

Agriculture Committee Long Range Plan Submission

Background

Concord has been an agricultural community for centuries, and agriculture remains a central piece of Concord's identity and economy even today. With 1004 acres in active agricultural production, some 16 farm businesses and 11 farm stands, Concord stands out among the suburbs of Boston as a place that is friendly to agriculture. Many residents enjoy the sight of open spaces in active agricultural production, and they enjoy eating the bounty of the harvest from these working lands.

In spite of both the historical and present-day importance of agriculture in Concord, the future of farming in this community is uncertain. The Ag Committee was established after the last Long Range Plan in 2005 to address many of the uncertainties and challenges Concord farms face in modern times. The Ag Committee currently works on issues such as raising consumer awareness about the importance of supporting local farms, promoting the preservation of agricultural land, giving input to the Town on ways to support a healthy farming community, and working with other local groups to find solutions to the challenges of affordable farmer housing and farm succession planning. The Ag Committee has had a hand in several notable success in the past twelve years, including the popular annual Ag Day Farmers Market in Concord center, which launches a weekend Food Farm & Garden Fair in September, the widely distributed Guide to Concord Farms brochure, an annual spring forum in March to educate the public about various farming-related issues, and the successful purchase and lease of the McGrath farmland to a new farming business.

Yet there is still much work to do to ensure that farms in Concord remain viable in the long term. While several new farm businesses have sprung up in Concord over the past twelve years, we have also seen a few close or move due to the challenges of making a sustainable living and gaining secure access to land and infrastructure.

Challenges for new farm businesses

The major challenge for farmers wishing to set up a new farm business in Concord is access to a viable farming situation. This means not only farmland, but also farming infrastructure and affordable housing, ideally located on or adjacent to the farmland.

Both vegetable and livestock operations require access to electricity, clean water, and a place for equipment storage. Depending on the type of operation, an irrigation system, greenhouses, livestock shelter, a place for washing produce, a place to store harvested crops or meat, and a farm stand are also crucial. Restrictions placed on farmland that prohibit this type of infrastructure ensure that the farmland is only a viable option for an established farm business with a base of operations elsewhere.

Affordable farmer housing is another essential piece of the puzzle for new farm businesses. Farming is not a career that is suited to long commutes for a number of reasons: farmers work very long hours, there are chores that need to be done seven days a week, and farmers additionally need to be “on-call” and able to quickly respond to problems that come up (like an animal getting loose or an irrigation line springs a leak). Farming is also not a particularly lucrative career, so most housing in Concord and the surrounding communities is out of reach for young farmers and farm workers.

Challenges for existing farm businesses

The major challenges that existing farms face are finding enough local seasonal workers, convincing community members to spend a larger portion of their food dollars on Concord-grown products, and planning for farm succession.

Because of the low cost of food and the thin profit margins on which most farms operate, farm workers generally make close to minimum wage and are only employed seasonally. This makes it difficult for farm managers to find and retain good employees for multiple seasons. The problem is also exacerbated by the dearth of affordable housing locally. Many qualified farm workers faced with a 45 minute commute from a more affordable community will choose instead to work for farms in more rural communities that are able to offer low-cost free local housing.

In addition to labor and housing challenges, long-term financial viability is a serious challenge to Concord farmers. A big part of remaining financially viable is attracting enough regular customers. While many people in Concord and surrounding communities have a higher than average level of awareness and enthusiasm for local food, it can still be a challenge for farms to convince people to regularly choose their local farm stand over the convenience of the “one stop” shopping or the low prices offered at grocery stores or even their own home gardens. Local farm prices are generally higher than grocery store prices because of higher labor costs and economies of scale. Labor costs are high in Massachusetts not only because prevailing wages are higher than in most agricultural regions, but also because most farms are smaller acreage and more diversified, making a high level of mechanization unrealistic (increased mechanization reduces the number of employees needed). There is certainly a dedicated core of Concord farm stand shoppers, but in order for existing businesses to grow, they need to be able to attract new customers as well as turn more occasional customers into regulars.

Farm succession is also a significant issue for maintaining a thriving agricultural sector in Concord. The traditional farmer “retirement plan” of selling the business no longer ensures that the business will survive. With land and housing prices so high in Concord, farmers are unlikely to find a buyer who is also a farmer. This means that unless the Town or a conservation organization steps in to assist in succession planning as needed, farmland will be sold into development.

Solutions

Protecting farmland from development and ensuring that farmland remains dedicated to agricultural use is essential to the survival of farming in Concord. The Ag committee supports collaborative efforts to buy farmland with existing housing and farming infrastructure, which can then be leased to new farmers. The Town's purchase of McGrath Farm is a great model for how this can work. Such projects could both help current farm owners with succession planning, and also address the lack of access to viable farming situations for new farm businesses. Recognizing the effectiveness of Mass. General Laws, Chapter 61A legislation in keeping land open and in agricultural production, the Ag. Committee also encourages the town to promote changes to the program that would include some reduction in the size of qualifying lots, while understanding that such changes should be made carefully with full consideration of the impact on town revenues and other potential unintended or unforeseen consequences.

The Ag Committee also recommends prioritizing seasonal farm worker housing in the Town's affordable housing plans. A shared house with rooms offered year-round at a reduced rate to seasonal farm-workers would let Concord's farms attract more experienced farm workers. The Concord Housing Foundation and Minuteman National Historical Park could be important partners in identifying and raising the funds for the purchase or repair of potential farmer housing.

The Ag Committee looks forward to working with the Town and local businesses to identify projects and find funding to keep Concord farms on the cutting edge of the local food movement, as well as competitive with the convenience and low prices of grocery stores. Examples of the types of projects that could be explored include a community kitchen for processing surplus crops into value-added products; the construction of a temperature and humidity controlled community crop storage space to allow farms to better keep crops for sale beyond the regular growing season; the establishment of an indoor "winter market" space where farms without insulated farm stands could sell produce through the winter months; and the purchase of communal equipment for the production of specialty crops or livestock.

In the interests of sustaining a strong local economy in Concord, the Ag Committee would like to partner with the Town and its many local retailers to make the case to the community for regularly spending their dollars locally. Ag committee members are convinced that the more invested people are in the fortunes of Concord's farms and small businesses, the more likely these businesses are to succeed in the long run.