

“Slaughterhouses and Sprawl: Supporting Local Agriculture as a Key to Preserving Local Heritage”¹

Judith M. LaBelle

Had you told me five years ago that developing a network of high-quality slaughterhouses was essential to protecting the Hudson River Valley, my home region, from sprawl, I would have thought you were nuts. Now I would think you insightful.

For in the Hudson Valley—and other regions that are strongly influenced by development pressures from nearby urban areas—the only way that we will preserve the agricultural landscapes that are a defining element of the region’s character is to help farming be economically viable.

We grow good grass in the Hudson Valley; it is a great place to pasture livestock. But livestock production ultimately requires slaughtering facilities, and here, as in many places across the country, the small slaughterhouses that used to dot the region have become scarce. As corporate consolidation has spread through the agri-food sector, larger slaughterhouses that can process animals more cheaply have replaced many smaller ones.

These large slaughterhouses serve the needs of the larger cattle producers very effectively. But for smaller farmers, trucking animals several hours is time-consuming and stressful to the animals, which reduces the quality and value of the meat. As fuel prices have skyrocketed, transportation costs have further reduced farmers’ already thin margins.

Yet it is the farmers who raise livestock, with their open pastures and crop land, who are responsible for maintaining much of the agricultural landscape that we treasure. Even small dairy farmers routinely work a few hundred acres and small (in the larger scheme of things) beef producers may maintain a few thousand.

But in today’s market, a farmer producing niche vegetables on a few acres may have a higher net income than a beef or dairy producer on a few hundred. A skillful farmer can produce a bounty of vegetables on five or ten acres; one young farmer we met recently supports a 75-member community supported agriculture program on three acres.¹ As beef and dairy farms go out of business and are replaced with one or two houses per acre, their loss ripples across the landscape. The irony that residential developments are often named for the farms they have replaced becomes ever more poignant.

Slaughterhouses are but one part of the agricultural infrastructure that has been fraying and disappearing since World War II, as national and global interests have come to dominate the agri-food business and infrastructure has shifted in response. Loss of

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infrastructure has made small and mid-size farmers less efficient and increased their costs. As the market value of their land rises in response to development pressure, selling becomes an ever more attractive option.

Some farmers are eager to sell; they have long considered the land their only retirement fund. Many others, however, would prefer to stay on the land, but they must be able to make a living and support their families. A third-generation dairy farmer, whose operation uses more than 300 acres of land for pasturing cows and producing feed, told us that “Every day, people come up my driveway and offer me more money than I have ever dreamed of—even though my farm is not for sale. I don’t want to go out of dairy but I can’t afford braces for my kids. What am I supposed to do?”

If we want to contain sprawl and protect key cultural landscapes, we have to find ways to help this farmer and others remain economically viable. The task is doubly hard because current agricultural policy—and global trade policy—is often oriented toward encouraging and supporting large commodity growers rather than the small and mid-size farmers that predominate in regions like the Hudson Valley.

But there are things that can be done at the regional and community level—and actions that can be taken by individual consumers—that can make a critical difference in encouraging farmers to stay on their land. The experience of Glynwood Center, in New York’s Hudson River Valley, provides insights and approaches that may be translated for use in other regions.

Glynwood Center, a nonprofit organization, helps communities conserve their cultural and natural resources while achieving economic well-being. In recent years a major focus of our work has been our Agricultural Initiative through which we encourage farmers to stay on their land and share what we learn with people facing similar challenges in other regions. Our agricultural work grew out of our decade of experience with community-based efforts, including the Countryside Exchange program through which we helped more than 100 communities in the United States and abroad gain new perspective and catalyze a new course of action. Nearly 1,000 professionals, including many historic preservationists, from a dozen countries contributed their services as team members.

Glynwood Center also operates its own farm. We are establishing a multi-species rotational grazing using the Black Angus that have traditionally been on the land along with heritage breeds. By encouraging the continued production of heritage breeds, we can help protect the genetic diversity that is part of our agricultural heritage.

Helping Communities Understand How Their Actions Affect Farmers

The officials who control land use and other regulatory and tax policy at the local level frequently aren’t aware of the effect their actions have on farmers. They often assume that farm viability is determined by national policy or economic forces that are beyond their influence.

But there are many ways in which local policy affects farm viability. In New York and many other states, critical land use decisions are made at the municipal level. Other states delegate authority to the county government. In either case, these local leaders play a key role in determining what happens on the land, including farmland. Many local policies and regulations undermine a farmer's ability to succeed, such as those that make it difficult to diversify or to engage in direct marketing or that make it prohibitively expensive to obtain permits for constructing or changing buildings.

Let us consider one common example of the problem: Zoning too often both reflects and creates a mindset that farming is a "transitional use." In most communities, agriculture is not a separate zoning category, it is an "as of right" use in a residential zone, which often means that you can build one house on every acre of land. This land-use policy both reflects and creates a mental framework in which agriculture is seen as part of a transitional landscape. There is an assumption that all farmland will one day be developed for residential or commercial purposes, which are assumed to be its "highest and best use." Even farmers may come to value their land for the number of "buildable lots" allowed by the zoning rather than its productive capacity.

Too often, value for future development, rather than value for current agricultural use, also determines real property taxes. One assessor in our region recently placed a higher assessed value on the portion of a cornfield with a higher elevation, despite the farmer's protest that the corn didn't care about the better view. The higher taxes will make it even more difficult for the farmer to remain on the land.

At the same time, there are many local regulatory approaches and real property tax programs that can affirmatively encourage farmers to remain on their land. While farmers are quick to note the discouraging impact of high real property and school taxes, many also cite lack of understanding and "harassment" by their neighbors as the element that is most likely to make them decide to stop farming.

Although many developers like to locate their residential developments next to "scenic" small and mid-size farms, the new residents often have no knowledge of farming. They are frustrated when their drive to town is delayed by a slow moving farm vehicle, or the smell of their barbeque is spiced with that of the manure being spread on a nearby field. Some communities in the Hudson Valley, such as Goshen, now require that when a subdivision is created near an active farm, each deed must contain a notice that the nearby farming operation will generate normal noise and smells. This helps create a more realistic expectation on the part of the buyer, and if local officials do receive a call from a new homeowner demanding that action be taken against the farmer, they can point to this notice and refuse. While this may sound like a small action to take, farmers often cite a municipality's commitment to support farming as being critical to their own determination to stay on their land.²

Helping Communities Understand Agriculture's Relationship to the Economy

Local officials are often unaware of the importance of agriculture to the local economy.

They assume that it is a vestige of the past—that farmland is “vacant” land just biding time until it is developed—rather than a key component of a diversified economic future.

When Glynwood Center made sustainable agriculture a major focus of its work, local officials told us that they did not have data that would support devoting economic development resources to agriculture. Therefore, we undertook the first analysis of the USDA’s Census of Agriculture data that focuses on the ten counties that make up the Hudson River Valley Heritage Area. By comparing the 1997 with the 2002 data (released in 2004) we were able to provide a snapshot of agriculture in our region and reveal some major trends.³

Most people were surprised to learn that in spite of the development that has taken place, the Valley still has 1,000 square miles of farmland—about 670,000 acres. About 17 percent of the land mass of the Valley is farmland and about 8 percent of all farmland in New York State is in the Valley. This is remarkable given the Valley’s proximity to New York City. In 2002, Valley farmers sold products valued at \$260 million, almost 10 percent of the total for New York State. The Valley produced almost 20 percent of the state’s vegetables and between 20 and 40 percent of the apples, peaches, tomatoes, and other fruits.

This farmland comprises 4,000 farms, virtually all of which are owned by the families that operate them. We are blessed to have farmers who are experienced and thoughtful stewards of their land. Many are relatively small; the average farm size is 156 acres and the median is 87 acres. At the same time, 80 of the largest farmers collectively own more than 100,000 acres.

The range in farm size is reflected in the range of value of the products sold. Twenty percent of the farms had sales in excess of \$50,000. Fifty percent had sales of \$5,000 or less, reflecting the fact that many farm families rely on income generated off the farm.

One of the troubling trends we identified was termed by one farmer as being the transition “from dairy to hay, to horses or houses.” Nonetheless, the opportunity to strengthen the regional food system and encourage these farmers to stay on their land—and even increase production—is tantalizingly evident. Between 1997 and 2002, the value of agricultural products sold through direct marketing (at farmers markets, through community supported agriculture, etc.) almost doubled, and a recent study undertaken on behalf of the New York State Department of Agriculture and Markets projected that the market for regional food products in New York City alone exceeds \$850 million. At the same time, this study projected that there is slightly less than \$150 million in supply (excluding the value of meat products). Clearly there is a great opportunity for regional farmers if we can encourage them to stay on their land and connect them to this regional market efficiently.⁴

But well-informed local officials cannot take effective action without an informed and supportive constituency. One response to this challenge is Glynwood Center’s Keep Farming program, a unique community-building process that helps communities

understand the many benefits that agriculture provides and then helps them develop and implement strategies to sustain it.

Responsibility for coordinating the program at the community level is vested in a Community Agricultural Partnership, which is composed of farmers, local officials, and other interested local residents. During the first phase of the Keep Farming program—*Analyzing for Understanding*—teams of community volunteers use a set of specially designed assessment tools to develop an understanding of what agriculture exists and how it contributes to the community’s economy, environmental quality, community character, and access to fresh food. During the second phase—*Creating a Strategy to Keep Farming*—the community considers what it has learned and determines the steps it wants to take in the implementation phase.

The results that can be achieved at the community level are impressive and reason for optimism. For example, in Chatham, N.Y., the Keep Farming economic assessment team interviewed every farmer it could identify in the town for whom farming is the primary source of income. They—and others in the community—began to view farmers in a new light when they learned that these farmers spend \$1.25 million per year for goods and services within the county. Clearly, farmers are an important part of the county’s economy and losing them would undermine many other small businesses as well.

After careful review of all of the data collected during the assessment phase, Chatham Keep Farming teams developed recommendations that four local farmers presented at the Community Agriculture Forum. They ranged from the simple (erect signs on the main roads entering the town declaring Chatham a “farm friendly” community) to the complex (implement a Purchase of Development Rights Program backed by a bond act to generate funds for farmland preservation.)

Within weeks, the Chatham Town Board passed a resolution officially implementing one of the recommendations—creation of the Chatham Agricultural Partnership (CAP), a standing advisory committee for agricultural issues. The CAP includes five farmers, a representative of the Town Board, and the local Keep Farming facilitator. The CAP and the members of the Keep Farming teams have continued to work on the implementation of the recommendations and to encourage their integration into the master planning process which is underway in the Town.

As the Keep Farming program moves forward in other communities, our goal is to build a network of communities throughout the Valley whose leaders and residents are better informed, organized, and taking effective action to support regional agriculture.

Our analysis of the State of Agriculture in the Hudson Valley and the research done through the Keep Farming program have begun to articulate the importance of agriculture to the broader economy of the Hudson Valley. Farmers and local officials are using this information to make the case for more economic development dollars being devoted to re-creating the infrastructure that farmers need to get their products processed and brought to market efficiently. High quality regional slaughterhouses are a critical part of this infrastructure. Given the strong demand for regional products, this investment could

generate an upward spiral by helping farmers stay on their land, diversify, and expand, while creating other opportunities for related businesses, such as machinery suppliers and veterinary practices.

One opportunity that is drawing increased attention in the Valley is “culinary tourism,” an offshoot of the agri-tourism that has grown dramatically in recent years.⁵ As more city dwellers yearn for a connection with the land (at least for a few hours on a weekend), many farmers have found that inviting visitors to the farm to see what is going on, participate in a farm-related activity and buy farm products is a lucrative form of diversification. They are no longer surprised if they generate more income from creating a maze in a cornfield and selling corn stalks for decorations than they could from selling the corn as a crop. (Many *are* still surprised when grateful visitors commend them for their hard work in spreading the pumpkins all across their field so that the children can have the fun of exploring and finding the perfect one.)

Culinary tourism has been termed “the hottest niche to emerge within the travel industry in years.”⁶ It is a natural outgrowth of the trend toward the “experience economy,” an economy in which consumers are more focused on having a memorable experience than merely purchasing a product or service.⁷ Culinary tourism can encompass any activity that relates to food and beverage in a region, but will be successful only if it provides a unique and memorable experience.

Focusing on the distinctive food products in a region is a key to culinary tourism. There is great potential for mutually supportive relationships between a region’s farmers and its restaurants, centers for culinary education, and specialty shops.

What Can an Individual Do to Support Regional Agriculture?

While each person has a critical role to play as a citizen in supporting efforts to sustain farmers, each person also has a powerful role to play as a consumer. Regardless of where you live, you can help keep farmers on their land by using your food dollar thoughtfully:

- Buy direct from the farmer whenever possible, so that the farmer receives your entire food dollar.
- Respect seasonality. Part of the distinctiveness of your region’s culture is derived from its seasons. Strive to purchase agricultural products that are in season in your region.
- Set a realistic goal and stick to it. Few of us can source all of our food regionally, but if each of us spent even 10 percent of our annual food budget on food from farmers in our own region, the increase in demand would strengthen the region’s farm economy and help keep sprawl at bay.
- Don’t confuse price with value. A head of lettuce from the supermarket may look like one from the farmers’ market, but it was likely picked many days before and won’t last as long. Taste, nutritional quality, freshness and shelf life all relate to the value of what you are getting for your food dollar.

Conclusion

There are many things that communities and consumers can do to help sustain regional agriculture, and in so doing stave off sprawl and help preserve the cultural landscapes that are a fragile part of our heritage.

Judith M. LaBelle, Esq., is the president of Glynwood Center, which is located in Cold Spring, N.Y., in the Hudson River Valley. Glynwood Center's mission is to help communities address change in ways that conserve local culture and natural resources, while strengthening economic well-being. For more information go to www.glynwood.org.

¹ In a community supported agriculture (CSA) program, farmers sell “shares” of their year’s production. The members of the CSA share risk with the farmer. In a bountiful year they receive more; when the weather reduces production they receive less.

² For more examples of the ways in which community policies influence retention of farmers, see “Market and Policy Tools for Improving Farm Viability,” prepared for the Kellogg Foundation Food and Society Networking Conference, April 21, 2004. It can be found on the Glynwood Center website: www.glynwood.org/news/JMLKelloggPresentation.pdf.

³ Our analysis is available on our website, www.glynwood.org, in a form that can be easily downloaded and printed. The full report, with analysis by county, is provided in *The State of Agriculture in the Hudson Valley: Agriculture in Transition*. The issue of *Gleanings* entitled “Agriculture in Transition: Recent Trends in the Hudson Valley” provides an overview.

⁴ This is, of course, the underlying paradox. The same city that creates the development pressure that challenges regional agriculture provides the market that could be its salvation.

⁵ For a good overview see *Entertainment Farming and Agri-Tourism* by Katherine L. Adam on the website of the National Sustainable Agriculture Information Service, www.ATTRA.NCAT.org.

⁶ See the homepage of the International Culinary Tourism Association, www.culinarytourism.org.

⁷ For more on “The Experience Economy” see: www.managingchange.com/masscust/experien.htm.