

NEW MILFORD FARMLAND PRESERVATION COMMITTEE STRATEGIC ACTION PLAN 2007

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Agriculture is a significant part of New Milford's heritage and can become a vital part of our town's future. For all of us, preservation of those few remaining farmlands within our town borders has acquired a heightened sense of urgency. This, in 2006, New Milford Mayor Pat Murphy established the New Milford Farmland Preservation Committee, charging it with assisting the town in identifying and implementing strategies for acquiring and protecting farmlands.

Through establishment of the Farmland Preservation Committee, our Town is signaling its conviction that a proactive and systematic approach to acquiring and protecting its few remaining farmlands needs to be implemented urgently. This Strategic Action Plan 2007, developed by the Committee members, represents its short-term road map for getting a long-term effort underway to help the Town achieve that goal.

2.0 MISSION STATEMENT

Assist the Town of New Milford in protecting and preserving farmland for future use.

3.0 THE IMPORTANCE OF PRESERVING FARMLAND

Preservation of farmland in New Milford would...

- ensure survival of farmlands for agricultural use, thus contributing to our local economy
- provide positive tax benefits—working farms can generate more in local tax revenue than they cost in municipal services
- help limit residential sprawl, which burdens town services and schools
- provide a local source of fresh, healthy produce that is not mass-produced, shipped at added expense from great distances or blended from different sources or unidentified origins
- offer opportunities for agro-tourism, a fast-growing Connecticut travel industry segment
- preserve barns and silos, farmhouses, meadows, stone walls and rolling viewsheds, among semi-rural New Milford's most attractive features
- afford survival of wildlife corridors for birds and animals
- strengthen the link with New Milford's rich agricultural heritage as our town celebrates its TriCentennial birthday

4.0 NEW MILFORD'S AGRICULTURAL HISTORY *(Sources: The Housatonic Valley Council of Elected Officials and "New Milford Connecticut 1707-2007, Housatonic Publications)*

New Milford began as a farming settlement long before the American Revolution. Beginning in the first quarter of the 18th century, the town's rich, alluvial and limestone-based soils provided the basis of a long period of agricultural prosperity.

Tobacco farming which began about 1845, supported over 200 farms in New Milford at the industry's peak during the early 20th century. The last commercial tobacco crop was grown in 1953. During the 19th century, there were as many as 150-175 dairy farms in New Milford, and although their numbers began to decrease by the late 19th century, dairy farming continued well into the first half of the 20th century.

However, as new technologies meant fewer farmers were needed, as US urbanization spread and as the epicenter of industrialized US agriculture emerged in the Middle West and West, farming in New Milford, as in many New England towns, began to decline.

By the early 1900's, some farms had already been acquired and transformed into summer homes, and by the mid-20th-century, many of New Milford's farms and large tracts of land were being sold and sub-divided, a trend that has accelerated through the beginning of the 21st century. The Town's relatively lower land prices continue to attract families employed in the expanding metropolitan areas to the south.

By 1990, less than 2700 acres of New Milford's agricultural lands remained in cultivation, employing less than 1% of the population. Today, there are even less. However, there are positive signs that promise development of new kinds of local farming ventures. For example, the Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) farm at Fort Hill has grown to the point where it boasts several hundred local shareholders and a substantial waiting list. The Farmland Preservation Committee is dedicated to supporting similar efforts that will help reduce loss of New Milford farmlands.

5.0 STRATEGIES FOR PRESERVING REMAINING FARMLANDS IN NEW MILFORD

5.1 Develop a systematic approach for identifying farmland to be preserved

- Create a master list of surviving farms and farmland in New Milford
- Align on criteria to be used in determining farmland preservation priorities
- Encourage farmers to advise the Town of any plans to sell their farms, giving the Town a grace period to explore, with the farmer, ways of protecting and preserving that property
- Using a questionnaire developed by the Farmland Preservation Committee, complete an inventory profiling every surviving farm in depth, including such information as type of production, tillable acres, quantities, etc.; use information to demonstrate economic importance of preserving local working farms

-Develop a map that indicates location of all farmlands in New Milford that have not yet been subdivided

-Tap into available state agency and private *pro bono* professional estate expertise to broaden New Milford farmers' understanding of the range of strategies available for preserving their farms while ensuring they are not financially penalized for doing so

5.2 Increase New Milford residents' awareness of the economic importance of preserving our Town's surviving farmlands

-Using the Committee's farm inventory data, work with additional input from the Town's Economic Development Director and state farmers' advocacy groups to create a presentation that can be delivered to civic, community, not-for-profit, state and federal groups or agencies on the economic importance of preserving New Milford's surviving farmlands, e.g., the New Milford Economic Development Commission, the Chamber of Commerce, etc

-Develop roadside signage that raises the public visibility and importance of our working farms

-Select those community events where organizing a New Milford Farmland Preservation booth would have a cost-effective impact, e.g., Village Fair Days, Pumpkin Festival on the Green, Nature Conservancy Farm Days, Elliot Pratt Fall Festival; identify project managers and volunteers to carry it out

-Design and produce brochures that can be widely distributed at civic and community events underscoring the economic importance of preserving New Milford's surviving farmlands

-Organize and sustain an ongoing media campaign through the *Spectrum*, *News Times*, *New Milford Times*, *Litchfield County Times*, *Waterbury Republican*, *Edible Nutmeg*, etc. emphasizing the economic importance of preserving New Milford's surviving farmlands

-Explore what other towns in Connecticut have done successfully to raise public awareness of the importance of preserving local farmlands

-Consider partnering with other local and regional organizations promoting farmland preservation to increase public attention to the need to support farmers and preserve farmland in New Milford

-Identify and implement ways of encouraging New Milford residents to visit local farms to broaden their understanding of the importance of preserving New Milford's surviving farmlands, e.g., organizing farm bike tours

-Explore with area restaurants development of a campaign promoting availability of locally-grown produce (with table tent cards and window decals: “We proudly serve locally-grown produce!”)

5.3 Enhance the success of New Milford’s Farmer Market as an effective channel for sale of local farm produce

-Building on joint discussions begun in 2006, determine together with the present organizers of the New Milford Farmers Market how the Farmland Preservation Committee can most effectively support their efforts

-Where needed, find committed volunteers with administrative skills to help with paperwork for the present organizers of the Farmers Market

-Identify and visit 8-10 of the best farmers’ markets around the Tri-state Area to benchmark, interviewing organizers, participating farmers and customers to determine “best practices” that may be used by the New Milford Farmers Market

-Using the results of the discussions, the benchmarking exercise and focus groups of local and regional potential customers, identify strategies to expand the ongoing customer base of the New Milford Farmers Market

-Work with the New Milford Farmers’ Market to launch a media and marketing campaign to increase the number of regular customers

5.4 Encourage other strategies that provide economic benefit to local farmers

-Work with New Milford’s Zoning Commission to help the farmers realize more income from their land by promoting agricultural tourism (Ag-Tourism) by amending the zoning regulations to allow activities like corn mazes, weddings and events to be held on New Milford farms

-Work with the Town and regional land trusts to offer town and land trust preserved lands for a nominal lease fee for agricultural purposes where appropriate

-Encourage Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) operations, niche specialty farms or ventures such as such as “Pick Your Own” produce and “Choose/Cut” Christmas tree farms

-Work with the Economic Development Commission to find outside investors willing to fund entrepreneurial organic farming ventures

-Locate state expertise to assist our own farmers in exploring niche farming opportunities

-Work with the New Milford Zoning and Planning Commissions to establish “Floating Agricultural Preservation Zones” to facilitate and encourage farming within the zone.

-Work toward inclusion in the Plan of Conservation and Development of language that protects, preserves and promotes our town’s working farms

-Where new developments are proposed adjacent to existing farmland, require that adequate buffers be placed along the proposed development to screen the development from the neighboring farm(s)

5.5 Identify and implement strategies to access significant amounts of federal, state, town, foundation and land trust funding to meet the Farmland Preservation Committee’s long-term goals

-Research and understand requirements and annual deadlines of most likely potential funding programs at state and federal levels for farmland purchases. Identify and recruit experienced grant writers who can help. Set up a calendar of proposal submissions

-Develop working relationships with local land trusts that have a proven track record of raising private funds for land acquisition and preservation

-Establish a designated sub-fund within the New Milford Charitable Trust Fund, Inc. to which private contributions aimed at preserving New Milford farmlands can be deposited

-Consider a proposal for the Town Council requesting a line item in the annual Town budget for accrual of funds for purchase of farmlands. Begin building public appreciation in New Milford of the need to do so

-Ensure timely annual municipal budget requests for Farmland Preservation Committee promotional and materials expenses

-Investigate the possibility of working together with farmland preservation committees or their equivalent in towns bordering New Milford to preserve farmlands that straddle the borders of both towns