



Town of Sparta, N.Y.

Agriculture & Farmland Protection Plan Executive Summary



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**Agriculture
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Introduction

The objective of this Town of Sparta Agriculture and Farmland Protection Plan is to provide a report on the state of agriculture in the Town and the issues confronting its agricultural community. With an overriding goal of promoting long-term agricultural viability and success for Sparta’s farming community, the Plan provides a vision for the future and includes prioritized and pragmatic recommendations to guide municipal leaders and farmers. This Plan details Sparta’s role in the regional agricultural economy and seeks to align local programs with county, state and federal programs

The Town of Sparta is a rural agricultural community located in southern Livingston County, in New York State’s Finger Lakes Region. The Town is approximately 27.8 square miles in area. With 1,624 residents, Sparta is the fourth smallest town in Livingston County in terms of population. It is located within the Finger Lakes region, which ranks first out of NYS’s ten, formally recognized Economic Development Regions for the largest amount of farmland and total amount of farm sales in New York.

Agriculture has long played a central role in Sparta. Farmers originally settled the area over 200 years ago, drawn to the rich soils and the proximity to shipping routes along the Genesee River and Great Lakes. Although today the nature of farming has changed, in Sparta agriculture is still a significant economic activity, as well as a defining characteristic of its landscape

The Town of Sparta is located in Agricultural District #3. In 2015, some 188 Sparta parcels were included in the Agricultural District program, totaling about 9,180 acres, or approximately 52% of the total area of the Town.

Developing the Plan

Through a series of stakeholder interviews, public meetings and committee meetings during the course of preparing this Agriculture and Farmland Protection Plan, a vision for the future of agriculture in Sparta has evolved. This vision is the guiding force in developing the recommendations outlined later in the Plan and can continue to guide Town officials and residents as they consider decisions that will impact the future of agriculture in the Town of Sparta.

Given the rural nature of the community, and the capacity of local government to implement this Plan, in many cases the recommendations in this Plan emphasize collaboration with Livingston County, other towns, local and state agencies, and the farm community itself.

Plan Vision and Goals

The Agriculture and Farmland Protection Plan vision is:

“The Town of Sparta has a unique resource in terms of its rich soils, waters and its climate, which for two centuries has supported stewardship, excellence, innovation and adaptation in agriculture. This Plan envisions that a hundred years from now people farming in Sparta will be continuing this tradition, maintaining the Town's rural character, enhancing the quality of life, protecting its environmental and other public

resources, supplying food and other agricultural products, and strengthening the local economy.”

To further this Vision, the Plan articulates four goals:

1. Maintain and enhance the local agricultural economy and its capacity to respond to economic trends in agriculture.
2. Preserve the land, water and other environmental resources critical to the long-term success of the local agricultural economy.
3. Ensure that the non-farm community continues to support the long-term viability of agriculture in Sparta.
4. Promote the link between farms and food: educate the general public about agriculture in Sparta, its value and its benefits to the overall community.

Agriculture in Sparta Today

Two percent (2%) of the Town of Sparta labor force are employed in the Agriculture, Forestry, Fishing, and Hunting Industry cluster. This is about 3.5 times the statewide percentage of 0.6% (curiously, Livingston County’s overall percentage is approximately 3.5%).

Farmers in New York and the Town continue to face a number of economic and logistical challenges. In a number of stakeholder interviews with Sparta farmers, however, the attitudes of the interview respondents were overall upbeat. No respondent expressed any pessimism regarding the future of agriculture in New York or the Town, or any desire to exit the farming business.

Among the positive indicators expressed by the Sparta farmers included:

- good soils, and a diversity of farm types and crops grown;
- relative lack of residential development in the Town;
- good farm operators and multi-generational farms;
- strong support structure in the form of Cooperative Extension, the local Soil and Water Conservation District (SWCD), and other agencies;
- local and state governments that are supportive of agriculture;
- good network of farm services suppliers, equipment dealers, independent consultants;
- proximity to larger regional and state wholesale markets, including food and grain processors;
- opportunity for direct farm to consumer marketing and internet sales;
- growing market for organic fruits and produce; and,
- the potential operational benefits of solar and wind energy development.

Although their outlook is generally upbeat, farmers have also identified a number of potential challenges, including:

- anti-GMO and anti-pesticides attitudes of some consumers;
- high start-up costs for farming;
- competition for land with other farmers and non-farmers who buy land and take it out of production;
- instability in the availability of rental lands;
- conflicts with non-farm neighbors, newcomers over agricultural operations;
- controlling operating costs, including fuel and energy costs;
- increasing amounts of regulations, permits, taxes;
- issues with the categorization of buildings by assessors as agricultural or non-agricultural for tax purposes;
- lack of broadband internet service for some farmers; and,
- zoning regulations that are not supportive of alternative agriculture or farm-based businesses.

Town of Sparta Population and Land-Use Demographic Trends

Over the past several decades, the Town of Sparta has experienced small to moderate population growth. A comparison of satellite orthoimagery from 1994 and 2014/2015 indicates that 59 new homes were built in the Town of Sparta during that period. Of the 59 homes, 26 (45%) resulted in the conversion of agricultural land to residential development. The conversion of land from agriculture to other uses appears to be a minor issue in terms of the loss of agricultural land. The satellite imagery indicates that the 26 new homes typically occupied lots between one and three acres in size, so the actual loss of land is relatively small.

During the past five years, a new Amish community has established itself in the towns of Sparta, Springwater, North Dansville and Wayland. A representative of the community estimates that between 25 and 30 families have moved to the region to establish homes and farmsteads, of which 13 have been identified in Sparta. The farms vary in terms of size and specialization, the products of which include traditional dairy, beef cattle, and fruits and vegetables. Several families operate small businesses such as woodworking shops, small lumber mills, bulk food stores, and harness shops.

The Town of Sparta is rich in high-quality farmland soils. According to the USDA soils survey data, 12.7% of the farmland in the Town is classed as prime agricultural lands, and some 72.4% of the farmland in Sparta is classed as farmland of statewide importance. Altogether almost 85% of the soils in the Town, covering approximately 14,170 acres of land, are classified as prime or soils of statewide importance.

Farmland represents the largest use of land within the Town of Sparta, with approximately 8,348 acres of land in the Town classified as agricultural lands, or 47% of the Town's area, according to Real Property Assessment data. Approximately 30% of the land in Sparta is classified as "residential" use.

Farmland in Sparta is highly fragmented in terms of ownership. According to data from the Livingston County Planning Department approximately 45% of agricultural lands are identified as not rented, and roughly 40% are identified as being rented. The percentage of farmland in Sparta owned by farm operators is low compared to Livingston County as a whole. According to the 2012 Census of Agriculture, county-wide approximately 77% of the agricultural land in Livingston County was identified as being owned by the farm operator.

The high percentage of rented farmland has important implications for agriculture in the Town. Farmers who rely on rented lands face uncertainty about availability of the land from year to year.

Farm to Markets

According to the Livingston County Agriculture and Farmland Protection Plan, farmers have access to a range of market outlets for their products in the region, and also to regional retail food outlets that purchase directly from farmers. Livingston County and Sparta are also located within reach of major regional markets such as Buffalo and Rochester, and larger metropolitan markets such as Cleveland, Pittsburgh, Philadelphia and New York City.

Energy and telecommunications are becoming more critical to the success of agricultural operations. According to the Livingston County Agriculture and Farmland Protection Plan, reliable energy resources that are sufficient to support the need of agriculture are generally available throughout the County. In some areas of Sparta, however, "end of the line" issues in terms of quality and reliability of service have emerged.

Land Use Regulations

The current Land Development Code for the Town of Sparta, adopted in 1991, divides the Town into four zoning districts: Agricultural/Residential (HR); Highway Residential (HR); Light Industrial (LI); and Commercial (C). In addition, the code includes two zoning overlay districts, the F-Flood Hazard Overlay district and the Steep Slope Overlay district.

With the exception of a few relatively minor issues that are identified above, the regulations in the Town of Sparta Land Development Code as it relates to agriculture do not appear to be overly burdensome. As is the case with many rural towns the Land Development Code generally supports agricultural operations; however, there are a number of areas in which it can be updated and improved to match the evolving nature of agriculture today.

Specific recommendations related to zoning include:

- review of the permitted uses in the A/R Agricultural/Residential zoning district and updating them where appropriate;
- review of the definitions section (Section 1001) and updating existing zoning definitions and adding new ones as appropriate;
- review the provisions for alternative energy systems, including Section 709, which governs solar energy systems. Especially important is updating the Land Development Code to ensure adequate regulation of large scale solar and wind developments on agricultural lands.

In addition to zoning regulations, the Town of Sparta should also review and amend as appropriate its subdivision regulations to provide for and encourage the use of conservation subdivision design approaches as a means for accommodating new development while conserving valuable agricultural lands.

Plan Implementation

To address the issues raised in the inventory and analysis and the dialogues with the farm community, and to further the Vision and Goals listed above, the Plan proposes 22 Implementation Measures that are detailed in Chapter 11. These measures are ambitious, however most of them are ones that can and will be implemented in partnership with state and county agencies and non-governmental organizations, as well as in partnership with the farm community.

In addition, the Plan proposes use of purchase of development rights (PDR) as a means of protecting the more vulnerable high-quality farmland in the Town. This would be accomplished through supporting the participation by Town farmers in the Livingston County Purchase of Development Rights program.