

Essex County Agricultural Roundtable
Newbury Town Library, Byfield, Mass
March 28, 2026

Convened by the Ag Com Technical Assistance Project

Present: 26 attendees

Agricultural Commissions Represented: Ipswich, Newbury, Rowley, Topsfield, West Newbury (5)

Towns Represented without Ag Coms: Boxford, Danvers, Gloucester, Hamilton, Haverhill, Middleton, North Andover (7)

Students: Two agriculture students from Essex Ag Tech HS

Notes

Sarah Gardner: Ag Com Tech Assistance Project/Conservation Works

Introduction: What Ag Commissions do; importance of meeting regularly with other town boards and committees, the voice of the farm community. Mass Farmland Action Plan; Mass has 3rd highest land values in the US; development pressures in every region of the state. Need to keep Mass farming!

Pete Westover: Ag Com Tech Assistance Project/Conservation Works

-Dept of Ag Resources has been very supportive recognizing Ag Coms' importance and funding the Ag Com Project.

-Ag Coms powers: hold and purchase farmland, lease farmland, create a farmland preservation fund, exercise Right of First Refusal on Ch 61 land, create community gardens and farms.

-Many things Ag Coms can do to promote agriculture and educate the community about the value of farms: Cost of Community Services Studies; farm profiles of the town (including economic contribution of farms), publicize grants and opportunities, sponsor farmers markets, etc. (See more on the [Ag Com Tech Assistance Project website](#).)

Bob O'Connor, Metro West Mediation Services/Conservation Works. Mediation is an effective way to help resolve conflicts; for farms, conflicts with neighbors, the town, and within the business or family. Free Ag Mediation is available throughout the state. See the Mass Office of Public Collaboration at [UMass Boston](#).

Vanessa Johnson-Hall, Dir of Land Conservation, [Essex County Greenbelt Association](#).

Dir of Land Conservation. ECGA a regional land trust. Welcomes more farm partners. Doing a big project in Boxford now; seeking CPA funds to make it happen. Many threats to development in towns in Essex County; towns seek tax revenue through development. But there is so much that farms do to benefit towns; "I need help making these arguments." There are so many threats against farms. The more advocates that can help us the better, the more arguments we can make for farmland, the better. If we can partner with MDAR, then we can seek Community Preservation Act funds. But many towns here don't have CPA. Our mission is to protect farmland and keep it affordable for future farmers.

-See AFT new [Farmland Protection Options book](#).

–These gatherings of farmers are important—older farmers and younger farmers can learn from each other.

Question from Ipswich: What don't more towns pass CPA? A surcharge on property tax, but the state matches it. Different levels of tax surcharge. Ipswich, is an inactive Ag Com, older members. No CPA.

North Andover: Has passed CPA and trying to get the Ag Com represented on the CPA Committee.

Kathy Herrick: the ECGA is a joy to work with.

Barry Moore, Newbury Ag Com. Antique tractors.

Lisa Colby, Colby Farm, Newbury Ag Com and Board of the Topsfield Ag Society. Ag Com has good relationship with the Select Board. Right Farm Bylaw. Been on the quiet side for awhile. Only 3 members. Ready to have a meeting in the future.

J. Harrison, Gloucester/Mass Food System Collaborative board. Used to be Town of Lincoln Ag Com. Less than 2% state budget goes to food, including HIP and school meals. The food system caucus in the legislature is one of the largest caucuses—but not much power. Ag Coms need to have more authority and more power. Food policy councils are springing up around the state.

Lydia Sisson, West Newbury Ag Com. Evergreen Farm. Ag Com just created in fall 2025. Right to Farm notification built into the signage. We are looking at other AG Coms to see what works. Hosted a potluck this week. Fortunate that ECGA works closely with our town.

Shirley Bachini, Essex County Coop and former Essex Aggie student. "I have a burning passion for agriculture." The Aggie schools are cutting the budget to agriculture. Essex Aggie just got funding cut to the livestock program.

Ava Constantine, Essex Tech student. Concerned about the proposed changes to the admissions policy at Essex Tech; the school committee voted to move to lottery-based admissions for all applicants. The plan is being reviewed by the state. Essex Tech is the only Ag high school in the region serving students who want to go into agriculture. (Last year, 42% of applicants were denied admission due to lack of capacity.)

Senator Bruce Tarr: Met with Commissioner of Education, who granted a waiver to the proposed cut to Essex Ag Tech HS. County government in Mass was dissolving in 2000 so all the county land became state land. 22 member communities send students to the school; the Aggie part of the school must accept students from any county in the state. School operates as two schools: tech side and ag side. I believe the school must

continue to accept students from any part of the state. A huge issue; we are trying to work through it. But we have more work to finalize a solution. About 1/3 student body is outside the district.

Kristen Herrick, Herrick Dairy Farm, Rowley. Just preserved the farm through the APR program and now have left the commercial dairy industry. Just sold 140 cows. We are a diversified farm: milk, veggies, eggs, compost, hay etc.

Barry Bacall, Rowley Ag Com and Rowley Community Gardens. Ag Com quiet for some years, but we are coming out of it.

Cory Head, Chickadee Hill Farm, Rowley Ag Com. Challenge: Ag Com was aging, two open seats on the Ag Com, Community Garden (Cons Com owns the land), Ag Com runs the farmers market, holding an Ag Day and antique tractor show. Met with Select Board and they were very supportive—they control the town common. We have to ask permission to use the farmers market every year.

Kathy Makowski-Cote, New Entry Farmers, North Andover. She is looking for farmland in North Andover. She was told by an older farmers: “if you care about farming, you have to show up at things.” Any time I can get in the room with the older generation, I try to do that to learn from them. Older farmers need to know that a lot of new farmers are looking for land to farm—but mostly we want smaller plots. I am interested in how we can make small farm plots available to new farmers.

Katlin Kenney, New Entry Sustainable Farming Project, Newbury
One problem is the competing interest in towns; all the towns need affordable housing in addition to farms. Local boards and committees are siloed.

Stacey Apple, Ironox Farm, Hamilton/Topsfield. Ag Com in Topsfield. No Ag Com in Hamilton. Only one farm in Hamilton. A first gen farmer, we lease our land from ECGB.

Recently went to a meeting about Conservation Districts—13 conservation districts in state, but only 8 are active. Would be helpful to farms to have them active again.

Conservation District, each needs a supervisor, and an assistant supervisor.

Kathleen Herrick, Herrick Dairy Farm, Rowley. Mass Assoc of Dairy Farmers, Mass Dairy Promotion Board. Thank you to Senator Tarr for all the support for our farm. We work with NRCS & MDAR, preserved the farm with ECGB; put farmland into APR. Farm would have been gone without Ch 61A. APR & 61A. “The state is your friend.” Rowley Selectboard likes us, but we have to convince the new SB members to care about farms. Approach your town with baby steps.

Doug Cook, Hamilton & farms in Boxford (No Ag Com in either town). Farm in Boxford. We want to protect farmland and water resources in Hamilton.

Marlene Stasios, Chris' Farm Stand, Haverhill. Our farm has problems with neighbors moving in and not wanting us to farm. New neighbors don't want to smell manure when grilling in the back yard. Some of us in Haverhill are trying to bring the Ag Com back. We had one before Covid; the mayor appointed three farmers to the Ag Com and one anti-farm member. We need help getting an Ag com back to Haverhill. We had a meeting with the City Council planned this week but they cancelled it. We've been around this many times. We think the mayor is afraid the farmers will have too many rights. The mayor is afraid the Ag Com will buy up the land. We want to pass the Right To Farm bylaw; we have 10 farms in Haverhill and 2500 active ag acres.

Ann Davidowicz, Haverhill. Brother is a farmer. Lots of realtors come to us trying to buy our land. We met Vanessa from ECGB - that's when we learned there is little support for land conservation in Haverhill. No land trust in Haverhill. My brother is a farmer; I support local farmers.

Wendy Reed, West Newbury. Brand new Ag com. When we wrote the bylaw, we had a SB member on the Ag Com. That has worked well. Non-commercial farmers were a main force behind the RTF bylaw. Many hobby farmers and equestrians.

Carolyn Walfield, Essex. We worked with Ipswich to move the community garden to a new location when we lost the first location after a 5 year hiatus. I am here to help facilitate other efforts; good experience working with the Ipswich Ag Com; but our chair, Jay Stanbury has retired. We need more younger members. I want to help install more community gardens.

Anna Kelchlin, Haverhill. Late Bloom Farm. Organic veggie farm, sells at farmers market. Working with Donny and Devan Ferreira to get the Ag Com up and running, New to Haverhill. Farming for 15 years. Passionate about organic farming and land preservation. The messy situation in Haverhill has been going on since before Covid.

Comment from Vanessa Johnson Hall: The problem in Haverhill sounds like a disconnect between the city council members and the farm community.

Ron Kuszmar, Middleton. No Ag Com. They raise chickens. Kuzsmars ant to start an Ag Com. No RTF community but a lot of farming in Middleton. A lot of residents complain about farming. Much development pressure. Board of Health decided to ban roosters last year - with no Ag Com to defend chicken farmers, there was nothing to do. We got MDAR involved. We had to remove our roosters because of noise issues.

Fiona Graham, Danvers. Essex Ag Tech Senior, FFA, cattle showing, Topsfield Fair. Concerned about budget cuts to the ag program at the school

Ava Constantine, North Reading. Essex Ag Tech Senior, FFA, cattle showing & FFA. Yesterday I was ag legislative lunch and learned about the cuts.

Senator Bruce Tarr: I can't say enough about the Herrick Family and their commitment to agriculture. Thank you to Greenbelt. Thank you to Wendy and West Newbury navigating the Right to Farm bylaw in Newbury. I didn't know there is a tractor show - I just look in Barry's back yard for a tractor show!

Legislature is considering Wednesday an Ag Bill, but not a spending bill, we need money for capital improvements; codifying the FSIG to be a regular program, I have many amendments to bills right now: including expanding how much electricity farms can produce, make APR more flexible, and the most important item is farmland loss and the rate at which its being converted. We need more defenses against farmland conversion. We need to help towns be more proactive in farmland protection. Frank DiLuna is fantastic and gives us a lot of advice: he suggested we file a RTF bylaw to be accepted by local action. We took language from Frank so the language for RTF could be simply accepted by towns. We need an Ag Com in Middleton—not just to address the Kuszmar rooster! There is so much ag in Middleton. I am cautious about Ag Coms, we must be careful Ag Coms are not used as ways to limit farming as happened in Haverhill.

Lily Jean fishing boat loss: we have been getting support from around the world. We got worldwide support for the Lily Jean fund. Fishing and farming go together.

Issues & Concerns

-Budget cuts to Aggie high schools: These schools are critically important to educate the next generation of farmers. Tension around vocational high school programs in the state: enrollment is going down in tech but the number of ag students is going up but there's a shortage of capacity and many students are denied admissions. Agricultural science is more expensive than conventional school.

-Anti-farming: Several farmers mentioned sentiment against farm practices from new residents; eg: Middleton rooster ban and Haverhill farm neighbors.

-Right to Farm notification: New residents in towns with farms may not be getting notified about Right to Farm bylaw, but sellers are required to notify buyers.

-Haverhill: Difficulties and obstacles to re-establishing an Agricultural Commission; Concern that the mayor and some city council members may oppose creating an Ag Com out of fear that it could buy up land that could be developed. Three farmers from Haverhill attended the meeting to help find a way forward to creating an Ag Com. 2500 acres of productive farmland in Haverhill.

-Ag Coms in Essex: Many towns lack Ag Coms or active Ag Coms; one problem is finding new and younger members as older farmers and older members age out. Several towns want to start Ag Coms.

-Realtors: Exert pressure on farms to sell, as do solar companies.