

Building Your Planning Process From the Ground Up

by Joel Russell

It's time for the final public hearing on a zoning revision or comprehensive plan amendment that the planning commission has been working on for over a year. Through a multitude of sparsely attended community meetings, participants have discussed the ins and outs of different planning recommendations, reviewing colored maps and charts and pages upon pages of text. Suddenly, seemingly out of nowhere, massive opposition erupts as rumors spread around town about what they are about to do to us.


Why does this happen, and what can be done about it? The art of public participation has been extensively described in planning publications, and much has been written about the techniques of participation, such as written surveys, public workshops, multi-day charrettes, citizen advisory committees, and other techniques designed to elicit public input. These are all useful tools, but unless they successfully engage the community, they will fall short of their goals.

This article describes and illustrates some of the key ingredients in a successful planning process that builds "from the ground up." Good planning is neither strictly top-down nor bottom-up. Rather, it requires effective management at the top to excite the imagination and interest of the community at large, along with a genuine openness to citizens' concerns and suggestions.

When solutions are "pre-cooked" and then pushed through an approval process using *public relations* rather than *public engagement*, they usually fail. Problem definition and solution must emerge through a well-managed public process that involves people in a meaningful way. This is not easy to do. The secret, if there is one, is to directly engage citizens at a heart-felt level on matters in

which they and their families have a stake, using language that they can readily understand. While this is no guarantee of success it certainly improves the odds of a good outcome.

TRUST IS THE SINGLE MOST IMPORTANT ACHIEVEMENT IN ANY PLANNING PROCESS; IT IS A PRECONDITION FOR SUCCESSFUL ACTION.

A structured, open process is at the core of the "Keep Farming"® program developed by the Glynwood Center, a non-profit located in New York's Hudson Valley.  See page 4. Keep Farming has helped several area communities develop and run successful planning efforts. This article describes eight of the key elements of the program's approach, with examples from one of the involved communities, the Town of Chatham, New York.

1. Have a Clear Purpose in Mind

Unless planning engages people, it will not accomplish much beyond the production of the proverbial "plan on a shelf." Planning processes driven by a state mandate or a vague notion that "we need a plan" are usually less effective than those that focus on issues of most importance to members of the community.

When a planning process is driven by a strong sense of purpose and is well-managed, broader connections will also gradually become apparent, and the process will itself become more comprehensive. For example, while a planning effort may initially focus on how to preserve farmland, those involved may come to see how preserving farms ties together with the need for economic

development, the need to protect environmental resources, and the need for housing for people involved in farming – a panoply of issues not usually considered to be agricultural start to be seen as interconnected and important.

Put differently, a strong purpose that excites people can become the "entry point" that gets the whole community involved and motivated to engage in a much more comprehensive process as the connections between issues become apparent. This can more effectively mobilize the community than the conventional approach which focuses on breaking the process into discrete planning categories such as housing, economic development, transportation, education, energy, and environment, and developing separate plan elements for each.

While a focus on "functional" plan elements seems a logical way to proceed, it often dilutes citizen interest in the process. It also may result in misallocating resources to material that has little interest to most citizens, while neglecting the more important task of tailoring the plan to the community's deeply felt needs.

If necessary or required by law, a plan can always be restructured to fit the conventional "elements." But as a matter of process, preparing compartmentalized functional plans is not usually a way to excite people about planning.

The resonant entry point issue will vary from one place to another. While in exurban areas of the Hudson Valley it has often been agriculture, in other communities it may be economic development and jobs, urban design and historic preservation, affordable housing, sustainability, energy-efficiency, or transit-oriented development. The key question to ask is "what are people most concerned and excited about?"

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The Keep Farming Program

The Keep Farming program works with selected communities in New York's Hudson Valley wishing to engage in a community-based process for saving agriculture. It has a well thought-out methodology at its heart. As described in the main article, a staff member from the Glynwood Center plays an ongoing role as a coach throughout the process, and helps with problems that arise when dealing with tough, contentious issues. The staff member provides community leaders and residents with hands-on training, instructional materials, and expert guidance organized in three major phases:

Phase 1: Organizing the Community for Success

Keep Farming engages a wide variety of stakeholders in the process from the beginning and helps community residents gain a deeper appreciation of local farming, how it benefits the community, and why it is worthy of strong support. This helps local residents feel truly invested in the "action plan" developed for local agriculture and its implementation.

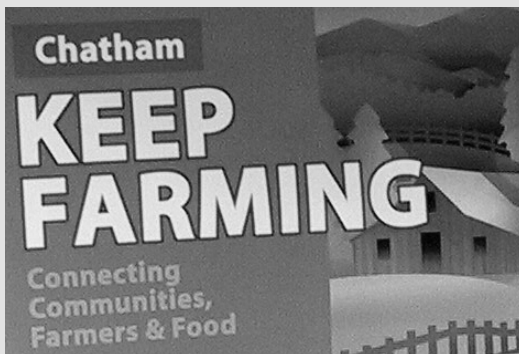
Phase 2: Analyzing the Challenges and Opportunities of Local Agriculture

Keep Farming helps the community document the contributions that farming makes by assessing the following key values:

- **Economics.** Helps the community understand that the most obvious value of agriculture is that it generates income:

it sells products, employs people, and supports many more in agriculture-related businesses. Additionally, keeping land in agricultural production saves the municipality money because farmland requires fewer services than developed land.

- **Local Foods.** Helps the community pinpoint where their food comes from and how much of that food is produced locally. It also uncovers opportunities for farmers to diversify to meet the demands of local consumers.



Farmland is vital to the Town of Chatham's economy and character.

- **Natural Resources.** Helps the community learn about their natural resources and understand how these resources are affected and protected by farming. Agriculture protects the local water supply by maintaining vegetative land cover rather than paving it over, thereby naturally purifying rainwater and recharging aquifers and streams. It keeps the soil rich with important nutrients and biotic elements that are depleted when

land is developed. It also maintains important habitat and wildlife corridors that support and protect endangered as well as common species.

- **Aesthetics.** Demonstrates the aesthetic quality that farmland brings to a community and how farming keeps the countryside alive. The rolling hills, green pastures, and working



Citizens were actively involved in all phases of Chatham's Keep Farming planning effort.

- **Preserving Agricultural Land.** In high and moderate growth areas, the first step in protecting agriculture is to secure the land base. There are many different tools that communities can use to preserve farmland. Keep Farming helps the community understand why certain land use tools work and others do not, which ones are

appropriate for their particular circumstances, and how they must customize these tools in order to achieve their goals.

- **Creating Economic**

Opportunities. Small and mid-sized farms have been challenged for too long by a lack of local markets for their products. Most supermarkets do not purchase local products because buyers cannot be guaranteed sufficient volume, year round delivery of seasonal produce, or the lowest price. As a result, farm products in the United States travel an average of 1,300 miles from farmer to table. Keep Farming helps the

farms – with their barns and grazing livestock – provide the scenic views that create a sense of place and distinctive community character.

Phase 3: Preparing Your Own Keep Farming Action Plan

Once the community understands the multiple benefits that agriculture provides, Keep Farming uses this information to design a strategy that both protects farmland and supports farmers.

community support its farmers in developing new markets for local products and highlights ways that farmers can benefit economically by shortening the food supply chain and linking more directly to consumers and distributors in their region.

More information on the Keep Farming program is available at:
www.glynwood.org/Programs/KeepFarming.html.



The Town of Chatham, New York (population 4,200), is an exurban community about 30 miles southeast of Albany. It is facing strong development pressures. Over one-quarter of Chatham's 33,500 acres is in agricultural use. Two-thirds of the town's active farmland, about 5,000 acres, is used for commodity dairy farming, a sector particularly at risk. Other types of farming include beef, horse, sheep, alpaca, goat, produce, and mixed-production farms.

With its comprehensive plan over 30 years old, and facing increased development, town officials decided to update the plan. But the town struggled for 18 months on efforts to revise the plan before deciding to work with the Glynwood Center's Keep Farming program. By focusing on farmland protection, the program resonated with the strong desire of many residents to sustain an agricultural base in order to maintain the town's rural character. Town officials felt that the Keep Farming program would raise awareness of the importance of agriculture in maintaining this rural identity and would inspire the kind of dedication needed to move from talk to action.

2. Strike a Chord that Excites People

Let's face it, planning issues as conventionally presented to the public are often just plain boring. Charts and statistics, along with generic lists of goals, objectives, strategies, actions, and metrics do not engage people's passions. To succeed, a planning process must be tied to something people really care about, expressed in terms they understand (e.g., jobs, teachers, major developments, farmland). Basing a community planning process on what people *want* rather than what they *fear* can create a more constructive climate in which to plan.



In the Chatham Keep Farming program, the chord that really excited people was the economic importance of agriculture in the community and the opportunity to connect to local food. As the local volunteer coordinator of the Chatham Keep Farming program said, "It's when people find out what farms and farmers mean to the local economy that they really start to pay attention."

The concept of an interwoven food system was new to many residents. It transformed the way they saw farming and land. Keep Farming helped them see how agriculture, food, and many seemingly unrelated businesses and activities were interconnected in one economic web, and brought out the central role agriculture played in their economy.

During the planning process people also found that the changing ownership patterns of land could threaten their access to local food and the viability of farming. Research during the planning process showed that 60 percent of the land being farmed was owned by non-farmer landowners. Town residents had not previously realized this. Neither the farmers nor their neighbors wanted to see this farmland leave active production. But the issue was framed in a positive way: "how can we actively work together to keep local farming viable?"

3. Provide Leadership for Effective Action

Community leadership is a key ingredient of success. If a project is to move beyond meetings of a group of well-intentioned people, leadership is needed to spur action. But true leadership is not about control, it is about inspiration, empowerment, openness, and effective management.

The community's political leadership needs to endorse and back the planning process, but not try to control it or its outcome. Otherwise, there will usually be pushback and ultimate failure. When local officials stand back and entrust leadership roles to others with credibility in the community, the result is often more broadly supported (more on this in point 8). It's worth noting here that a good outside consultant can help to structure a process that empowers the local community to take effective action and to help a group of dedicated residents take a leadership role in the planning process (more about consultants in point 6).



Chatham's Town Supervisor (the equivalent of a mayor) "blessed" the Keep Farming planning process and then appointed a Town Council member to serve as a liaison to the program. A local volunteer leader then carried the ball. This individual (who happened to be a management consultant specializing in organizational behavior) understood the importance of having farmers involved and brought eight farm leaders onto the program steering committee. Participation by these farmers sent a message to other farmers that the program was important, and as a result many joined the steering committee and attended the community meetings. Other members of the steering committee

included four town officials (in addition to the Town Council liaison) a farm animal veterinarian, and a staff member of the Columbia Land Conservancy. The steering committee provided overall leadership to the program, actively promoted it in the community, attended significant community meetings, and made sure that its goals were fulfilled.

Throughout the process a Glynwood staff member provided training on organizing the community. She served as a resource to the community leader and to members of the steering committee, and helped to ensure that the process remained open and transparent.

4. Engage Local Talent and Culture

Communities that can afford staff and/or consultants often make the mistake of leaving most of the process up to these professionals, and do not draw upon the resources of the community itself. The more a plan or ordinance arises from the active participation and skillful contributions of local experts and ordinary citizens, the better it will be tailored to the community's needs.

The temptation to rely heavily upon paid outside consultants, who often use a cookie-cutter one-size-fits-all approach, should be resisted in favor of drawing upon the local talent pool wherever possible. Nevertheless, there are important, but clearly delineated, roles for staff and consultants to play. One role has already been noted (i.e., supporting local volunteers and the steering committee), others are discussed in point 6 below.



In Chatham, as already noted, it was critically important that local farmers were engaged in the planning process. The Keep Farming program actively involved farmers and others with a business or personal connection to farming as much as possible. They were the real experts on local conditions, crops, soils, markets, infrastructure, and what does and does not work on the land and in the marketplace. It also brought in others who were not directly involved in agriculture, but had a stake in it.

Others who were helpful in both supporting and facilitating the process included representatives of the area land trust (the Columbia Land Conservancy) and the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service, as well as the Berkshire-Taconic Foundation (which also provided funding for

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Chatham's outreach brochures). Other local talent included business leaders and residents with expertise in media and communications.

The broad cross section of residents, farmers, and non-farmers involved with the Chatham project made it possible to have a conversation with a variety of stakeholders in which no single viewpoint dominated the discussions. As one resident put it, "the program made us more tolerant of each other's priorities."

5. Make Effective Use of Volunteers

If you are able to excite people, you will also attract volunteers. Your local volunteers, in turn, will get even more people excited and involved in the process. As a result, the plan's ultimate recommendations will have greater community buy-in. Too often, the opposite happens: a small number of insiders try to control a pre-conceived agenda, creating a vicious cycle in which the more people think that the result is predetermined, the fewer people get involved. In this case, the plan's recommendations are more likely to be one-sided and shot down when they go public.

It is important to manage volunteers well. If they spend too many hours spinning their wheels trying to figure out what to do, the process will run out of energy. This is where leadership and competent outside consulting or staff work can help enormously. If volunteers are given clearly delineated tasks that make sense to them, draw on their talents, and empower them to shape the outcome, they will feel valued, work hard, and produce good results.

In addition to the usual corps of adult volunteers found in every community, it helps to involve students of all ages, as they often have unique insights into their community. This also serves to train the next generation of citizens. An additional benefit is that by engaging students you may end up involving their parents (who represent a broad cross-section of the community).

Perhaps the most important benefit of using volunteers is that it changes perceptions that planning is a government process engaged in by "them." Rather,

the process is about citizens planning their future together in a way that strengthens the civic culture of the community.



In Chatham, the Keep Farming program put volunteers to work by giving them meaningful and clearly defined tasks, deadlines, and recognition for performance. In order to do this, Glynwood staff made sure that the volunteer efforts were well-managed, using a skilled local coordinator.

Glynwood staff also provided training for recruiting and organizing the volunteers, as well as written resource materials including a detailed Keep Farming workbook. The workbook clearly outlines a methodology for engaging residents on volunteer teams. These teams go into the community to gather data, talk to local farmers, and assess the overall value of agriculture to the local and regional economy, as well as its contribution to the community's food system, environment, and character.

Keep Farming seeks to ensure that participants do not waste their time with more committee meetings than necessary. Volunteers are given real work, especially research and fact-gathering about farming and the local economy. This not only provides invaluable information, it gives participants first-hand knowledge of the facts, breaks through conflicts based upon uninformed opinions, and connects people with others they might otherwise never get to know. As one farmer commented, "I cannot believe how hard the teams worked to gather the information in an effort to try and help the farmers." Another said, "Keep Farming showed that there are folks in our midst who are attempting to understand the issues we face."

6. Use Consultants Effectively

Except in the case of purely technical issues, it is a major mistake to turn a planning project over to a consultant in its entirety. Not only does this add tremendous cost, it also reduces the likelihood of community support.

Sometimes there are local experts who are qualified to be consultants. Such local talent can provide the best quality consulting work if the local expert is truly qualified, well-respected, and objective. Local experts know the community best and may have working relationships with key players. They will often work for discounted rates as a community service. It may be tempting to try to get such people to do the work as vol-

unteers, and most will volunteer up to a point. However, they will usually (and justifiably) balk at large assignments which would require them to forego other consulting projects which represent a substantial portion of their income.

Outside consultants can be critical to the success of a planning process if they are used to:

- Provide technical expertise that is not available in the community.
- Provide a recommended organizational structure and methodology for the project and its volunteers.
- Provide discrete tasks and help establish realistic timelines.
- Offer an outside perspective, neutrality, facilitation, and even mediation where necessary.
- Ensure that work is done in compliance with relevant laws, regulations, and grant requirements.



The Keep Farming program offers a form of outside consulting assistance that embodies the first four points bulleted above, empowering citizen volunteers to be more effective. In Chatham, Glynwood staff also connected residents working on the plan with their counterparts in the nearby towns. This provided valuable information, especially about drafting special state legislation to enable the Town to establish a "Community Preservation Fund" using a 2 percent real estate transfer fee for purchasing development rights.

Glynwood sometimes recommends bringing in outside technical experts at appropriate points when needed. For example, I was brought in as a consultant to conduct a training session about different land use strategies and how they might or might not work in Chatham. This helped to catalyze the work that resulted in the Community Preservation Fund legislation.

7. Build Trust and Work With Those Most Affected

Trust is the single most important achievement in any planning process; it is a precondition for successful action. Trust between people who had not known each other before, and between citizens and their leaders, is an essential element of successful democratic participation. All affected and interested citizens must be able to participate. This requires a significant effort to recruit

those who are habitually distrustful of government or who usually just do not get involved in community affairs.

Establishing trust also requires a truly open-ended participation process that does not seek to achieve any pre-conceived outcome. Sometimes it is difficult for planners to maintain this kind of open agenda, especially when their well-conceived plans have been muscled aside in the past by citizen protest or special interest lobbying. Building trust requires a leap of faith that a well-managed open process can produce a positive result and will not spin out of control. It is tempting to use the public process as a means to obtain political cover for a pre-ordained planning agenda, rather than as a forum for open decision making. This is ultimately self-defeating because it erodes community trust.

An open process, where the discussion is structured and disciplined but the outcome is not predetermined, can be used to build trust and solve any community problem more effectively. In addition, ideas that emerge through open processes are not only more likely to build trust and gain traction, they are often better ideas because they have been generated and tested by the “wisdom of the crowd.”

The trust-building process has to break down the “silos” that divide people into different interest groups and factions. When offered the opportunity to sit on a committee with a particular subject matter, most people will pick the subject that interests them most and end up talking primarily to people who agree with them. It helps to mix people up. This, in turn, can lead to a more comprehensive view of problems and their solutions.



In Chatham, the Keep Farming program forged new connections between farmers and non-farmers that made possible breakthrough understanding and solutions to problems in the local agricultural economy and food system. One surprise was that different kinds of farmers – dairy, horse, beef, poultry, vegetable, fruit, and tree – didn’t often talk to one another. So it became important not only to connect farmers with non-farmers, but also to connect farmers with each other.

The diversity of farming sectors began to be seen as a benefit to farmers as well as the community. As the largest dairy farmer in the community put it, “one thing Keep Farming did was help me get to know my neighbors and realize that other farmers have the same issues I do.”

Another surprise was the emergence of agricultural economics as the most exciting feature of the project. This probably would not have surfaced without a truly open process in which the research on farming and economics was conducted by volunteer stakeholders rather than by an outside planning consultant.

By building trust within the framework of a well-structured open process, the volunteers working on Keep Farming were able to develop action agendas designed to address multiple issues, including protection of farmland, farm product marketing, water quality concerns, housing needs, and infrastructure demands.

8. Build Political Will and Support

Action requires political will. It does not require complete consensus, but there must be enough of a shared community vision to empower political leaders to take actions that are necessary to achieve community goals. Having an effective citizen-based planning process helps build the political will and community support needed to produce results. Political will that leads to successful action also requires follow-through and monitoring by a group charged with the task of making sure that the plan is implemented.



The Town of Chatham adopted the results and recommendations from the Keep Farming initiative as the agricultural section of the Chatham Comprehensive Plan, which ultimately came to have a more conventional structure based upon “plan elements.” The Keep Farming recommendations now serve as an important part of the roadmap to the town’s future. In order to ensure that these recommendations were carried out, the Town Board established the Chatham Agricultural Partnership (CAP) to oversee implementation. The CAP, with funding from the New York Department of Ag & Markets, recently completed a draft Chatham Farmland Protection Plan. This Plan builds upon the Keep Farming recommendations.

SUMMING UP:

Keep Farming built trust among those who had not known or trusted one

another, using talented volunteers to gather information and engage in a civic project that built relationships while solving problems. Most importantly, it mobilized both political and citizen leaders to engage in an open, structured process designed to make wise collective decisions through listening, research, and action. In so doing, it has built democracy “from the ground up.” ♦

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Taking a Closer Look Reprint Sets

- Food, Farmland, & Open Space

Cities and towns are

looking to understand and improve their local food systems, by examining how and where food is grown, distributed, and consumed. Communities are also recognizing the need to plan for open space as a way to preserve sensitive areas and maintain water quality. The desire to preserve productive farmland and open space has prompted planners to explore a range of techniques – discussed in this booklet. For detailed contents and to order go to: <http://pcj.typepad.com/> (right hand column).

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