



TOWN OF CHATHAM

AGRICULTURAL PROTECTION PLAN

DECEMBER 2023 UPDATE

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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INTRODUCTION

Purpose

The purpose of this document is to provide an update to the 2009 Town of Chatham Agricultural Protection Plan that reflects the changing farming profile of Chatham with associated modifications and additions to the strategies and tactics in the original plan.

Extensive additional information can be found in the original Agricultural Protection Plan adopted by the Town of Chatham in 2009 and the Community Preservation Plan adopted by the Town of Chatham in May 2023.

All documents are available on the Town of Chatham website (chathamnewyork.us) and the Chatham Agricultural Partnership (CAP) website (chathamkeepfarming.org).

Definition of Agriculture¹

Chatham's emphasis is on promoting agriculture as a critical part of our town and regional economy. Thus, the focus of this document is on the commercial sustainability of our farms.

For the purposes of this updated plan, we continue to use the New York State definitions related to agriculture (AML 25 aa, Section 301). In particular, we define a farm operation as follows: "The land and on-farm buildings, equipment, manure processing and handling facilities, and practices which contribute to the production, preparation and marketing of crops, livestock and livestock products as a commercial enterprise, including a 'commercial horse boarding operation' as defined in subdivision thirteen of this section, a 'timber operation' as defined in subdivision fourteen of this section, 'compost, mulch or other biomass crops' as defined in subdivision sixteen of this section and 'commercial equine operation' as defined in subdivision seventeen of this section. Such farm operations may consist of one or more parcels of owned or rented land, of which parcels may be contiguous or noncontiguous to each other."

The Keep Farming Initiative and Formation of CAP: 2004-2007

In early 2004, the Town of Chatham was selected as one of two national pilot sites for the Glynwood Center's Keep Farming Program. Program oversight was provided by 25 people who served as members of the Community Agricultural Partnership (CAP). Another 25 people served on teams that gathered data and made recommendations. 30 Chatham farms participated in the study, representing about 80% of the agricultural activity in the town. 450 citizens gave input regarding their buying habits and interest in local foods.

Based on the recommendations from the Keep Farming study, the Chatham Town Board created the Chatham Agricultural Partnership (CAP) as a town committee in early 2007. CAP members are appointed by the Town Board. The mission of CAP is to "maintain the long-term viability of

¹ New York State Department of Agriculture and Markets

agriculture in the Town of Chatham. CAP provides direct connection between the farming community, town government and community at large. The committee maintains an inventory of farms in the Town of Chatham, provides advice and feedback to the Town Board and other committees, and fosters connection to food and farming through collaborative events such as the Farm Film Fest, annual farm tour, and other outreach.”

Municipal Farmland Protection Planning: 2007-2009

The CAP took the lead in applying for a Municipal Agricultural and Farmland Protection planning grant on behalf of the town in November 2007. The CAP worked with Community Planning and Environmental Associates (CP&EA), the Hudson Group, and the Columbia Land Conservancy to create the plan.

The CAP worked with CP&EA to analyze every parcel in Chatham, using multiple data sources, and created a complete GIS map of the town’s agricultural activity. When the draft GIS map was complete, CAP members solicited feedback from the farming community at the town’s Harvest Dinner in November 2008.

The CAP commissioned a fiscal impact study from the Hudson Group to analyze the potential impact of the protection of priority farmland as identified in the GIS maps. Specifically, the study looked at the impact on town services and residents’ taxes should priority farmland be developed at historical and accelerated rates.

The CAP worked with the Columbia Land Conservancy (CLC) to create models and tools to be used when monies for Purchase/Lease of Development Rights (PDR/LDR) programs become available. CLC created a model easement and criteria that the town could use when in a position to allocate PDR and LDR funds in the future.

The CAP updated the environmental analysis and strategies that had been generated through the Keep Farming study and Comprehensive Planning process, soliciting input and feedback from a variety of organizations for this purpose, working with the Columbia Land Conservancy, the Glynwood Center, and the New York State Farm Bureau.

Adoption by Town of Chatham and Subsequent Activity: 2009-2022

The Town of Chatham Agricultural Protection Plan was adopted by the Town of Chatham on September 17, 2009. The plan was subsequently approved by Columbia County and the New York State Department of Agriculture and Markets. The plan has been used by the Town of Chatham and the CAP to guide activities since adoption.

Updating the Plan: 2021-2023

In 2021, the CAP began the process of updating the Agricultural Protection Plan. The environmental assessment and farm inventory were updated. In parallel, the CAP worked with CLC and the Hudson

River Estuary Program on the Chatham Agriculture and Open Space Planning Project initiated by the Town of Chatham. The goals of this initial project were:

- To articulate a vision of how land will be used, managed, and protected for farming, ecological, aesthetic and recreational purposes in the Town of Chatham.
- To make recommendations regarding zoning and policies to support the vision.
- To update the farming inventory created for the 2009 Municipal Farmland Protection Plan.
- To update the prioritized list of farmland, land used for recreation, and other important open space to support the creation of a Community Preservation Plan.

As part of the project, the CAP provided input to a team of Cornell University students in the Masters of Regional Planning Program whose involvement in the Agriculture and Open Space Planning Project was part of an Environmental and Urban Studies class. During extensive work with Ingrid Haeckel (Hudson River Estuary Program), the criteria for prioritizing farmland were updated from the 2009 plan.

Ultimately, the Agriculture and Open Space Plan provided the foundation for creation of a Community Preservation Plan (CPP) for the Town of Chatham, spearheaded by the CAP and the Town of Chatham Conservation Advisory Council. The CPP was adopted by the Town Board in May 2023.

Following adoption of the CPP, the Town Board passed the required legislation to create a Community Preservation Fund (CPF) and to present to voters the levying of a real estate transfer tax to fund the CPF. The ballot measure was endorsed by Chatham voters on November 7, 2023.

CHATHAM AGRICULTURE: CHANGES AND TRENDS

Town Demographics²

The town's population remains stable, with 4,014 residents in the 2020 Federal Census, a slight decrease from 4,128 in the 2010 Federal Census.

Land Use

There are about 33,500 acres in Chatham. Roughly one-half of the land is forested. 13,012 acres are in New York State Agricultural District #10 under a law enacted in 1971 to protect farmland in New York. Throughout the town, 10,132 acres currently have an agricultural tax exemption, an increase from the 8,371 acres that had an agricultural assessment in 2009.³ Some parcels being farmed are outside of the Agricultural District and don't have an agricultural tax exemption.

About 18% of Chatham (6,129 acres) is classified in agricultural land use by Columbia County, and 44% of the town (15,168 acres) is located within a county-designated agricultural district. Cornell University staff identified about 21% of the town (7,152 acres) as active or potential farmland based on visual interpretation of 2019 aerial imagery. Generally better farmlands are located in the valleys of the west and south of the town, which also support better, higher-quality groundwater availability. The most productive farmland soils are in alluvial deposits along floodplains bordering the Kinderhook Creek and its major tributaries. Upland areas of lesser value for crops are often still valuable for pasture.⁴

Approximately two-thirds of the town's farmland is tillable, with acreage used for grass silage, green chop, grass/mixed hay, silage, alfalfa, corn and a variety of fruits, vegetables, and plants.⁵ Other crops include Sudan grass, sorghum, hops, barley, oats, wheat, and rye.⁶

Chatham has a long history as a dairy farming community. In 2009, there were six commodity dairy farms and two-thirds of the town's farming acreage was used for commodity dairy farming. Much of that land is still being farmed, although most operations have transitioned to beef cattle or crop production. There is still one large dairy farm which has operations that straddle Chatham and Kinderhook. The fragility of commodity dairy farming was described in 2009 and documented in the Municipal Farmland Protection Plan. Chatham is fortunate that many farmers have been able to diversify and evolve their operations, thereby keeping their lands in active agricultural use. Non-agricultural development of Chatham farmland would have a profound impact on the rural character and agrarian economy of the town.

² U.S. Census Bureau

³ Town of Chatham Assessor

⁴ Town of Chatham Community Preservation Plan, 2023

⁵ Chatham Keep Farming study, 2007

⁶ Town of Chatham Community Preservation Plan, 2023

The past decade has also seen a growth in Chatham’s equine industry and includes private, commercial, and nonprofit horse farms. The equine community supports local hay producers, equine event venues, and commercial boarding stables and contributes to Chatham’s rural character. Preservation of forage lands and continued hay production are essential to the town’s horse farms.

Unlike many neighboring towns, Chatham has not suffered a significant loss of farmland since the 2009 study, but in other towns in the Hudson Valley, farms continue to go out of business as farmland is developed for residential and commercial purposes.

While the acreage being farmed has remained fairly steady, the mix of farming has changed. In addition to the shift from dairy to beef cattle noted above, the 2021 farming inventory showed a growth in equine operations, more haying, an increased number of smaller, niche farms, and a new winery and distillery.⁷ This mirrors the trend seen nationally and in New York State of increased diversification of farming operations.⁸

In adopting the Municipal Farmland Protection Plan in 2009, the town committed to a goal of “zero net loss of farmland.” While we have been fortunate thus far, the land continues to be attractive to developers and the town needs to anticipate and manage that risk.

Preserving Chatham’s Farmland

In 2009, the New York State Senate passed legislation authorizing the Chatham Town Board to establish by law a Community Preservation Fund. Due to the softening economy, the decision was made to not pursue the strategy at that time. With authorization set to expire in 2027, interest in resurrecting this potential strategy resurfaced in the Town Board in 2022. Led by the CAP in conjunction with the CAC, the Hudson River Estuary Program and Cornell University studies previously mentioned provided a foundation for moving ahead. The ballot measure was presented to and endorsed by Chatham voters on November 7, 2023.

Continued Interest in Farming

Chatham’s local food movement continues to grow, and this renewed interest and awareness continues to support our local farmers. Many of the town’s new farms provide crops and products intended for local consumers, including fruits, vegetables, mushrooms, poultry, beef, pork, flowers, maple syrup, honey and fiber.

For the past 15 years, the CAP has produced several events intended to educate and inform residents, especially those moving here, about farming, farmers and farming-related issues. These events include the annual Farm Film Fest, produced in partnership with Crandell Theatre and Columbia Land Conservancy, and the annual Farm Tour that has now expanded to include farms in adjacent towns. The CAP periodically produces the *Essential Guide to Agriculture in the Town of*

⁷ 2021 Town of Chatham Farm Inventory

⁸ New York State Farm Bureau

Chatham, a brochure that highlights venues for purchasing local foods, products and agricultural services.

The recent survey done as part of the comprehensive planning process showed that 70.95% of respondents agreed that they are “supportive of farming in our community.”⁹

A Fragile System

While the farming landscape has remained relatively stable over the past decade, the town remains vigilant about potential risk. Chatham’s farming system is complex, full of interdependencies, and extremely fragile. More than half the land farmed is owned by non-farmer landowners. Some farmers lease or use land from multiple landowners. If these leased lands were to be converted to non-farm uses or otherwise made unavailable for agriculture, Chatham farmers would be at risk for losing critical farmland resources. Changing land ownership patterns, rising property values, and the challenges of maintaining a modern farm threaten Chatham’s farming economy and the town’s landscape.¹⁰

The erosion of local infrastructure continues to impact the economic viability of the town’s farming operations. In the last decade, the town has lost Blue Seal, Empire Livestock auction house, large animal veterinarians and other ag-related support businesses. Lack of storage capabilities and distribution networks continue to create challenges, as do labor and regulatory requirements.

Many of the town’s farmers are older, and their impending retirement will stress the system unless effective transition plans can be realized. In most cases, the land is the farmer’s primary asset and retirement fund. Providing a financially viable exit strategy for retiring farmers while preserving the farmland they have stewarded for decades, if not generations, will be critical.

More than half the land farmed in Chatham is owned by non-farmer landowners, with many farmers relying on a patchwork of leased lands. A change in ownership or use of the land could have a negative impact, especially for the smaller or medium size farms that often comprise newer operations and younger farmers who are vital to the future of farming.

Looking Ahead

The Town of Chatham continues to be forward-looking and proactive in enacting plans and policies that protect farming, farmland and access to local foods. Chatham was the first town in Columbia County and one of the first in New York State to adopt its Municipal Farmland Protection Plan in 2009.

This 2023 update to the 2009 plan continues that long standing commitment by reflecting changes in the town’s farming profile and offering modifications and additions to the strategies and tactics of the original plan.

⁹ Town Wide Community Survey, 2021

¹⁰ Town of Chatham Community Preservation Plan, 2023

CHATHAM AGRICULTURE: VISION AND GOALS

Vision

The Town of Chatham continues to be a robust agricultural community and seeks to nurture and sustain a viable agricultural economy, ensuring a resilient local food system and preservation of farmland for future generations.

Goal 1: Chatham is a “farm friendly” town that actively identifies and removes barriers to farming.

Strategy 1.1

The CAP works with the Town Board to ensure that the town’s image, laws, policies, and practices are consistent with the town’s vision in support of agriculture.

- A. Establish a process to identify and update farmers’ needs to provide an understanding of what is required to support farming in the town. Implement the process on an ongoing basis.
- B. Review Town policies and make amendments where necessary to ensure compliance with New York State Agriculture and Market laws.
- C. Per the revised Comprehensive Plan, ensure that new development projects do not have a negative impact on farming operations and protect agricultural operations from constraints associated with adjacent non-agricultural use.

Strategy 1.2

The CAP advises the Town Board on ways to ensure that the town’s zoning supports agriculture.

- A. Review and amend zoning laws to be “farm friendly” and consistent with the laws of the New York State Agriculture and Market laws.
 - a. Permit a variety of agricultural uses and accessory uses consistent with farming operations.
 - b. Remove restrictions on farm operations, such as setback and parking requirements, allowed uses, etc. that negatively impact farm operations.
 - c. Ensure that zoning permits agricultural support businesses such as food processing, slaughterhouses, and cold storage.
 - d. Preserve agricultural lands in light of solar energy development.
 - e. Modify site plan review procedures for farm-related operations to be consistent with the Comprehensive Plan and the NYS model for agricultural site plans.
- B. Ensure that members of the Town Board, Planning Board, and Zoning Board of Appeals are knowledgeable about the range of farmland protection techniques available for their use and in alignment with the Comprehensive Plan.

Goal 2: Chatham works to expand the acres of working farmland and the number of agricultural enterprises.

Strategy 2.1

Protect as much of the town's remaining active farmland as possible.

- A. Actively participate in overseeing the implementation of the Community Preservation Plan and Community Preservation Fund.
- B. Advocate at the state level for increased funds to be allocated for farmland protection initiatives.
- C. Update the Town Board and the community at large on the evolving profile and role of farming in the town.

Strategy 2.2

The Town Board works with the CAP, other community organizations, and individuals to provide support to current and prospective farmers.

- A. Provide outreach to current landowners and new buyers of agriculture parcels, educating them on land use patterns, their responsibilities and the opportunities provided to support farming.
- B. Develop materials for and relationships with realtors, recognizing the key role realtors play in introducing new property owners to the Town and its agricultural priorities.
- C. Connect Chatham farmers with resources related to farm transition planning and estate planning.
- D. Create a pipeline of new farmers.
 - a. Work with the Columbia Land Conservancy's farmer-landowner match program to help introduce farmers and landowners with compatible interests.
 - b. Create a mentorship program for new farmers, pairing CAP members and other farmers with those entering agriculture.
 - c. Investigate ways to generate grants and other funding mechanisms to support incubator projects and provide capital to new farmers.
 - d. Support youth programming (i.e., FFA, 4-H) that introduces local teenagers to agriculture, and explore ways to introduce agriculture into the local school curriculum.
 - e. Explore the possibility of agriculture-related training with Columbia-Greene Community College and other ag-related institutions.
- E. Maximize use of the town's farming website (www.chathamkeepfarming.org) to disseminate information that helps current and prospective farmers access useful information.

Goal 3: Chatham supports and sustains a system of locally grown, healthy, and affordable foods.

Strategy 3.1

The CAP works with the Town Board to support development of the infrastructure necessary for a thriving and sustainable, local, healthy food system.

- A. Inventory local farmers to understand their infrastructure needs (cold storage, delivery, marketing, etc.).
- B. Partner with other towns and organizations to facilitate storage, distribution, and other infrastructure improvement efforts.
- C. Ensure that town zoning allows critical food system infrastructure development.
- D. Maximize use of existing infrastructure and avoid duplication of efforts.

Strategy 3.2

The CAP analyzes existing infrastructure and needs related to food access in the community to help ensure that all Chatham residents are food secure.

- A. Survey existing food access infrastructure such as food pantries, backpack programs, recovery kitchens, school meal programs, SNAP/WIC, community fridges, retailers, and others.
- B. Analyze data, conduct research, and connect with other agencies and organizations to more fully assess food security in the Town of Chatham.

Strategy 3.3

The CAP works with the Town Board to raise awareness of the availability and importance of local food.

- A. Create a “Farmer of the Year” or Locavore Award to highlight local farming operations and their impact on the town.
- B. Revitalize the “Chatham Grown” logo and brand.
- C. Create a Restaurant Week with local restaurants to promote local food production.
- D. Continue efforts to place Chatham Grown products in Chatham schools, restaurants and other outlets.
 - a. Survey both existing and potential outlets as well as existing and potential producers to better understand gaps, needs, opportunities, challenges, pricing, etc.
 - b. Facilitate conversations among stakeholders and develop targeted goals.

Goal 4: Chatham actively promotes community awareness about the importance of agriculture and the role that farmland, soil health, and forest preservation plays in the community.

Strategy 4.1

The CAP provides ongoing community outreach.

- A. Work with New York State Department of Transportation to place signs at the town's major entry points, to read: "Welcome to Chatham: A Farm Friendly Community."
- B. Develop and distribute signage that can be placed on properties in active agricultural use, using the Chatham Grown logo. (Like the "a firefighter lives here" signs.)
- C. Maximize use of the town's farming website (www.chathamkeepfarming.org) to highlight local farming operations.
- D. Continue the town's annual farming events: Farm Film Fest, Farm Tour, Harvest Dinner.
- E. Establish a presence at annual town and village events on Main Street and other locations.
- F. Periodically update the "Essential Guide to Agriculture in Chatham" brochure.