rights on the land. The Town of Marilla began a local PACE program in 1999, and over 7 years protected 880 acres of farmland. One year earlier, the Town of Amherst began protecting 860 acres of farmland as part of a larger planning process that also saw the formation of Nature View Park with 1200 acres adjacent to the protected farmland. Later, the Town of Elma purchased the development rights on 60 acres owned by a Marilla farmer who had other protected farmland. An additional 715 acres of farmland are permanently protected in Elma through the USDA Grassland Reserve Program. And, in 2002 the Town of Clarence passed a \$12.5 million bond, by public referendum, to purchase development rights on farm and natural lands. To date the town has permanently protected or purchased 1,025 acres of farmland.

Most of the agricultural conservation easements placed on the farmland are co-held by each town and the Western New York Land Conservancy (WNYLC). WNYLC monitors the properties, in collaboration with the towns and the landowners, in perpetuity to ensure that the purpose of the agricultural conservation easement is upheld. There is also additional farmland in the county protected with permanent conservation easements that are held by the Genesee Valley

Conservancy, a land trust located in Geneseo, New York. With this land the total protected farmland in Erie County is 3,888 acres.

#### County PDR Program:

While four towns in Erie County have proactively protected farmland by purchasing the development rights on the land, there is value in approaching land protection on a county level. Agricultural resources are not defined by political boundaries and a broader planning view can better assess the resource value and protection needs. The county also has a staffed planning department to assist with the complicated real estate transactions that result from PDR awards.

Some counties in New York State have PDR programs - Livingston and Wayne Counties have active programs in western New York. The following is required for Erie County to develop a PDR program:

- Identify an entity to oversee the program. The Department of Environment and Planning, with assistance from the county Agricultural and Farmland Protection Board, could manage a county program.
- Establish program goals. How much farmland should be protected? Where are priority areas for protection in the county? Who will steward the easements?
- Determine the cost of the program to the county. Identify how the program will be funded.
- Develop a county pre-application. (See Appendix for examples.)
- Hold a required annual meeting for farmers and landowners interested in completing a pre-application.
- Rank pre-applications
- If applicable, complete and submit applications to the state and/or federal program.
- Manage the closing process for any awarded projects.

#### Term Easements

Two towns in the County have programs that give landowners the option of protecting their land for a term or permanently. Orchard Park has had a program since the 1990s, and the Town of Elma is close to finalizing a program. In both cases, landowners agree to not develop their land for a set number of years in exchange for a percentage decrease in property taxes on the land during the term, and the longer the term, the greater the decrease in property taxes.

#### Agricultural Districts and Right to Farm Protections

Article 25-AA of New York State's Agriculture and Markets Law was enacted in 1971 to establish county agricultural districts in order to help keep land in active agricultural use. The County Agricultural and Farmland Protection Board, in conjunction with the County Department of Environment and Planning, is responsible for local administration of the agricultural districts. Erie County has 14 state certified, county approved agricultural districts encompassing 258,717 acres – the 10<sup>th</sup> highest number of Agricultural District acres in the state. Farmers and rural landowners enrolled in these agricultural districts receive important “right-to-farm” protections:

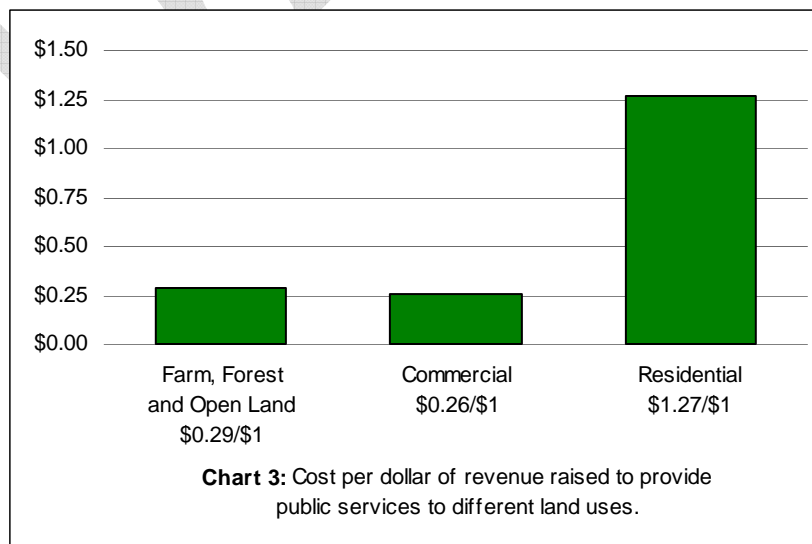
- Definition of agriculture: the commissioner of the New York State Department of Agriculture and Markets has authority to determine what constitutes an agricultural land use.

- Local ordinance provision: provides protection against unreasonably restrictive zoning code and ordinances regarding farm practices.
- Agricultural data statements: requires that an agricultural data statement be filed with the local board for certain land uses located within 500 feet of a farm in an agricultural district.
- Notice of intent: an NOI filing on proposed public projects in an agricultural district identifies potential impacts on agriculture and is reviewed by the County Agriculture and Farmland Protection Board and the New York State Department of Agriculture and Markets.
- Sound agriculture practices: gives authority to the New York State Commissioner of Agriculture and Markets to review specific cases and issue an opinion regarding whether an agricultural practice is “sound”.
- Disclosure notices: requires that landowners in agricultural districts provide a notice to a prospective buyer at the time that a purchase contract is signed, advising the purchaser that agricultural practices occur in the area.

Erie County, and 23 of the 25 towns in the county have adopted “Right-to-Farm” laws. These local laws complement the state law, publicize county and town support for local farms and, in many of the municipal laws, establish a town process for dispute resolution involving farms. While Agricultural Districts and Right to Farm Laws cannot keep land in farming nor ensure farm profitability, they have served as the cornerstone for agricultural planning, and have helped to stabilize the farmland base.

### Local Property Tax Program

Many cost of community services studies (COCS) have been conducted across the country that show that farms use less in services than they pay in taxes while the reverse is true for residences (Chart 3). Farmland can help to lower demand and expense for public services in a town. Balancing working farms with other land uses makes fiscal sense for municipalities.



Agricultural assessment is a state program that recognizes that farmland should be valued and assessed at its use value for farming. Agricultural assessment is applicable to land in or outside of an agricultural district that meets the following criteria. Eligible farmland parcels must be at least 7 acres and worked by a farm that grossed at least \$10,000 annually in agricultural sales for the preceding two years. Or if the land is less than 7 acres, the farm working the land must have an average gross sales value of at least \$50,000 annually for the preceding two years.

Landowners who rent their land to farmers can qualify for agricultural assessment if they provide a minimum 5 year lease to the farmer, and the farmer's operation meets the criteria for eligibility. Converting land to a non-agricultural use will end agricultural assessment and will result in a computed penalty. Farmers and landowners wishing to enroll in agricultural assessment must visit the Erie County Soil and Water Conservation District office to determine the soil types on the farm parcels (agricultural use assessment values are set by the state and vary by soil type), then visit the town assessor to complete and file state form RP-305. Agricultural assessment does not guarantee that land will remain in agriculture but, as with agricultural districts, it has a stabilizing affect on the land base, and can incentivize farmland leasing by non-farm landowners.

### Land Use and Infrastructure Planning

While towns in New York State have jurisdiction for land use regulations, the County does have the responsibility to assist municipalities with land use and infrastructure planning. In developing this plan, a number of maps were created to aid land use planning on both the county and the town level. Following is a basic description of each map with associated suggestions for use as a planning tool.

#### Maps

1. *Land in Erie County Agricultural Districts:* identifies the 14 state-certified, county-approved agricultural districts in the county. (Note: there are agricultural districts numbered greater than 14 due to district consolidation of lower number districts.)

Farms within the county's agricultural districts receive the Right to Farm protections outlined previously. It is important for the county to know which farm parcels are located in agricultural districts, and is also important for individual towns to have maps of the agricultural district(s) that fall within town boundaries. The county currently provides this information to the towns.

2. *Agricultural Parcels and Cropland Coverage:* identifies active agricultural land within agricultural parcels (some land in parcels may be woodland or scrub land and is not tilled).

This map is most useful for informative purposes, providing a consolidated view of active agricultural land in the towns.

3. *Agricultural Soils Rating:* identifies parcels with the greatest amount of high quality soils. Soils with USDA soils classifications of prime received a rating of 2; prime when

drained rated 1.5; and soils of statewide importance rated 1. The number of acres in each category in a parcel was multiplied by those weighting factors then the totals were added together.

This should be one of the most used maps by both the county and towns. It very clearly shows locations of the largest acreages of high quality soils. While all of the farmland in the county should receive the benefit of effective planning so that it is not converted, it is valuable to note which parcels and areas of the county contain the best soils and greatest quantities of quality farmland. Particular care must be taken to protect these areas from conversion. New water and sewer extensions should not be placed in these areas, and tap ins for existing lines should not be allowed. Towns should create zoning districts that encompass these areas and support farming as the primary use in those districts.

4. *Natural Resources Rating*: identifies and values parcels with particular natural resources features. The number of acres in each of three categories was added together to determine the Natural Resource Value Rating for a parcel: state or federally-regulated wetland, including a 100 foot buffer from wetlands regulated by the NYS Department of Environmental Conservation; land within 75 feet of a mapped stream or lake; land within 500 feet of the Lake Erie shoreline.

This map is useful when considering the value that well-managed farms can have in protecting wildlife habitat and water quality. Cost share funding to adopt conservation practices on parcels receiving a high natural resource ranking should be prioritized for these farms.

5. *Natural Resources Rating Features*: identifies DEC and federal wetlands, streams, and agricultural parcels.

This map depicts the natural resources features used in the rating map but is also useful for viewing the actual location of key natural resources features in relation to critical farmland parcels.

6. *Proximity to Protected Lands*: identifies parcels located within 500 feet of protected farmland (land that is restricted from development due to a conservation easement or owned by a municipality and leased for farm use), a public park, or other preserved land.

Protecting a critical mass of farmland in a given area can be vital for farm viability and ease of overall planning. This map identifies parcels of protected farmland, as well as other public and protected land. Since public funds are often invested in protecting land, locating newly protected farmland nearby maximizes the public investment in land protection. Any towns that have protected land should use this map when considering land use projects, and the county should consider the locations of protected land in developing a PDR program and prioritizing land to be protected.

7. *Framework for Regional Growth Policy Areas*: identifies agricultural parcels in relation to regional growth policy areas from the Erie Niagara Framework for Regional Growth.



The Framework delineates Developed, Developing, and Rural areas as well as Development Centers and Corridors.

This is another key map for use in both county and town agricultural planning. The Framework has already identified areas of the county that have high development pressure and are therefore at increased risk of farmland conversion. Farms in any of the three areas have value to their communities and the County and need supportive planning in order to remain viable. Farms located in the Developing area are often at high risk of conversion. These farms are in areas that have experienced sprawling development. When prioritizing farms for protection, this map should always be consulted and other factors and other maps used in conjunction with it. Reiterating and upholding the Framework policies regarding farmland in the Developing and Rural areas is critical to alleviating development pressure on farms in the county, and to stopping sprawling development from reaching the Rural areas of the county.

As outlined previously in this plan:

*The conservation of agricultural land is a key policy for the Developing Areas. Relevant strategies include:*

- *Support local planning that designates areas appropriate for development and conservation, minimizes conversion of agricultural lands and avoids “leap frog” patterns of development*
- *Minimize conversion of significant agricultural lands*
- *Channel growth to areas with existing sewer and water service*
- *Where extensions of public sewer and water service are needed to address health issues, restrict tap-ins for new development in areas designated for agricultural use*

*Strategies for Rural Areas include:*

- *Expand efforts to strengthen the rural economy, including the conservation of agricultural lands and rural economic development initiatives*
- *Identify and conserve agricultural lands; Support zoning that reduces permitted development densities, require cluster development to maintain rural character and protect resources, and discourage continued subdivision of rural road frontages.*
- *Encourage the contraction of sewer district boundaries that extend into areas designated for agricultural use*

8. *Clusters of Parcels with High Agricultural Soils Values:* identifies areas in the county that have groupings of farmland parcels with excellent soils.

The identified areas are generalized and have value when using planning tools to protect areas of farmland with the best soils in the county. These clustered areas do not take into consideration development pressure, but do depict places where non-farm development should not occur. Water and sewer extensions should not be placed in these areas and if they already exist, tap ins should not be allowed. These are excellent areas in the county for farming – the best soils, largest parcels, and highest quantity of adjacent farmland.

Finally, no single map is designed to be used independently for agricultural planning – referring to a number of the maps will yield the best analysis and decisions. The county should ensure that all towns have copies of these maps with the associated methodology (in the Appendix) and text descriptions, and should encourage their use by town planning boards and town boards. Trainings offered to town volunteers and staff should include opportunities to learn how to use these maps to plan for agriculture in local towns.

## Strategies, Goals, and Actions

The Agricultural and Farmland Protection Board, after collecting and reviewing public and farmer input, developed a plan of action to address identified agricultural needs in Erie County over the next decade, from 2012 to 2022. Following are two main strategies with specific measurable goals for each. Each goal has a list of actions that can be taken. This is a comprehensive list of goals and actions and requires input and assistance from a myriad of partners. No partner listed or entity mentioned is required to assist but will hopefully choose to support the process of improving and supporting Erie County's farm viability. Priority actions are highlighted and these are the actions that the Erie County Department of Environment and Planning and the Erie County Agricultural and Farmland Protection Board will prioritize for implementation. All other support actions will be prioritized, executed, and evaluated for action periodically throughout the ten year implementation phase.

**Strategy I: Keep land in agricultural production by protecting farmland, helping a new generation to farm, and improving the viability of all farms in the County.**

**Goal A:** Retain 95% of the 149,356 acres in the county in agricultural production as reported by the 2007 USDA Census of Agriculture.

**Priority Action** to protect farmland and stabilize the land base:

**Determine the feasibility of developing an Erie County purchase of development rights program.** As part of this planning process, farmland in the county was prioritized for protection based on criteria including soil quality, development pressure, and location in relation to other public natural resources and permanently protected land. A county program will use the farmland prioritization, along with a voluntary, pre-application process, to determine which farmers and landowners are interested in protecting their land. Review of the land prioritization and pre-applications will culminate in a ranking of potential projects. New York State ([www.agriculture.ny.gov](http://www.agriculture.ny.gov)) and the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) (<http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/main/national/programs/easements/farmranch>) have had programs to supplement the local cost of purchasing development rights on farmland. New York's program has not funded any new projects since 2009. In order to institute a county program, a local funding source will be needed to match the federal or state program funding, or to fully fund the county program.

### Implementation:

*Timeline:* Immediate action (1-2 years)

*Lead:* Dept. of Environment and Planning (DEP); Agricultural and Farmland Protection Board (AFPB)

*Partners:* Western New York Land Conservancy (WNYLC); American Farmland Trust (AFT); Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS)

*Potential Funding Sources:* County funds. USDA NRCS Farm and Ranch Land Protection Program (FRPP). New York State Farmland Protection Program.

*Support Actions* to protect farmland and stabilize the land base:

**Support the state-certified agricultural district program with right-to-farm provisions.**

New York Agricultural Districts Law, Article 25AA

(<http://www.agriculture.ny.gov/AP/agsservices/25-AA.pdf>) of the Agricultural and Markets Law, provides ‘right-to-farm’ protections for farms in state-certified, county-adopted agricultural districts. These include protection against unreasonably restrictive local ordinances, the ability to undertake sound (as determined by the NYS Commissioner of Agriculture) agricultural practices, agricultural data statements for certain land uses within 500 feet of a farm, and notice of intent filings on proposed public projects that may impact farms.

Continue to consolidate the 14 county approved, state certified agricultural districts in the County with an ultimate goal of 4 districts for the County.

**Implementation:**

*Timeline:* ongoing

*Lead:* DEP; AFPB

*Partners:* Towns in Erie County

*Potential Funding Sources:* NA

**Collect agricultural assessment data by town in order to inform agricultural planning efforts.**

The Erie County Department of Environment and Planning administers the state agricultural districts program for the county, and staffs the Agricultural and Farmland Protection Board. Agricultural assessment data is collected by individual municipalities but not necessarily shared with the county Dept. of Environment and Planning. Understanding exactly what land in the county is in active agricultural production is necessary for the Dept. of Environment and Planning and the Agricultural and Farmland Protection Board to effectively plan for agriculture in the county. This data will inform a Purchase of Development Rights Program as well as all other actions outlined in this Plan.

**Implementation:**

*Timeline:* Immediate Action (1-2 years)

*Lead:* DEP

*Partners:* Towns in Erie County; AFPB

*Potential Funding Sources:* NA

**Assist towns that wish to adopt term and/or permanent easement programs.** Currently the towns of Orchard Park and Elma have term easement programs with permanent conservation easement options. These programs reduce the property tax assessment on a minimum acreage and place a deed restriction for a specified term on that land. Farmland is unavailable for development during the term. Because the towns legal authority to establish such a program was questioned, Orchard Park and Elma sought state authorizing legislation in order to proceed with the program. Determining the parameters of a term easement program, and requesting state authorization can be daunting tasks for a town. DEP assistance can facilitate the process. Providing support to towns that have permanently protected farmland is important as well. This includes the towns of Amherst, Marilla, Elma, and Clarence.

Implementation:

*Timeline:* Intermediate Action (3-5 years)

*Lead:* Towns in Erie County

*Partners:* DEP; AFPB

*Potential Funding Sources:* Town funds.

**Develop a ditch maintenance program which supports preservation of prime agricultural land.** Poor ditch maintenance affects good agricultural land when plant growth clogs ditches and pipes reducing their effectiveness and contributing to water soaked farm fields that become difficult to impossible to till. In wet areas of the County, particularly the northern portion of Erie County, this has become an increasingly frustrating situation for farmers. Regular ditch maintenance performed with input from the farm community will help to alleviate this situation.

Implementation:

*Timeline:* Intermediate

*Lead:* Erie County

*Partners:* AFPB

*Potential Funding Sources:* County funds

**Goal B:** Retain 95% of the 1215 farms in the county as reported by the USDA 2007 Census of Agriculture. (Note: The Census of Agriculture defines a farm as producing and selling \$1,000 of agricultural products in a year.)

**Priority Action** to help a next generation to become established on new and existing farms through training programs, promotion, education, and incentives.

**Determine the feasibility of developing a community college agricultural training program for workforce development.** Niagara County Community College has a horticulture degree program([http://catalog.niagaracc.suny.edu/preview\\_program.php?catoid=6&poid=247&returnto=132](http://catalog.niagaracc.suny.edu/preview_program.php?catoid=6&poid=247&returnto=132)) for students interested in careers with nurseries, landscapers, golf courses, or florists. Genesee Community College offers an exploratory agriculture course to help students better understand agriculture in the region

[http://www.genesee.edu/content/academics/programs/MathSci/Environ/AGR190\\_factsheet.pdf](http://www.genesee.edu/content/academics/programs/MathSci/Environ/AGR190_factsheet.pdf).

And Monroe Community College has an Agriculture and Life Sciences Institute (<http://www.monroecc.edu/depts/Agriculture/>) designed to prepare students for farm and food production careers. Erie County can use these courses and programs as models to create a community college agriculture degree program that trains students for work on farms.

Implementation:

*Timeline:* Immediate Action (1-2 years)

*Lead:* DEP

*Partners:* Erie Community College; AFPB

*Potential Funding Sources:* ECC program funds, Erie County

*Support Actions* to help a next generation become established on new and existing farms through training programs, promotion, education, and incentives:

**Research and develop programs that will help to build an educated and trained workforce for local farms by:**

- **encouraging BOCES to include agricultural workforce training.** BOCES offers career training for high school students and workforce development for adults. Expanding these programs to include hands-on training for farm work will help to provide a local workforce for Erie County farms.  
<http://www.boces.org/wps/portal/BOCESofNYS> <http://www.e1b.org/wps/portal/Erie1>
- **developing a formal county apprenticeship and internship program.** Create a comprehensive program package that farms can use when offering apprenticeships and internships. Farms sometimes hire students or young adults who continue to work on the farm throughout their high school and college years. A small number of these students become permanent employees on a farm or begin to farm on their own. Generally, this has happened informally in Erie County, Cornell Cooperative Extension of Erie County can facilitate these work arrangements by documenting and sharing opportunities for apprenticeships and internships on local farms.
- **researching the institution of a farm workforce development program that could benefit new immigrant populations and farms.** Diverse immigrant and refugee populations from around the world are located in Erie County. Many immigrants come to the U.S. with farm backgrounds and knowledge. Using these farming skills and helping them to secure jobs benefits the immigrants and local farmers. The New Farmer Development Program in New York City. <http://www.grownyc.org/greenmarket/nfdp> supports and trains immigrants to become farm owners.
- **supporting all youth agriculture programs:** 4-H is part of Cornell Cooperative Extension (including programming at the Belle Center in Buffalo <http://www.thebellecenter.org/>) and provides hands-on learning opportunities for youth in a variety of areas including agriculture. <http://cceeriecounty.shutterfly.com/4-hyouthdevelopment> ; FFA is a high school and college agricultural career and leadership program <http://www.nysffa.org/>; and Agriculture in the Classroom is a curriculum based education program for primary and secondary students, that uses agricultural lessons to teach required competencies <http://www.nyaged.org/aite/>.
- **encouraging agriculture programs in city, suburban, and rural school districts.** McKinley High School in Buffalo <http://www.buffaloschools.org/McKinley.cfm?subpage=46912> offers a horticulture program for students and hosts a chapter of the Future Farmers of America (FFA). Supporting and enhancing this program to include training in other agricultural careers and urban farming can create new opportunities for city youth and may help to provide a trained workforce for county farms. John Bowne High School in New York City is a model for an extensive internship component in a school agriculture program. [http://www.johnbowne.org/apps/pages/index.jsp?uREC\\_ID=65010&type=d](http://www.johnbowne.org/apps/pages/index.jsp?uREC_ID=65010&type=d)

Implementation:

*Timeline:* Immediate Action (1-2 years) for the apprenticeship program; Ongoing Action for the support of youth education programs; Intermediate Action for all others(3-5 years)

*Lead:* CCE for the apprenticeship program; Erie County Farm Bureau for the youth and school agriculture programs; DEP for all others

*Partners:* AFPB; CCE; Erie County Farm Bureau; DEP

*Potential Funding Sources:* Grants for the apprenticeship program and the workforce development training program for immigrants.

**Urban agriculture:**

**Support Buffalo's Green Code zoning update in order to expand urban farming opportunities.**

The City of Buffalo is part way through a two year process to update its 60 year old zoning code to be 'place-based' with emphasis on enhancing the quality of life and character of the city. Urban farming is prevalent in many large U.S. cities, and has become rooted in Buffalo's neighborhoods as well. Zoning code that reflects the interests and needs of urban agriculture will help these farms to flourish – farms such as the Massachusetts Avenue Project (MAP) <http://mass-ave.org/>, Queen City Farm <http://queencityfarm.blogspot.com/>, Community Action Organization Green Entrepreneurial Center <http://www.caoec.org/html/gec.html>, Wilson Street Farm <http://wilsonstreeturbanfarm.wordpress.com/>, and others.

Implementation:

*Timeline:* Immediate Action (1-2 years)

*Lead:* DEP; AFPB

*Partners:* Massachusetts Avenue Project; Grassroots Gardens of Buffalo

*Potential Funding Sources:* NA

**New farmers:**

- a. **Determine the feasibility of developing a property tax abatement program for new farmers.** Similar to a payment in lieu of taxes (PILOT), new farmers could receive an exemption from property taxes for a specified time period, for instance five years, on land that is used for agricultural production. Town IDAs could function as the primary program provider. The county could reimburse towns for the program cost. The PILOT could require that a new farmer participate in a training program offered by CCE, NOFA NY, NESAWG or others in order to qualify for the exemption. The state of Nebraska has a beginning farmer tax credit program for personal property used in agricultural production that operates in a similar manner.  
[http://www.agr.state.ne.us/beg\\_farmer/index.html](http://www.agr.state.ne.us/beg_farmer/index.html)

Implementation:

*Timeline:* Intermediate Action (3-5 years)

*Lead:* Town IDAs

*Partners:* DEP; AFPB

*Potential Funding Sources:* To be determined



- b. **Promote western New York as a place to farm.** Erie County will lead a western New York effort to promote the region to new farmers and to help transition farms that are at particular risk of being lost to development. Promotional efforts will focus on niche, value added, and direct market farm enterprises that operate on smaller acreages in urban-edge areas. Jefferson County developed a promotional program, *Come Farm With Us*, which eventually expanded to encompass 8 northern New York counties and led to the transfer of well over 65 farms in the North Country. <http://www.comefarmwithus.org/>

Implementation:

*Timeline:* Long Term Action (6-10 years)

*Lead:* DEP

*Partners:* Erie County Farm Bureau; CCE; NOFA New York; other western NY county organizations

*Potential Funding Sources:* Foundation grants

- c. **Promote existing training programs that are targeted to small and beginning farmers.** Organizations that offer such programs include Cornell Cooperative Extension of Erie County <http://cceeriecounty.shutterfly.com/agriculture> Northeast Organic Farming Association of New York <http://www.nofany.org/>, New York Sustainable Agriculture Working Group (NESAWG) <http://www.nysawg.org/>, and others.

Implementation:

*Timeline:* Ongoing Action (1-2 years)

*Lead:* CCE

*Partners:* NOFA NY; NESWAG; DEP

*Potential Funding Sources:* NA

**Goal C:** Establish five new agricultural programs (from the list below or others) that can improve the viability of farms in Erie County.

**Priority Action** to improve farm viability and increase investment in agricultural economic development projects.

**Incorporate agritourism into countywide tourism efforts.**

Hay rides, corn mazes, u-pick, and farm trails have popped up around the region, and are helping farmers to supplement traditional farm income and to keep farms in business. Coordinating agritourism efforts and promotion allows farms to share costs, and can help market the county as place to visit. Erie County agriculture is diverse and has something for everyone. The scenic beauty of farm country, and consumer interest in local farm products will draw tourists to the county's rural areas. The Southtowns Community Enhancement Coalition partnered with the University of Buffalo Regional Institute to develop a farm market brochure after surveying area farmers [http://www.regional-institute.buffalo.edu/Includes/UserDownloads/sowing\\_finalreport.pdf](http://www.regional-institute.buffalo.edu/Includes/UserDownloads/sowing_finalreport.pdf). The Buffalo Niagara Convention and Visitors Bureau recommends the Lake Erie and Niagara wine trails as 'things to do' when in the region. <http://www.visitbuffaloniagara.com/things-to-do/vineyards-wine-trails/>.



Implementation:

*Timeline:* Ongoing *Lead:* Southtowns Community Enhancement Coalition

*Partners:* Buffalo Niagara Convention and Visitors Bureau

*Potential Funding Sources:* Grants

*Support Actions* to improve farm viability and increase investment in agricultural economic development projects:

**Establish a shovel-ready Agribusiness Park in the county to attract food and agricultural processing businesses.** Processing facilities for raw agricultural products can create an added market for local farms.

Implementation:

*Timeline:* Immediate Action (1-2 years)

*Lead:* DEP

*Partners:* BNE; Erie County IDA; Town(s) with potential sites

*Potential Funding Sources:* Regional Economic Development Council (REDC)

**Capital:**

**Create an IDA Agricultural Specialist position.** This position would be the coordinator of all county agricultural economic development initiatives. Responsibilities would include developing and managing a USDA microenterprise loan fund / rural microenterprise technical assistance; researching and applying to funding sources for agricultural economic development projects in the County; assisting with agricultural business attraction efforts (production, processing, wholesale, retail); exploring innovative financing options for agricultural businesses as well as for implementation of actions in this Plan; and, generally supporting all county efforts that seek to improve farm viability. This position would also have a seat on the Agricultural Working Group of the Western New York Regional Economic Development Council. Instituting a “funders forum” to creatively pitch county and regional agricultural economic development projects to public (Empire State Development; Rural Development, others) and private funders (local foundations, others) would be a key implementation action for this position.

Implementation:

*Timeline:* Intermediate Action (3-5 years)

*Lead:* DEP

*Partners:* Erie County IDA

*Potential Funding Sources:* County funds

**Aggregation and Distribution:**

**a. Research the feasibility of creating a food hub in the region for farm product aggregation and distribution with the following elements:**

- Co-packing facilities.
- Public cold storage
- Branded, community marketing initiatives

- Partnerships with upstream and downstream industries
- Global GAP certification capability designed into the operating and management systems
- USDA inspected facilities
- Shared-use processing facilities with business support systems, e.g., business incubation services
- Best practice research on food hubs can be found at <http://wallacecenter.org/our-work/current-initiatives/food-hub-collaboration>

**Implementation:**

*Timeline:* Immediate Action (1-2 years)

*Lead:* Field and Fork Network

*Partners:* DEP; Erie County Farm Bureau

*Potential Funding Sources:* USDA, grants

- b. Identify a coordinating agency (Erie County IDA, Buffalo Niagara Partnership) to issue a request for proposals to provide aggregation and distribution services for local farmers and food processors seeking to develop external markets.**

**Implementation:**

*Timeline:* Long term actions (5-10 years)

*Lead:* DEP; Field and Fork Network

*Partners:* Erie County IDA; BNE

*Potential Funding Sources:* USDA; REDC

- c. Research development of an innovation center for the western New York region (for new food product development and value-added).** [www.cdr.wisc.edu](http://www.cdr.wisc.edu)  
The center should be focused on key regional sectors such as dairy, livestock, and vegetables. Attract private sector participation and investment. Seek affiliations with national and international research institutions with a proven record of success.

**Implementation:**

*Timeline:* Long term (5-10 years)

*Lead:* DEP

*Partners:* AFPB; CCE; other western NY county planning departments and other agricultural organizations

*Potential Funding Sources:*

**Marketing:**

- a. Develop a county program to help farmers market their agricultural products and to assist with identifying new market opportunities.** This program should focus on virtual services and include a more rigorous transaction based system than is currently offered by Market Maker, for example similar to the Fresh Fork Market [www.freshforkmarket.com](http://www.freshforkmarket.com).

Implementation:

*Timeline:* Long term

*Lead:* CCE

*Partners:* Erie County Farm Bureau

*Potential Funding Sources:* Grants

- b. Develop a regional agricultural brand.** It can be difficult for consumers who want to purchase local agricultural products, to identify which products are actually produced in western New York. A regional brand provides a quick, visible indication of where the product comes from. Niagara County has a 'Pick Niagara' logo for local farm produce: <http://www.ccenagaracounty.org/PickNiagara.aspx>. And New York State has a state brand for agricultural products grown, and foods processed, in the state. <http://www.prideofny.com/>

Implementation:

*Timeline:* Immediate Action (1-2 years)

*Lead:* Field and Fork Network

*Partners:* CCE

*Potential Funding Sources:* NYS Dept. of Agriculture and Markets

**Strategy II**    **Inform the public, local leaders, and elected officials about the benefits that agriculture provides and support policy and legislative changes that will improve farm viability.**

**Goal A:**        Fifty percent of the towns in Erie County will document the importance of agriculture to the local community either in their comprehensive plan or through other local planning efforts.

**Priority Actions** to educate local leaders and elected officials about the benefits that farms provide to local economies and to the quality of life of county residents:

**Erie County will calculate the value of agriculture to the local and regional economy as part of a complete economic analysis of agriculture and its multiplier effects.** Local officials need information on the many benefits that farms provide to communities, but in order to be fiscally responsive to residents concerns, economic information is particularly useful. A complete analysis of the local and regional agriculture economy can provide this needed information. It will also be useful for the county to share cost of community services studies that American Farmland Trust and others have done in many areas of the country. These studies show that farms contribute more in property taxes than they use in services.

[http://www.farmlandinfo.org/documents/38422/COCS\\_08-2010.pdf](http://www.farmlandinfo.org/documents/38422/COCS_08-2010.pdf).

This economic information will also help to inform a Purchase of Development Rights Program as well as all other actions in this Plan.

**Implementation:**

*Timeline:* Intermediate Action (3-5 years)

*Lead:* DEP

*Partners:* University of Buffalo; AFPB; Erie County towns

*Potential Funding Sources:* To be determined

**Erie County Dept. of Environment and Planning will offer regular trainings for local leaders and volunteers about:**

- agricultural friendly zoning;
- the economic benefits of farms and buying local farm products;
- the value of agriculture to the local community including cost of community service studies;
- agricultural assessment requirements and enforcement,
- incorporating agriculture into comprehensive plans and, developing and implementing agricultural and farmland protection plans;
- use of plan maps, especially soils maps, for local planning purposes;
- assessing and coding farmland and easement protected land; and
- addressing water line restrictions, drainage, and other infrastructure concerns that impact farms.

In New York State, towns are responsible for land use decisions. Yet, agricultural resources are not defined by political boundaries and are often better served by regional planning. Erie County can provide training to municipal leaders and volunteers to assist them in making educated land use decisions that support agriculture and help farms remain in business.

Implementation:

*Timeline:* Ongoing and Immediate Action (1-2 years)

*Lead:* DEP

*Partners:* Towns in Erie County; CCE; Soil and Water Conservation District (SWCD); Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS); AFT; Erie County Dept. of Real Property Tax Services

*Potential Funding Sources:* NA

*Support Actions* to educate local leaders and elected officials about the benefits that farms provide to local economies and to the quality of life of county residents:

**Periodically host farm tours for local officials and leaders.**

Many elected officials have never visited a working farm and doing so can be quite informative. In past years, Erie County hosted local leaders on tours of farms during the renewal period for a state-certified agricultural district. This was an ideal opportunity to engage local officials in planning for agriculture in their community. For 22 years, Genesee County has annually hosted a countywide bus tour of farms and agribusinesses for officials and leaders, the Local Decision Makers Tour. [http://www.co.genesee.ny.us/docs/planning/ag\\_tour\\_rsvp\\_form\\_2011.pdf](http://www.co.genesee.ny.us/docs/planning/ag_tour_rsvp_form_2011.pdf)

Implementation:

*Timeline:* Ongoing

*Lead:* CCE

*Partners:* DEP; AFPB; Erie County Farm Bureau; NRCS; SWCD

*Potential Funding Sources:* To be determined

**Encourage towns to use Memorandums of Understanding (MOUs)** to expand regional planning for agriculture, and to recognize that farms are land based businesses that are not always well served when defined by political boundaries. Towns in the county already use MOUs for specific multi-town planning purposes. For example the towns of Amherst and Clarence have an MOU for the shared Transit Road transportation corridor. The Southtowns Community Enhancement Coalition is a group of 9 municipalities in the southern portion of the county who are working together to support agriculture. Formalizing that support to include planning for agriculture would be a natural next step. And in 2000, the towns of Brant, Evans, and North Collins developed a joint Agricultural and Farmland Protection Plan to coordinate agricultural planning efforts.

Implementation:

*Timeline:* Long Term (6-10 years)

*Lead:* DEP

*Partners:* towns in Erie County

*Potential Funding Sources:* NA

**Goal B:** Twenty percent of food products purchased by county institutions will come from local and regional farmers.

**Priority Action** to support policies that will help farms to provide affordable, local food to county residents:

**Develop a county Food Policy Council that includes a formal role for the Agriculture and Farmland Protection Board** so that farmland is recognized as a critical component of local food production, and farm and food issues are not decoupled. Food Policy Councils typically influence policies directly related to food issues. It is less typical that they address land policies as they relate to farms and food production. Erie County has an ideal opportunity to create a Food Policy Council that does both and includes representation from the county Agricultural and Farmland Protection Board. Missoula County, Montana established a food and agriculture coalition <http://www.missoulacfac.org/> to serve as an umbrella organization for two committees addressing land use and agricultural viability, and food access and consumption issues.

Implementation:

*Timeline:* Immediate Action (1-2 years)

*Lead:* Healthy Kids Healthy Communities

*Partners:* AFPB; AFT

*Potential Funding Sources:* NA

*Support Actions* to support policies that will help farms to provide affordable, local food to county residents:

**Work with the Food Policy Council to develop a local food procurement policy for county institutions.** Expanding local purchasing from area farmers can improve farm profitability while consumers receive a fresh product that is grown nearby. In 2009, Albany County passed the first local food procurement policy in the state.

[http://www.farmlandinfo.org/documents/37953/Buy\\_Local\\_Law\\_Albany\\_County\\_\(3\).pdf](http://www.farmlandinfo.org/documents/37953/Buy_Local_Law_Albany_County_(3).pdf)

In 2010, the New York City Council released a report, *FoodWorks*, with associated food policy recommendations. [http://www.council.nyc.gov/html/action\\_center/food.shtml](http://www.council.nyc.gov/html/action_center/food.shtml)

And in 2011, students in the University of Buffalo Department of Urban and Regional Planning under the direction of Dr. Samina Raja, developed a food system assessment for Erie County,

*Room at the Table.* [http://www.farmlandinfo.org/documents/39106/Room\\_at\\_the\\_Table\\_-\\_Food\\_System\\_Assessment\\_of\\_Erie\\_County-FINAL.pdf](http://www.farmlandinfo.org/documents/39106/Room_at_the_Table_-_Food_System_Assessment_of_Erie_County-FINAL.pdf)

Implementation:

*Timeline:* Intermediate Action (3-5 years)

*Lead:* Food Policy Council

*Partners:* Healthy Kids Healthy Communities; AFPB; Erie County Farm Bureau; CCE

*Potential Funding Sources:* NA

**Promote local food purchasing by schools.** Concern about the nutritional quality of food served in school lunches has been well publicized. Connecting schools with local farmers to improve food quality is a win-win for school children and farmers but is not necessarily an easy process. Assisting county school districts with efforts to work with farmers and procure local food can facilitate these partnerships. <http://www.farmtoschool.org/state-home.php?id=17>

Implementation:

*Timeline:* Intermediate Action (3-5 years)

*Lead:* CCE

*Partners:* Erie County school districts; Erie County Farm Bureau; Field and Fork Network

*Potential Funding Sources:* NA

**Promote farmers markets in the city and county to attract more people to existing markets.**

Nationally, the number of farmers markets has quadrupled since 1994 and grew by 17% from 2010 to 2011. Farmers have benefited from an increase in direct market opportunities where they capture more of the retail dollar while consumers appreciate a local stop to purchase local farm products. Erie County has 16 farmers markets with additional markets opening each season, including some that are sponsored by companies to provide a convenient, healthy food shopping option for employees. A number of Erie County farmers markets offer entertainment, making them a destination as well as a place to purchase good food. Erie County can encourage the establishment of new farmers markets in underserved locations in the county so that residents have a source of fresh, local produce.

Implementation:

*Timeline:* Intermediate (3-5 years)

*Lead:* DEP

*Partners:* Farmers Markets; CCE

*Potential Funding Sources:* NA

**Goal C:** Establish an annual county-wide, agricultural event.

**Priority Action** to educate and inform the public about farms and food production:

**Celebrate Erie County farms with a county-wide agricultural event for the general public.**

Annually from 1996 to 2003, the Erie County Family, Food, and Farm Tour bused up to 500 adults and children to area farms on a Saturday in September. This farm tour was sponsored by a collaboration of county agricultural organizations and was well supported by county farms. Every Father's Day for 16 years, Saratoga County hosts a public event on a local farm.

<http://www.saratogafarms.com/sundae2011page.html> Attendance is always over 1000 people. Erie County can hold a public event on an annual basis that will showcase what farms in the county have to offer.

The County can also assist towns by publicizing the variety of agricultural events that occur throughout the County.



Implementation:

*Timeline:* Immediate (1-2 years)

*Lead:* CCE; Erie County Farm Bureau

*Partners:* AFPB; SWCD; NRCS; AFT; WNYLC; DEP; Erie County Agricultural Society

*Potential Funding Sources:* Local grants; farm organizations; attendance fees

*Support Actions* to educate and inform the public about farms and food production:

**Work with the Erie County Agricultural Society to promote the Farm2Table school program.** <http://www.the-fairgrounds.com/farm2table> The Farm2Table program, sponsored by the Erie County Agricultural Society, and held at the Erie County Fairgrounds, is a free, hands-on educational field trip for 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> graders. Students learn about agriculture to better understand how food comes from farms to their tables. Advertising and promoting the Farm2Table field trip to schools can help educate youth about local agriculture.

Implementation:

*Timeline:* Ongoing

*Lead:* Erie County Farm Bureau

*Partners:* DEP; CCE

*Potential Funding Sources:* NA

**Provide support for Erie County Farm Bureau's efforts to encourage Agriculture in the classroom** curriculum use in Erie County schools. <http://www.nyaged.org/aite/> Erie County Farm Bureau also donates a book to area schools and reads in classrooms during Ag Literacy Week each March.

Implementation:

*Timeline:* Ongoing

*Lead:* Erie County Farm Bureau

*Partners:* AFPB

*Potential Funding Sources:* NA

**Goal D:** Implement at least four new public policies, or support ongoing policies, that protect farmland and support the viability of farms in Erie County.

**Priority Action** to support partner agricultural organizations, such as Farm Bureau, American Farmland Trust, and others, with advocacy efforts that focus on:

**Adequate county funding for Cornell Cooperative Extension**

<http://cceeriecounty.shutterfly.com/> , and the Soil and Water Conservation District

<http://www.ecswcd.org/>. Receive regular updates about county agriculture programs and support these organizations and programs in the annual county budget process.

Implementation:

*Timeline:* Ongoing

*Lead:* DEP

*Partners:* CCE; SWCD; Erie County Farm Bureau

*Potential Funding Sources:* County budget.



*Support Actions* to support partner agricultural organizations, such as Farm Bureau, American Farmland Trust, and others, with advocacy efforts that focus on:

**Increasing the penalty for termination of agricultural assessment.** Current penalties often do not deter removal of farmland from agricultural assessment when a landowner chooses to sell or develop the land. And, consistent enforcement of agricultural assessment requirements and penalties is also needed. <http://www.agriculture.ny.gov/AP/agsservices/25-AA.pdf>

Implementation:

*Timeline:* Intermediate Action (3-5 years)

*Lead:* DEP; Erie County Legislature

*Partners:* Erie County towns

*Potential Funding Sources:* NA

**Regional planning, especially between Erie and Niagara Counties.** The Erie Niagara Framework for Regional Growth identifies opportunities for shared agricultural planning between the two counties. Formalizing shared agricultural planning and including other western New York counties will strengthen farmland protection and farm viability work throughout the region. Elements from the Erie County Agricultural and Farmland Protection Plan should be used in developing the Farmland Protection Policy component to the Framework for Regional Growth. This will be one of six policy specific components prepared by Erie County as part of the upcoming phase of the Framework for Regional Growth (2006) document.

<http://www2.erie.gov/regionalframework/index.php?q=FrameworkPlan>

Adhering to Framework for Regional Growth policies including maintaining growth in areas that have infrastructure, such as water and sewer lines, rather than extending this infrastructure into rural areas, will help to protect productive farmland. The DEP has a county policy that limits sewer extensions outside of Framework for Regional Growth developed areas.

Implementation:

*Timeline:* Immediate (1-2 years)

*Lead:* DEP

*Partners:* AFPB; Erie County Legislature

*Potential Funding Sources:* NA

**Identifying, drafting when appropriate, and advocating for county, state, and federal agricultural policy and legislative changes.**

Coordinate state and federal advocacy work with other counties in the region with shared agricultural interests. Engage state and federal elected officials to advocate as a western New York coalition for these changes.

Implementation:

*Timeline:* Ongoing

*Lead:* DEP; Erie County Legislature

*Partners:* State and federal legislators; Erie County Farm Bureau; AFPB

*Potential Funding Sources:* NA

**General:**

**Priority Actions**

**At five year intervals, formally review progress in implementing the Agricultural and Farmland Protection Plan.** Evaluate progress based on the identified goals in each strategy and update goals as needed. Develop a new county Agricultural and Farmland Protection Plan at the 10 year mark.

Implementation:

*Timeline:* Intermediate (3-5 years) and Long Term (6-10 years)

*Lead:* DEP; AFPB

*Partners:* CCE; SWCD; NRCS; Erie County Farm Bureau; AFT; WNYLC

*Potential Funding Sources:* NA

**Develop an interactive, web based application of the Erie County Agricultural and Farmland Protection Plan.** Post the Plan on the county website and incorporate links to examples and websites of interest. Maintain the site as a clearinghouse for agricultural information and post current items of interest for farmers and county residents.

Implementation:

*Timeline:* Immediate (1-2 years)

*Lead:* DEP

*Partners:* NA

*Potential Funding Sources:* DEP staff time

# APPENDIX

DRAFT

# Appendix

- Funding Sources Chart
- Map methodology
- Farmland Information Center: Eden, Clarence, and Brant/Evans/North Collins Agricultural and Farmland Protection Plans. Room at the Table: Food System Assessment of Erie County. <http://www.farmlandinfo.org/>
- Sowing the Seeds of Southtowns Agribusiness  
[http://www.regional-institute.buffalo.edu/Includes/UserDownloads/sowing\\_finalreport.pdf](http://www.regional-institute.buffalo.edu/Includes/UserDownloads/sowing_finalreport.pdf)
- NYS Dept. of Agriculture and Markets: Guidance documents  
<http://www.agriculture.ny.gov/AP/agsservices/agdistricts.html>
- Erie Niagara Framework for Regional Growth  
<http://www2.erie.gov/regionalframework/index.php?q=FrameworkPlan>
- Erie County Right to Farm Law
- <http://www2.erie.gov/law/index.php?q=erie-county-right-farm-law>
- RP-305 Agricultural Assessment Application  
[http://www.tax.ny.gov/pdf/current\\_forms/orpts/rp305\\_fill\\_in.pdf](http://www.tax.ny.gov/pdf/current_forms/orpts/rp305_fill_in.pdf)
- SWOT Chart
- Focus Group Session Summary Notes
- Interviewees
- Summaries of Agricultural Planning Documents:
  - Agricultural and Farmland Protection Plan summaries: Towns of Brant, Evans, and North Collins Agricultural and Farmland Protection Plan
  - Town of Eden Agricultural and Farmland Protection Plan
  - Town of Clarence Agricultural and Farmland Protection Plan
  - Room at the Table: Food System Assessment of Erie County summary

## Funding Sources

Program Name	Program Description	Eligible Applicants	Capital Equipment	Working Capital	Technical Assistance	Expected Due Date
Value-Added Producer Grant (USDA): <a href="http://www.rurdev.usda.gov/BCP_VAPG_Grants.html">www.rurdev.usda.gov/BCP_VAPG_Grants.html</a>	This grant program can be used directly by farmers and some intermediaries in the food system to support the working capital finance needs related to changes in the market or product development.	Farmers and agribusinesses with risks in production who are seeking to change marketing and/or manufacturing practices.	No	Yes	Yes	August 2013
Rural Business Enterprise Grant (USDA): <a href="http://www.rurdev.usda.gov/BCP_rbeg.html">www.rurdev.usda.gov/BCP_rbeg.html</a>	This program can be accessed by qualified not-for-profit and government agencies to support market feasibility studies, business planning, and other enterprise development activities related to profit making businesses.	Public bodies and qualified Exempt Organizations that have been through USDA Microenterprise training in communities with a population less than 50,000.	Yes	Yes	Yes	April 2013
Rural Business Opportunity Grant (USDA): <a href="http://www.rurdev.usda.gov/BCP_RBOG.html">www.rurdev.usda.gov/BCP_RBOG.html</a>	This program provides financial support to community level business assistance programs.	Public bodies and qualified Exempt Organizations that have been through USDA Microenterprise training in communities with a population less than 50,000.	No	No	Yes	July 2013
Community Facility Grant (USDA): <a href="http://www.rurdev.usda.gov/HAD-RCDI_Grants.html">www.rurdev.usda.gov/HAD-RCDI_Grants.html</a>	Communities can access funds through this program to develop community infrastructure such as water and sewer systems to support economic growth.	Public bodies and qualified Exempt Organizations that have been through USDA Microenterprise training in communities with a population less than 50,000.	Yes	No	No	On-going
Specialty Crop Grant (USDA/NY): <a href="http://www.mda.state.md.us/pdf/specialtycrop.pdf">www.mda.state.md.us/pdf/specialtycrop.pdf</a>	This program is administered by the NY Department of Agriculture and Markets and is used to support business growth, development, marketing, and research in support of non-program crops.	For-profit and Exempt Organizations with a mission to support growth in the specialty crop sector.	Yes	Yes	Yes	April 2013

Program Name	Program Description	Eligible Applicants	Capital Equipment	Working Capital	Technical Assistance	Expected Due Date
Rural Microenterprise Assistance Program (USDA): <a href="http://www.rurdev.usda.gov/BCP_RMAP.html">www.rurdev.usda.gov/BCP_RMAP.html</a>	This program provides funding for government agencies and not-for-profits that provide direct technical and funding support for microenterprises.	Public bodies and qualified Exempt Organizations that have been through USDA Microenterprise training in communities with a population less than 50,000.	Yes	No	Yes	Ongoing
Farmers' Market Promotion Grant (USDA): <a href="http://www.ams.usda.gov/AMSv1.0/FMPP">www.ams.usda.gov/AMSv1.0/FMPP</a>	This program provides funds to support direct market expansion and market access. Often used to encourage greater access to farmers' markets by underserved populations.	Public bodies and qualified Exempt Organizations.	Yes	Yes	Yes	May 2013
Economic Adjustment Assistance and Community Trade Adjustment Assistance Grants (EDA): <a href="http://www.grants.gov/search/search.do;jsessionid=XfmNPYLVtKZGfvLW3JwvdSK5pPRLXhYfvGW9cMTxNhDKM5QzmZ6x%21545677704?oppId=131493&amp;mode=VIEW">http://www.grants.gov/search/search.do;jsessionid=XfmNPYLVtKZGfvLW3JwvdSK5pPRLXhYfvGW9cMTxNhDKM5QzmZ6x%21545677704?oppId=131493&amp;mode=VIEW</a>	Communities covered by a Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy, like Erie County, can access these funds to support industrial and entrepreneurial development projects.	Public bodies and Exempt Organizations with a compliant Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy on file with EDA.	Yes	No	Yes	Quarterly
NY Aggie Bond Program	This program supports new farmer land acquisition through the issuance of private activity bonds.	Public Finance Authorities such as IDA's	Yes	No	No	Ongoing
New York Buy Local Campaign: <a href="http://www.agriculture.ny.gov/RFPS.html">www.agriculture.ny.gov/RFPS.html</a>	This program supports the development of regional branding programs through small grants.	Public bodies, Tourism Boards, and Exempt Organizations	Yes	No	Yes	February 2013
Good Agricultural Practices (GAP) Certification Assistance Program: <a href="http://www.agriculture.ny.gov/RFPS.html">www.agriculture.ny.gov/RFPS.html</a>	This program provides financial assistance to farmers seeking to develop GAP plans.	Farmers	No	No	Yes	Ongoing

<b>Program Name</b>	<b>Program Description</b>	<b>Eligible Applicants</b>	<b>Capital Equipment</b>	<b>Working Capital</b>	<b>Technical Assistance</b>	<b>Expected Due Date</b>
NY Fresh Connect Program: <a href="http://www.agriculture.ny.gov/RFPS.html">www.agriculture.ny.gov/RFPS.html</a>	This program is designed to fund projects that increase access to NY State grown agricultural products to low income and underserved communities.	Public bodies, Market Authorities, Public Benefit Corporations, and Exempt Organizations	No	Yes	Yes	April 2013
Northeast Sustainable Agriculture Research Education: Sustainable Community Grants <a href="http://www.nesare.org/Grants/Get-a-Grant/Sustainable-Community-Grant">http://www.nesare.org/Grants/Get-a-Grant/Sustainable-Community-Grant</a>	Projects that strengthen the position of sustainable agriculture as it affects community economic development. Key issues: finance, marketing, land use, water use, enterprise development, value-added activities, labor	Agriculture oriented organizations and local governments with expertise in sustainable agriculture enterprise development	No	Yes	Yes	October 2012
USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service: Farm and Ranch Land Protection Program <a href="http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/main/national/programs/elements/farmranch">http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/main/national/programs/elements/farmranch</a>	Provides matching funds to help purchase development rights to keep productive farm and ranchland in agricultural uses	Government or non-governmental entity	No	No	No	April 2013

## SWOT Chart

Strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT) chart as developed with public input at the initial public meeting to kick-off the agricultural planning process.

Strengths
<b>Good food.</b> Erie County farms produce a variety of raw agricultural products that can be consumed locally either directly or after processing: fresh vegetables and fruits, milk, meat, eggs, and grains.
<b>Strong agritourism.</b> Farms that encourage public interaction, and include attractions for children and adults, can be found throughout the county.
<b>Framework for Regional Growth.</b> This joint planning document between Erie and Niagara Counties lays the groundwork for regional agricultural planning efforts.
<b>Cost of Community Service studies.</b> These studies have repeatedly shown that it is cost effective for municipalities to support farms and to keep land in active agricultural production.
<b>Business planning courses offered by Cornell Cooperative Extension (CCE).</b> These courses are particularly helpful for beginning farmers and farmers who are diversifying or changing the nature of their operations.
<b>Erie County microenterprise loan program.</b> Providing small loans to start-up or diversifying farms can be critical to their initial success.
<b>Some farmland is being returned to production.</b> Some farms have removed hedgerows in order to accommodate large farm equipment. In doing so, this increases farmable land in the county.
<b>Transportation routes.</b> A major interstate, Route 90, crosses the county, as do numerous state and county roads that make for easy transportation of farm products to markets and population centers.
<b>Farmer's Markets.</b> Erie County has 16 Farmer's Markets where county residents can purchase fresh, local farm products.



<b>Weaknesses</b>
<b>Public education.</b> There is a lack of understanding of the many benefits that farms provide to communities.
<b>Youth education.</b> Most children are a number of generations removed from the farm and need opportunities to visit working farms.
<b>Town official education.</b> Providing local officials with information on the economic benefits that farms afford is important to build town support for agriculture.
<b>Improved transportation to New York City.</b> New York City is a huge market and transporting western New York agricultural products into that market would help local farms.
<b>Shortage of USDA slaughter facilities.</b> Without local USDA certified slaughter facilities, farmers must send livestock out of the region and out of the state for slaughter.
<b>American perception that lowest price is best.</b> U.S. consumers spend less of their income on food than any other country in the world. Cheap food is not necessarily the best quality food.
<b>Health Department does not promote healthy food.</b> Publicity about the many health issues tied to poor food choices abounds. Consumers need information and encouragement to make better food decisions.
<b>Distribution.</b> There is a lack of accessible distribution methods for small farms.
<b>Local laws and policies that restrict use of prime lands.</b> Zoning that promotes development on the best soils is not ag-friendly zoning.
<b>City land use policies.</b> Zoning in the city of Buffalo has not been flexible enough to accommodate the changing nature of urban agriculture.
<b>Availability of contiguous parcels for growing food in the city.</b> Zoning to encourage the use of vacant parcels for urban agriculture – particularly contiguous parcels – has been lacking.
<b>Urban soil preparation is tricky.</b> Urban residents need guidance on preparing soils to grow food crops.
<b>Loss of quality farmland to subdivisions.</b> Sprawl continues to affect agriculture in the region by converting prime farmland to development.
<b>Lack of shovel ready sites for food processors.</b> In order to compete with other regions of the state and other states, Erie County needs to identify and prepare shovel ready agribusiness sites.
<b>Debt management concerns of beginning farmers.</b> It is difficult for beginning farmers to acquire loans needed to start a farm and when they do receive credit, to manage the repayment of the loans.

<b>Opportunities</b>
<b>Get local food into schools and institutions.</b> This is a win-win for school children to eat fresh, local foods and for farmers to expand markets.
<b>Cross-border food processing.</b> Expanding markets for county farmers boosts profitability.
<b>Local branding.</b> An identifiable brand for regional agricultural products can help both consumers and farmers.
<b>Green energy.</b> Farmers can benefit from renewable energy options – crops grown for fuel, methane gas from digested manure converted to electricity.
<b>Education of public and youth.</b> Helping the public and children learn more about Erie County farms, can increase support and markets for local farm products.
<b>Reclamation of abandoned farmland.</b> Abandoned farmland is generally poorer quality land, but reclaiming it as livestock pasture or for other less intensive farming practices, keeps land in production and available.
<b>Winter farm markets.</b> Erie County currently has a few options for purchasing local farm products in the winter but there is an opportunity to provide more venues for off season local food markets.
<b>Public education about food preservation.</b> Renewed public interest in consuming local foods, has translated to renewed interest in preserving in-season farm produce for winter consumption. Yet, few people are well-versed in preservation methods that had gone out of style.
<b>Apprenticeship programs.</b> Offering young people and beginning farmers a hands-on learning experience on farms can interest and train a new generation of farmers.
<b>Direct marketing.</b> Farmers receive more of the retail dollar when they sell their farm products directly to customers rather than using a middleman.
<b>Zoning amendments to help small farm viability.</b> Ag friendly zoning is critical to any size farm but zoning can be designed to help small farms flourish.
<b>Underutilized urban areas such as rooftops and factories can be used for farm gardens.</b> In many cities across the country, rooftops and other underutilized locations have been used to grow food. Buffalo can learn from these examples.
<b>Farming on college campuses.</b> Many colleges are using available land to grow large gardens and provide food for students. Erie County colleges can do the same.
<b>Festivals to market farm products.</b> Buffalo and Erie County have a plethora of festivals and celebrations. Encouraging vendors to source local food products and to advertise the use of local products, is a win-win for the farmer and the vendor.
<b>Local food into food deserts*.</b> Getting fresh, nutritious local food into food deserts in Buffalo is another situation that benefits both city residents who can access better food and farmers who can expand markets for their products. * Food desert: a low-income census tract where a substantial number or share of residents has low access to a supermarket or large grocery store
<b>Value added products.</b> Farmers who add value to their raw agricultural product – maple syrup that is made into candy, goat's milk made into fudge, berries made into jams – can increase the portion of consumer spending that they receive and thus help improve farm viability.
<b>More farmer's markets.</b> Creating opportunities where consumers can purchase local

agricultural products is a benefit to both the consumer and the farmer.
<b>County food policy council.</b> Food policies that promote purchase of local food products are another way to help improve farmers profits.
<b>Food hub feasibility study.</b> Analyzing the need for, and benefits of, a food hub will inform efforts to aggregate and distribute agricultural products produced on local farms.
<b>Creative thinking about how to access resources.</b> It can be challenging to assemble the resources needed to implement meaningful recommendations that support the viability and profitability of local farms. Brainstorming innovative methods to access resources is necessary.
<b>Include the city of Buffalo in the agricultural plan.</b> Connecting rural and urban interests in food and agricultural issues will create a stronger plan.
<b>Have a voice in Buffalo's Green Code zoning process.</b> Urban agricultural interests should be well represented in the Buffalo zoning process.
<b>Attract new farmers.</b> There is growing interest in direct-to-consumer sales of farm products. Erie County has smaller parcels of farmland available in urban-edge locations which can be ideal areas for new farmers to establish Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) farms, and other farms that market directly to the customer.
<b>Respond to the differing needs of small farms vs. large farms.</b> Farm size does affect what assistance is most meaningful for those businesses. Smaller farms often need assistance with marketing and business planning; larger farms often need assistance with workforce development and labor issues.
<b>Increase funding to Cornell Cooperative Extension to address these opportunities.</b> Cornell Cooperative Extension is an established organization that can implement some of the plan recommendations if funding and staffing levels are adequate.
<b>Need aggregation and distribution for local farm products.</b> Conducting a food hub feasibility study will lay the groundwork needed for local farm product aggregation and distribution.
<b>Compile a farmland database for the county.</b> Understanding what land is available for farming and what land is currently in active agricultural production, will better inform agricultural planning efforts.
<b>The recession has slowed farmland loss to development.</b> Now is an opportune time to strengthen local zoning to protect farmland.
<b>View outer edges of the county as inner ring farmland of neighboring counties.</b> The strong agricultural counties surrounding Erie – Chautauqua, Cattaraugus, Wyoming, Genesee, and Niagara – contribute to agricultural production in this county. Some farms in neighboring counties work land in Erie. This creates an opportunity for regional planning efforts.
<b>Do an agricultural economic analysis for Erie County.</b> A complete analysis of the economic benefits that farms provide would inform local officials decisions about land use and other policies that affect agriculture.
<b>Institute tax incentives to encourage rental landowners to keep land in agriculture and to strengthen lease terms.</b> While farmers can participate in tax programs that reduce the property taxes paid on farmland (agricultural assessment, Farmer's School Tax Credit), rental landowners do not necessarily qualify for those programs. Incentivizing farmland rentals by non-farm landowners would help to stabilize the land base and provide more secure tenure arrangements for farmers.

<b>Inform town governments of the value of local farms.</b> Articulating the many benefits of farms will help local officials make informed decisions that support farms.
<b>Create a farm workforce – attract the Amish.</b> Farm workforce recruitment and development can focus on a variety of populations: youth, college students, Amish, immigrants.
<b>Provide county assistance with grant writing.</b> While there are government and private funding sources to assist with a multitude of farm projects, most farmers do not have the grant-writing experience or the time to write multiple grants in search of funding for key projects.
<b>Document the economic multiplier effect of agriculture.</b> Articulating farms positive affect on the county economy can help to inform local policymakers decision making.
<b>Encourage horse boarding – luxury money.</b> Horse boarding is an agricultural use that can attract outside investment into a community.
<b>Assist with understanding and negotiating gas well contracts.</b> Farmers can benefit from legal advice and expert help in negotiating contracts of this type.
<b>Development of small cooperatives modeled after Eden Valley Growers.</b> Small farmer cooperatives give individual farms a way to aggregate supply in order to meet the needs of wholesalers and retailers.
<b>Assistance with navigating the IDA process or a small business resource day.</b> Farmers have not traditionally viewed IDAs as partners in establishing and expanding their businesses. A resource day that targets small businesses, such as farms, could build these connections that would benefit farms in the county.
<b>Attract international companies that are interested in dairy value-added.</b> Dairy processing and value added has been a growth area recently in New York State. Erie County could benefit from this trend.
<b>Capitalize on local food interests of major food retailers.</b> Consumer, and thus retailer, demand for local food is a marketing opportunity for local farmers.
<b>Growing and processing hops for microbreweries.</b> Erie County has seen an increase in the number of microbreweries. This is a production opportunity for local farmers.
<b>Increase milk production in western NY.</b> As milk manufacturing capacity expands in western New York, farmers can increase the production of milk to meet increased demand.
<b>Weak dollar in relation to Canada.</b> Canadians come to the U.S. to buy a variety of products including food and other agricultural products.
<b>County assistance with marketing and promotion of agricultural products.</b> A coordinated marketing and promotion effort for local farm products would help all county farms.
<b>Tort reform.</b> As with other businesses, farms need relief from unreasonable liability threats.
<b>Educate policy makers about the nature of farms – they provide jobs, they are land based businesses that do not move offshore.</b> Continued education of local officials and policy makers as to the many benefits of farms, including the fact that they do not move out of state or out of the country, will help to inform local planning and policy making.
<b>Develop a county agritourism trail.</b> Diversifying farm income with tourism ventures is widespread in the county. A publicized tourism ‘trail’ would help to promote all of these enterprises.

<b>Develop a Public Service Announcement (PSA) for agritourism.</b> Coordinated publicity about agritourism opportunities throughout the county could expand the communication reach of individual farms.
<b>Farm management and technology education for agriculture.</b> Providing educational opportunities to learn about cutting edge technology and farm management principles, will help farmers in the county to improve their businesses.
<b>Expand Agricultural and Farmland Protection Board role to include advocacy for agriculture.</b> The Erie County Agricultural and Farmland Protection Board (AFPB) has traditionally facilitated the state-certified Agricultural District program. The AFPB is poised to become an advocate for agriculture in order to implement this plan.
<b>Include a youth position on the Agricultural and Farmland Protection Board.</b> Engaging the next generation of farmers starts with involving them in agricultural decision making.
<b>Give recognition to exceptional farm businesses.</b> Recognizing the ‘best’ farms and agricultural businesses in the county can also serve to inform the public and local leaders of the contributions that well-managed farms provide to the community.
<b>Assist towns with agricultural planning, provide maps.</b> County support, training, and resources, such as maps, can facilitate improved town level planning for agriculture.
<b>Assist towns with small agricultural grants.</b> Providing a small amount of seed money to towns to undertake agricultural planning and promotion can leverage additional resources.
<b>Local college internship program on farms.</b> As with apprenticeships, college internships can provide a trained work force for farms.

Threats
<p><b>Government regulations and restrictions – environmental, labor, business, health.</b> Regulations are costly for farms and reduce profits. Assistance in meeting new regulations is critical.</p>
<p><b>Shortages of public funding support for agricultural programs.</b> Agriculture competes with many needs for public funds. Because the benefits of agriculture are not well understood, it often receives a disproportionately small portion of what is available.</p>
<p><b>Sprawl.</b> Continuing unplanned development on prime farmland, permanently decreases our ability to grow local food.</p>
<p><b>Farmer/neighbor conflicts.</b> Farms create noise, smells, dust, traffic in order to perform normal, usual farming practices. Sprawling residential development brings more non-farm people into contact with the affects of farm practices which can result in conflicts.</p>
<p><b>Processed foods.</b> Highly processed foods can have reduced nutritional value – fresh, local vegetables and fruits grown in Erie County provide excellent nutritional benefits.</p>
<p><b>Social stigma of local foods.</b> Some consumers equate local foods with poorer quality.</p>
<p><b>Subsidy system for agriculture.</b> The subsidy system is expensive and has not improved the quality of food choices for consumers nor helped northeast farmers significantly.</p>
<p><b>High cost of doing business in New York State.</b> New York taxes and regulations are costly to small businesses like farms.</p>
<p><b>Myth that all urban soils are toxic.</b> Urban agriculture has attracted local interest but there is concern and misunderstanding about urban soil quality and urban farming practices.</p>
<p><b>Crop theft in the city of Buffalo.</b> As urban agriculture expands, theft of crops must be addressed.</p>
<p><b>County redistricting.</b> Redistricting needs to ensure adequate representation for the agricultural areas of the county.</p>
<p><b>Careless infrastructure extensions in agricultural areas.</b> Sewer and, more often water line extensions, in agricultural districts continue to promote residential growth.</p>
<p><b>Lack of immigration reform.</b> Lack of a legal, reliable workforce hinders farm viability.</p>
<p><b>Profitability/viability of farms.</b> If farms are not able to stay in business, prime land can be lost and options for local food production are reduced.</p>
<p><b>Lack of drainage maintenance.</b> Farmland is abandoned when drainage infrastructure is not maintained on private and public land.</p>
<p><b>Lack of rental land tenure prohibits farmer investment in land improvements.</b> Insecure lease arrangements on farmland provide no incentives for farmers to adopt conservation practices, tile wet fields, or adopt any other land improvement practices.</p>
<p><b>Need for a next generation of farmers.</b> With the average age of farmers in the county continuing to rise, it is important that a next generation of farmers wants to farm.</p>
<p><b>Regulatory environment is too cumbersome for small/medium farms.</b> Small farms have a particular need for assistance in navigating the array of regulations that exist.</p>
<p><b>SEQR process is too difficult.</b> The complexity of the State Environmental Quality Review (SEQR) process adds time and expense to projects that may benefit agriculture.</p>
<p><b>Wetland issues.</b> Land that was once farmland but is abandoned due to poor drainage maintenance can be lost to farming if it becomes a designated wetland.</p>
<p><b>Local permitting.</b> Regulations and non ag-friendly local ordinances, can put an undue burden on farms.</p>

# Focus Group Sessions

## Discussion Questions in June (Buffalo), July (Eden), and August (Alden) 2011 Sessions:

- a. What and where are the greatest opportunities in Erie County....
  - i. To farm and grow food?
  - ii. To market food and farm products?
  - iii. For new food and farm enterprises?

### *Farmland:*

- Vacant and other urban land is available for small farm enterprises.
- Vacant and abandoned agricultural land can be reclaimed for farming purposes if successional growth has not proceeded too far.
- Poorer quality farmland can be used for less intensive agricultural enterprises.
- College campuses may have land that would be suitable for agriculture.
- Neighboring counties have successful farms that are looking for land in the county and moving into the outer ring towns.
- Erie County is fortunate to have some permanently protected farmland that will be available for farming in perpetuity.
- State certified, county-adopted agricultural districts help to keep land available for agriculture.
- The economic downturn has slowed development, and thus sprawl, into the second ring towns.
- Municipal mapping of drainage systems would be a first step in addressing poor drainage concerns in some of the northern towns in the county.
- Incentivize leasing of farmland.

### *Next Generation:*

- Attract new farmers to the county.

### *Farm Viability:*

- Diversification of agricultural enterprises to include opportunities like aquaculture.
- Erie County Soil and Water Conservation District provides excellent support to farmers.
- A year-round public market, like Rochester's, would flourish in Buffalo.
- Value-added agricultural products often provide more return to the farmer. Assisting farmers with development and processing could increase farm viability.
- Local food procurement by institutions would help county farmers.
- Direct marketing of farm products to the city and urban edge areas.
- Connect with university resources and knowledge.
- Small and larger farms have different needs for county support.

### *Local Food:*

- Farm communities in the county are well suited for food production.
- Farmers markets, festivals, and events are growing opportunities to market local farm products.
- Buffalo has areas that are food deserts and are in need of fresh, local food.

- b. What are the biggest barriers in Erie County...
- i. To farming and growing food?
  - ii. To getting local food and farm products to Erie County residents, schools, institutions?
  - iii. For new food and farm enterprises?

*Farmland:*

- Quality agricultural land is being subdivided regularly in this county.
- Careless infrastructure extensions lead to sprawl
- Erie County has a significant land area that is designated as prime where drained, mostly in the northern portion of the county, but there is little drainage infrastructure to make the land suitable for farming.
- Farmland lease terms are often too short and too tenuous to encourage farmers to invest in land improvements.
- Leased farmland is the land most at risk of conversion.

*Farm Viability:*

- There is a significant lack of livestock processing facilities in western New York.
- The high cost of doing business in NY negatively affects farm growth.
- Poor farm profitability makes it difficult to continue to farm.
- There is a lack of aggregation and distribution infrastructure to help small farmers.
- Buffalo needs an urban public market.

*Educate Leaders:*

- City of Buffalo zoning is currently not urban farm-friendly, and city policies that limit the sale of city grown food are too restrictive.
- State regulations are not friendly to small farms.
- Cornell Cooperative Extension has been hurt by county funding cuts.
- Federal immigration policy puts farm labor in jeopardy.
- There are too many overly restrictive government regulations especially with regard to food safety.
- Municipal master plans should consider cost of community services studies when determining land use.

*Educate Public:*

- There is a lack of consumer connection to farms and where food comes from.
- Agricultural education in schools has disappeared.

*Local Food:*

- Price is often considered most important when purchasing food but there are other values that can and should be considered.
- The County Health Department needs to provide input into how food choices affect people's health.
- Poor quality of processed foods served in many school meals.
- Social stigma of local food.



- The farm subsidy system is not working.
  - Some local laws and policies restrict the use of the best land for agriculture.
  - The view that all urban soil quality is too poor for food production, and the expense of soil testing impede urban food production.
- c. What are the food and farming issues that Erie County should be grappling with?
- A complete economic evaluation of the value of farmland and farms in the county would be very useful.
  - With county assistance, improve municipal master plans so they are developed to support farms and protect farmland.
  - Expand agricultural education in schools at all grade levels.
  - Municipal leaders and other policy makers need more information and education about all that agriculture contributes to local communities and that prime land should be protected.
  - Build awareness in municipalities of cost of community service studies that show farms use less in services than they pay in property taxes.
  - Develop a land database of available farmland in the county.

Discussion Questions in November 2011 (Buffalo) and January 2012 (Newstead and Concord) Sessions:

1. *Farmland:* What can be done to keep land in farming in Erie County?
  - Work with farmers and land trusts to put conservation easements on farmland.
  - Adopt ag-friendly zoning in both rural and urban areas.
  - Encourage food production on currently unused or underutilized farm parcels with a tax incentive program.
  - Improve soil quality in the city of Buffalo so that food can be safely grown there.
  - In order to keep abandoned farmland in an agriculturally ready state, institute 'seed ready' projects modeled after 'shovel ready' projects for manufacturing and other business development.
  - Connect rural and urban interests in food and farming.
  - Permanently protect farmland by purchasing the development rights and placing an agricultural conservation easement on the land.
  - Adopt regulations and policies that prevent sprawl.
  - Provide funding or cost share programs to help farmers acquire land.
  - Encourage demand for locally grown farm products.
  - Place drainage easements on private land in agricultural areas so that ditches can be maintained properly by local governments. This would be an effort to avoid the loss of farmland that is evident in areas where ditches are not well maintained.
  - Form a farm advocacy group.
  - Capitalize on Erie County's proximity to Canadian markets.
  - Help farmers access capital to begin to farm or to expand or diversify.

- Educate local officials and the public about the varied benefits of farms.
  - Develop a local equipment cooperative so that farmers can share the expense of farm machinery.
2. *Next Generation:* What can be done to increase the number of young and new farmers in Erie County?
- Promote Erie County as a place to farm.
  - Help beginning farmers with access to markets.
  - Teach children about agriculture and give them firsthand experiences on farms.
  - Provide formal and informal apprenticeships and internships on farms.
  - Create a summer jobs program on farms.
  - Cost share and assist with land and equipment acquisition costs.
  - Encourage different types of farming like organic, aquaponics.
  - Fund Cornell Cooperative Extension and BOCES programs to provide youth agricultural education.
  - Demonstrate the potential for land to produce a variety of things: crops, wind energy.
  - Create an incubator farm in the county (modeled after some in New England) where people can learn how to farm.
  - Create a property tax abatement program (like PILOT: payment in lieu of taxes) for new farmers.
3. *Farm Viability:* What assistance can be provided to farms to help them become more profitable?
- Provide financial assistance or programs that can help to balance the unpredictable nature of weather and markets.
  - Educate lenders so they are more knowledgeable about agriculture and more willing to lend to farmers.
  - Create agricultural infrastructure for marketing farm products.
  - Better understand the economics of the entire food system.
  - Develop a transportation cooperative to pool resources for transporting farm products to markets.
  - Form a county Food Policy Council that can institute local food procurement policies.
  - Assist with market access, and with adapting to market changes. New ethnic communities in Buffalo create market opportunities for a diversity of food crops.
  - Build on agritourism efforts to create a county farm trail
  - Encourage cross municipal agricultural efforts with memorandums of understanding.
  - Create a regional food hub to aggregate farm products and as a distribution point.
  - Charge a fee when agricultural land is developed. Create a fund for the collected fees to help permanently protect farmland.
  - Revamp federal immigration policy.

4. *Educate Leaders:* What can be done to help town and county governments to better understand how valuable farms are to the local economy?
  - Produce a study of the value of agriculture to the local economy.
  - Local farms can help keep communities healthy – both economically and physically. Better physical health can lower healthcare costs.
  - Farms need to be included in local emergency and disaster planning.
  - The county should take the lead on educating municipalities about the value of local agriculture.
5. *Local Food:* What can be done to help farms provide a healthy, abundant source of food to county residents?
  - Develop a county-wide farm product brand.
  - Help to manage the supply chain: CSAs, farm to institutions, or farm to restaurant programs.
  - Develop county-wide food procurement policies for schools and institutions.
  - Incentivize local food procurement policies i.e. the county could pay a premium for local goods.
  - Assist with organic certification. Help farms understand what is required to become organically certified.
  - Include information on the county website about alternative energy options to use on farms.
  - Advocate for farm-energy friendly policies.
6. *Educate Public:* What would help Erie County residents, both urban and rural, better understand the value of farms in our everyday lives?
  - Understand what it costs for farms to produce the food we eat.
  - Include graphics in the plan to illustrate the value of local foods to the local economy.
  - Provide information on the county website.
  - A local food brand.

## **Interviewees**

Carmen Vacco, Vacco Farms  
Carolyn and Marty Rosiek, MCR Farm  
Dan Gerhardt, GC Acres  
Hans Kunze, Steuben Trust  
John Cappelino, Erie County IDA  
Carolyn Powell, Buffalo Niagara Enterprise  
Tim Harner, Upstate Milk Cooperative  
Jodi Smith, Upstate Milk Cooperative  
Norb and Lynn Gabel, Gabel's Maple Syrup  
Kevin Komendat, Wegmans Markets  
Paul Zittel, Eden Valley Growers  
George and Pat Castle, Castle Farms  
Jerry Mammoser, Mammoser Farms  
Bill Holmes, dairy farm  
David Phillips, Phillips Family Farm  
Marty Wendel, Wendel's Poultry Farm  
Bob and Jason Engel, Shamel Milling  
Lloyd Lamb, Lamb and Webster  
Southtowns Community Enhancement Coalition  
Ryan and Liz Donovan, CSA  
Wayne and Gerald Aldinger, Aldinger's Farm  
Ginny Wolski, horse farm

# Summaries of Agricultural Planning Documents

## Town of Eden Agricultural and Farmland Protection Plan

Eden is a rural, farming town located in the Southowns of Erie County. It is one of Erie County's medium sized towns (population) but is a major contributor to the county's \$117 million in agricultural sales. The Town of Eden Agricultural & Farmland Protection Plan, completed by the Town in 2010, includes an analysis of local conditions, a parcel rating system to prioritize farmland protection parcels, and recommendations to support agriculture and protect farmland. The Plan also includes an assessment of its land use regulations and recommends modifications to improve support for agriculture.

*Recommendation 1: Stabilize the town agricultural land base and maintain land in active agricultural use. Maintain 95% of the current active agricultural land in production through the next ten years. Support Eden farmers as stewards of the land and other natural resources.*

### Actions

- Implement Eden's conservation easement law (Chapter 95 in the Town code) to provide participating agricultural landowners with a property tax reduction in exchange for a term conservation easement on their agricultural property.
- As needed, hire a grant writer to develop and support applications to the New York State Farmland Protection Program and the USDA-NRCS Farmland Protection Program, when approached by farm landowners who are interested in selling their development rights.
- Utilize the plan's rating criteria to rank multiple requests for purchase of development rights applications to the State Farmland Protection Program or the Federal Farmland Protection Program. The Town Board, Planning Board, and Zoning Board of Appeals can also use these criteria to determining the impact of non-farm development on valuable agricultural land and neighboring farms.
- Strive to submit at least one competitive application each year to the New York State Farmland Protection Implementation Grants program to permanently protect farmland in the Town.
- Establish a dedicated agricultural land protection fund for use in farmland protection projects in the town. Research the legal parameters of establishing a Community Preservation Fund and follow these parameters in establishing the land protection fund. Evaluate local funding options and opportunities.
- Research creation of a program to make farmland ownership more affordable for beginning farmers. Link property tax reductions for a specified time period to minimum land use and percentage of income from farming. Assist matching sellers of agricultural land with interested buyers who will keep the land in active agricultural production.
- Encourage new residential development in the Hamlet Residential zone and away from the Agricultural and Conservation zones.

- Follow the recommendations of the Framework for Regional Growth (as adopted by Erie County) to discourage investments that would hinder agricultural protection and/or would require additional infrastructure extensions, specifically limiting water and sewer district expansions in agricultural districts. Encourage future infrastructure development in the Hamlet Residential zone.
- Adopt the New York State Department of Agricultural and Markets recommended guidelines for connections to water lines in the Agricultural District. Consider additional lateral restrictions or constraints on the size of water lines in the Agricultural and Conservation Zones.
- Consider a minimum lot size of 2 acres in the Agricultural zone combined with a fixed density of one lot for every 4 acres.
- Explore the use of buffers between active agricultural land and residential/developed areas of the Town. If this zoning tool is used, require that the land used for buffers be on new developments and not on active agricultural land.

*Recommendation 2: Maintain a supportive business environment for farm operations.*

Actions

- Support Erie County with its update to the County Agricultural and Farmland Protection Plan. Engage Eden farmers and local officials in the County plan update process.
- Strive to have at least one farmer on all local boards especially the Town Board, Planning Board, and Zoning Board of Appeals, in order to have consistent representation from the farm community in all aspects of local government.
- Engage town, county, state and federal officials in a tour of a representative group of Eden farms and agribusinesses.
- Coordinate planning support for the tour with the Erie County Department of Environment and Planning, Cornell Cooperative Extension, and the Southtowns Community Enhancement Coalition. Hold this tour every 2-3 years and always at the 8-year Agricultural District review.
- Establish a \$1000 annual college scholarship to be given to a student residing in the Town, who is attending college and majoring in agriculture with the intention to return to farm in Eden. Administer this scholarship through the Eden Community Foundation.
- Establish a scholarship fund to encourage the return of a student from a farm family or a student who would like to establish a farm business in Eden.
- Encourage Town farmers to develop business and marketing plans with particular emphasis on businesses that are considering new agritourism enterprises. Coordinate local business plan trainings with Cornell Cooperative Extension and the Southtowns Community Enhancement Coalition. Assist farmers with implementation of their plans.

- Adopt the Eden Agricultural and Farmland Protection Plan as part of the Town of Eden's 2015 Comprehensive Plan. This action will strengthen both the Agricultural and Farmland Protection Plan and the Comprehensive Plan. Update the Agricultural and Farmland Protection Plan at regular intervals, such as when the Comprehensive Plan is updated, and closely review agricultural sections of zoning code when Comprehensive Plan or code updates are done.
- Work with the Erie County Department of Environment and Planning and the Erie County Farm Bureau to develop a menu of financial incentive programs targeted to the agricultural industry.
- Support New York's agricultural industry and Eden farmers by working with agricultural coalitions and organizations to:
  - Develop labor policies that provide a legal, reliable work force for agricultural businesses;
  - Support relief from regulatory burdens;
  - Fund agricultural infrastructure needs;
  - Increase funding for purchase of development rights; and
  - Increase support for agricultural economic development.
- Review the Zoning Analysis in Eden's Agricultural and Farmland Protection Plan and amend Eden's land use regulations as recommended in the analysis. Ensure that the zoning code is supportive of agritourism business opportunities.

*Recommendation 3: Educate the non-farm public about agriculture. Facilitate an ongoing dialogue between the farm community and other Eden residents. Encourage appreciation of the agricultural resources located in the Town.*

Actions:

- Promote the Welch Farm Museum as an educational tool to teach students and adults about both the history of agriculture in the Town and modern-day farming. Capitalize on the museum's close proximity to the Eden Elementary School and the Eden Boys and Girls Club to offer regular educational opportunities.
- Continue involvement with the Southtowns Community Enhancement Coalition and promote their focus on agritourism.
- Institute an "Ag Giveaway Day". Provide Town property owners with a coupon, mailed with their tax bill, for free farm products and vegetables on a given day at a given drive-thru location.
- Utilize the "Eden Agricultural and Farmland Protection Plan" publication to promote understanding of agriculture in the Town. Distribute copies at the Corn Festival, Welch Farm Museum, Ag Giveaway Day, and other agricultural events. Include a promotional item in the publication such as a coupon for free admission to the Welch Farm Museum.

## *Town of Clarence Agricultural and Farmland Protection Plan*

The Town of Clarence was developing an Agricultural Plan at the same time as Erie County, with plan approval in 2012. Clarence is located in the northeastern portion of the county and has had significant residential growth in the last few decades. With a population increase of 17% from 2000 to 2010, community commitment to support farms and protect farmland was needed if farming was to remain in the town. In 2002, a \$12.5 bond was passed by public referendum to fund the Greenprint Program to permanently protect farmland and open space in Clarence.

*Strategy A: Protect farmland: Sustain no net loss of farmland in the Town of Clarence during the next decade, from 2012 to 2022. The number of farmland acres in the town in 2012 totaled 4,344.*

Actions to protect farmland:

1. Recognize the Farmland Protection Committee (FPC) as a permanent committee with an identified role to inform the Town Board about agricultural issues, and to make recommendations to address these issues. Have the Town Board approve the Committee in this capacity.
2. Formalize the Farmland Protection Committee's advisory role in the Greenprint process to:
  - a. select farmland to protect using parcel ranking criteria developed through this planning process, and
  - b. review the agricultural easement template.Work with the Recreation Committee to develop a mutually agreed upon review process that incorporates the FPC.
3. The Farmland Protection Committee will sponsor an annual farmer/farm landowner meeting where farm needs can be discussed and prioritized for ongoing town action. Giving the farm community a 'voice' may be the most important accomplishment of this planning process. Clarence's growing population is dominated by people who are unfamiliar with agriculture and farming practices and needs. The farm community must be unified and have a formal process in place to be heard.
4. Adopt the Clarence Agricultural and Farmland Protection Plan (AFPP) as part of the Town Master Plan. The AFPP should be reviewed and updated as part of the Master Plan review cycle. Including the AFPP in the comprehensive planning process, sends a clear message that agriculture is a priority business and land use in the Town of Clarence.
5. Develop a program to keep private land that is currently not eligible for agricultural assessment, mowed and "farm ready". Develop eligibility criteria and 'farm ready' criteria. Set a rental rate for land that is kept in a farmable state. Identify a minimum rental period for the land and formalize an agreement between the town and the landowner to pay the rental fee for the



specified time period in exchange for the landowner meeting certain land maintenance standards.

6. Encourage land leasing of farmland. Approximately 37 % of farmland in Clarence is rented. This land, by its very nature, is the least secure. Agricultural assessment\* reduces landowner's property taxes and is an incentive to keep land in agricultural production. Have FPC members communicate with landowners who are not receiving agricultural assessment to encourage farmland leasing and to explain the benefits of, and requirements to, receiving agricultural assessment.

*Agricultural assessment: Farmland is assessed at its use value based on soil type values determined by New York State. Landowners must visit the Soil and Water Conservation District office to determine soil types and associated acreages on their land, and then file Form RP-305 with the town assessor. Eligible land must be seven acres or more with the operating farm grossing at least \$10,000 of annual agricultural sales, or less than seven acres with the operating farm grossing at least \$50,000 of annual agricultural sales. Horse boarding operations must also board at least 10 horses.*

7. Approve a local law amendment for the code revisions outlined in the Code Review of this plan.

*Strategy B: Plan for infrastructure: Institute infrastructure planning that formally and routinely considers the needs of agriculture with regard to drainage, roads, utility lines, water, and sewer in any town zoning districts that allow farms.*

Actions to plan for infrastructure:

1. Address drainage concerns of the farm community to keep ditches streams and waterways clean on public and private property.
  - a. Establish an agricultural drainage working group of the Farmland Protection Committee, which will inform the FPC of drainage maintenance needs specific to agriculture. The FPC will be responsible for prioritizing and sharing these needs with the Town Board. The drainage working group will communicate with private landowners to assess concerns and needs.
  - b. Have the drainage working group review and comment on the draft ditch maintenance plan (due in spring 2012) being developed as part of the town drainage study.
  - c. Institute a cost share program that would help landowners to develop primary drainage ditches on their properties and that would be part of the town ditch maintenance plan. Seek input from the Erie County Soil and Water Conservation District.
  - d. Collaborate with the county to ensure that county-maintained ditches in the town are cleaned as necessary in order to improve drainage on farm fields and reduce conversion of land to wetlands. This could be a system in which the Town cleans county ditches and is reimbursed for doing so.

2. Notify the Farmland Protection Committee of any proposed infrastructure changes in the Agricultural Flood Zone or the Agricultural Rural Residential Zone. Have the FPC review any Agricultural Data Statements\* that are filed with the town pursuant to Agricultural and Markets Law requirements. Provide the committee's recommendations, regarding infrastructure changes or Agricultural Data Statements, to the Planning Board and the Planning Department.

*\*Agricultural Data Statements: Per Agriculture and Markets Law an application for a special use permit, site plan approval, use variance, or subdivision approval that requires review and approval by the planning board, zoning board of appeals, or town board, and that is within five hundred feet of a farm operation located in an agricultural district, shall include an agricultural data statement. The Ag Data Statement should include a description of the proposed project and its location on a map showing the site of the proposed project relative to the location of farm operations.*

*Strategy C: Promote agriculture: Inform the public about the variety of contributions farms make to the town, and what agricultural practices to expect in a farm community. Include youth and youth agricultural programs in town efforts to promote farms and agricultural events.*

Actions to promote agriculture:

1. Develop a youth community service program in collaboration with the local youth bureau, 4-H, Farm Bureau, and local schools to educate and involve town youth in agriculture. Projects include:
  - a. Promoting youth agriculture programs such as 4-H.
  - b. Incorporating additional youth programs and educational opportunities into the Clarence Hollow Farmers' Market.
  - c. Working with Farm Bureau's Ag in the Classroom program.
  - d. Developing a school garden program with local schools.
2. Develop an ongoing working relationship with the Clarence Bee. Identify a farm community member who will serve as a media liaison to the Clarence Bee to assist in developing interesting, informative, accurate stories about farming in Clarence.
3. Create an agricultural section of the town webpage to promote food and farming events, advertise agricultural meetings, educate residents about farming practices, and share accomplishments of the FPC and the Greenprint Program. Also create a link to the Clarence Hollow Farmers' Market webpage.
4. Assist the Clarence Hollow Farmers' Market with efforts to grow the market and to expand opportunities for town residents to purchase local farm products. Identify a funding source to assist the Market with promotional efforts.

### *A Regional Farmland Protection Plan for the Towns of Brant, Evans, and North Collins*

The Regional Farmland Protection Plan for the Towns of Brant, Evans, and North Collins was developed in 2000 and includes regional goals and actions. This 3 town planning effort recognized that a regional approach to support farms could have more impact than a town-by-town planning process. Since development of the plan, a group of 9 municipalities in the southern portion of the county, the Southtowns Community Enhancement Coalition, have worked together to develop an agritourism trail. Following are the 4 goals and related actions from this regional plan.

#### *Regional Goal 1: Foster Collaboration*

RR1. Support and maintain a three-town agricultural development and farmland protection committee.

RR2. Investigate grant opportunities and leverage local resources.

RR3. Work with Erie County and other partners to share technical information and geographic data.

RR4. Direct town and planning boards to focus attention on land use and agricultural issues near town boundaries.

#### *Regional Goal 2: Promote Understanding of Agriculture*

RR5. Adopt municipal right-to-farm laws.

RR6. Promote public education and agritourism events.

RR7. Adopt the New York State Agriculture and Markets Law definitions of "farm operation" and "crops, livestock, and livestock products" for the purposes of local planning and policies.

RR9. Create a supportive business environment for agriculture.

RR10. Evaluate the net fiscal impacts of future town growth on municipal and school budgets.

RR11. Highlight the importance of both full-time and part-time farmers to the region's economy and farm community.

RR12. Periodically review the New York State Agricultural Districts Law to evaluate changes in the Legislation and ensure proper compliance at the local level.

#### *Regional Goal 3: Encourage Policies that Protect Productive Farmland*

RR13. Continue to involve farmers in reviewing, developing and implementing municipal policies that may affect agriculture.

RR14. Using the prioritization rating system developed in this plan, identify priority-farming regions, and then implement policies and programs to protect farmland in those areas.

RR15. Create or update master plans to highlight the importance of local farms to each municipality and the regional farm community and outline strategies for supporting local farms through agricultural economic development and farmland protection initiatives.

RR 16. Reduce trespassing onto farmland by promoting educational efforts and enforcing trespassing ordinances.

RR 16. Develop zoning and subdivision ordinances that adequately protect farmland while not being overly restrictive of farm businesses.

RR 17. Promote development in existing hamlets and areas that already have municipal infrastructure. Site future water and sewer districts away from priority farmland. To manage

growth, consider requiring lateral restrictions for water districts already sited in priority farming regions.

RR 18. Collaborate with regional partners to conduct a demonstration purchase of development rights or conservation easement project.

RR 19. Develop land use policies to maintain scenic vistas of farmland along highways.

RR 20. Implement property tax relief to farmers: Implement term conservation easement tax abatement programs, farm building exemptions and ad valorem tax limitations for farmland outside of agricultural districts. Extend agricultural assessment values for taxation of fire and ambulance districts. Educate landowners.

RR 21. Enhance town assessors' understanding of farmland and farm building assessments.

RR 22. Acknowledge the importance of rental land to local farmers.

RR 23. Work with regional partners to conduct workshops about estate and farm transfer planning.

RR 24. Implement traffic calming measures, and educate residents about slow moving farm vehicles

#### *Regional Goal 4: Cultivate a Viable Agricultural Economy*

RR 25. Urge Erie County to collaborate with Cornell University on an Agricultural Industry Development, Enhancement and Retention (AIDER) project

RR 26. Ensure that local infrastructure meets the needs of modern farms

RR 27. Work with regional partners to promote local agritourism

RR 28. Help farmers improve their marketing and other business skills

RR 29. Support the labor needs of farm businesses by permitting an array of farm worker housing on-and-off local farms

RR 30. Revise local ordinances and regulations to accommodate the business needs of farms.

#### *Room at the Table: Food System Assessment of Erie County*

Researched and written by a group of University of Buffalo graduate students in the Department of Urban and Regional Planning, this report concluded with a set of recommendations to improve Erie County's food system.

1. Sponsor Agricultural Training Courses
2. Facilitate greater involvement in Agricultural Districts
3. Identify Potential New Cropland
4. Establish a Seed Bank
5. Manage a County Website on Agricultural Resources
6. Facilitate a Regional Food Hub in Erie County
7. Make Available a Master Food System Contact Directory
8. Enable a Food Transportation Cooperative
9. Support Social Entrepreneurs in the Food System
10. Target Industry Clusters
11. Implement a PDR or TDR Program
12. Develop a County-Run Comprehensive Composting Program
13. Facilitate Agriculturally Focused Municipal MOUs
14. Create the Erie County Food Policy Council

15. Adopt an Erie County Food Charter or Food Action Plan
16. Fund Local Procurement Policies for Public Institutions
17. Pass a Food System Development Fund
18. Consolidate an Agritourism Program
19. Proliferate County-Wide Branding of Local Food
- 20 Reorganize Business Practices to Express a Local Preference

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## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> 1992 Census of Agriculture

<sup>2</sup> Farms for the Future

<sup>3</sup> 2007 Census of Agriculture

<sup>4</sup> Erie County Dept. of Environment and Planning

<sup>5</sup> 2007 Census of Agriculture

<sup>7</sup> Minnesota Implan Group

<sup>8</sup> New York Farmland Protection Study, 2009