

The following excerpt is from a presentation made by Philip Chester, AICP at the 2005 Southern New England Planner's Conference session on Strategies to Preserve Farmland.

Creating a Local Farmland Preservation Program

The Town of Suffield has implemented an aggressive local farmland preservation program. The first step in this process was the inclusion of a goal in Suffield's *Plan of Conservation and Development* to preserve 55% of all residentially-zoned land as agriculture or open space.

The following describes several steps a planner can take to create a local farmland preservation program. Farming predates all other land uses and benefits a community in numerous ways. Consider your mission similar to that of an economic development director who is trying to retain business, only you are trying to retain the business of agriculture.

1. Collect all Town Hall references to "AGRICULTURE" and "OPEN SPACE".
 - PLAN OF C&D
 - REGIONAL and STATE PLAN OF C&D
 - ZONING REGULATIONS
 - SUBDIVISION REGULATIONS
2. MAP all AGRICULTURAL and OPEN SPACE properties.
3. Create a RATING SYSTEM for AGRICULTURAL LANDS.
 - CREATE SPREADSHEET of agricultural properties over 25 acres (exclude property owners' name). For each property include a parcel identification number, total acreage, percent active farmland, percent prime and important soils, adjacent land uses (i.e., contiguous to farmland/open space), and any other values your community places on preserving farmland (i.e., visual impact from public roads, development pressures).
 - CREATE RATING SYSTEM by assigning numeric value for each spreadsheet item, i.e., total acreage = 1pt. <50 acres, 2pt. 50-100 acres, 3pt. >100 acres.
4. ARTICULATE local BENEFITS to FARMLAND PRESERVATION.
 - Reduces sprawl.
 - Preserves agricultural economy.
 - Preserves open space, viewsheds, and rural character.
 - Preserves natural resources.
 - Preserves a land use with positive tax benefits, e.g., farmland generates more in local tax revenue than it costs in services.
 - Preserves community character.
5. IDENTIFY and SOLICIT agricultural preservation groups and FUNDING sources. Declare that you are creating a Local Farmland Preservation Program! Hold a meeting with these groups, apply for a grant, get on an email/ mailing list, and find out what options are out there.
 - LOCAL. Create a steering committee to work with. Conduct a web-based survey or a cost-of-community-services study to solidify farmland preservation support. Collect fee-

in-lieu of open space and request an annual budgetary allotment that allows you to conduct appraisals and offering matching funds.

- STATE DEPARTMENTS of AGRICULTURE and ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION. Identify farmland preservation, open space, and other funding sources.
- USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service. Identify farmland preservation funding and other resources.
- OTHER, i.e., Local Land Trusts, Foundations, Farm Bureau, Connecticut Farmland Trust, American Farmland Trust.

6. Conduct LOCAL OUTREACH.

- Present findings to ELECTED OFFICIALS.
- Contact MEDIA.
- Conduct a LAND PRESERVATION OPTIONS workshop for property owners.
- Create a FARMERS' MARKET or other local economic development assistance.
- Conduct letter-writing campaign to FARMERS to discuss programs available to them, to identify yourself as a point person in helping them preserve their farm, and to make them aware that they can retain ownership of their land and receive government dollars for a portion of its value.

7. Prepare FARM-FRIENDLY REGULATIONS and POLICIES.

- Include the “promotion and protection of agriculture” as a purpose to your Zoning and Subdivision Regulations.
- Create an “open space” definition that makes “open space” and “agriculture” synonymous land uses.
- Mandate cluster development with an emphasis on preserving farmland.
- Allow farm stands by right.
- Require agricultural buffers or no-build areas when a residential development is proposed adjacent to actively farmed land.
- Require adjacent agricultural land uses to be identified on subdivision plans and work to avoid conflict of land uses in the planning process.
- Lease town-owned land to farmers.
- Adopt tax assessment policies that favor agricultural land uses and structures.
- Adopt other regulations and policies that help to preserve farming as a land use.

Postscript: At a one-time municipal expenditure of \$2K per acre coupled with positive long-term tax consequences and the preservation of open space and prime soils, farmland preservation has become synonymous with smart growth in Suffield! Over the past 5 years Suffield has preserved a farm a year or 400 acres of prime farmland at a municipal cost of \$750K. The total funds paid to these property owners was \$3.4M, the balance of which was realized through Federal and State cost sharing and private foundation funding. The Town plans to preserve 2 additional farms in 2006, and has 15 farmers who have requested to have their development rights purchased.

Resources: Joseph Dippel CT Dept. of Ag. (860) 713-2530, Bonnie Burr CT Farm Bureau (860) 298-4400, Elizabeth Moore Connecticut Farmland Trust (860) 247-0202, Kip Kolesinskas USDA/NRCS (860) 871-4047, Chris Coffin American Farmland Trust (800) 370-4879.