

**Agricultural Commission Roundtable
Hampshire, Franklin, Hampden Counties**

Feb 28, 2026

Smith Vocational and Agricultural High School, Northampton

Convened by Sarah Gardner and Pete Westover,

Agricultural Commission Technical Assistance Project

Ag Commissions Represented (14): Bernardston, Chesterfield, Easthampton, Franklin, Gill, Greenfield, Hatfield, Lee, Monson, Northampton, Shelburne, Southampton, Southwick, Whately

Towns Present Lacking Ag Coms (4): Amherst, Deerfield, Montague, Sunderland (Conservation Commission) (Bernardston)

Attendees: 42

Issues Raised: PFAs/forever chemicals in farm soils, 4H, solar on farmland, difficulty finding members and volunteers, need for Ag Com budgets, need for Ag Com staff support, CPA for Ag Preservation Fund, conflicts with farm vehicles on the road, much need for irrigation systems due to drought, farmers pay same water rate as households—some towns have gotten reduced water/sewer rates; Ag Coms managing farmland

Meeting Notes

Sarah Gardner

- Introduce the Agricultural Commission Technical Assistance Project
- Mass has 3rd highest land values in the US; new roles and powers of Ag Coms.
- Our work is to help implement the Farmland Action Plan (2024).
- Ag Coms play multiple roles: Advocate for farms locally, first point of contact with farmers, social.
- Ag Com/MDAR website has a long list of functions that Ag Coms can fulfill, from fun events to buying and leasing farmland.
- Important for Ag Coms to work with other boards; stay in touch with land use boards and Select Board.
- Important and easy first step to get involved in farmland protection: get the list of Ch 61 land in town from the Assessor.

Pete Westover

- Review of Ag Com land protection tools; Ag Coms can buy and hold land.
- Farmland Partnership Program grants for local Farmland Action Plans
- Buy Land, hold land, lease land, youth programs, public programs, mediation etc

Jamie Pottern & Kathleen Doherty, American Farmland Trust

- AFT works with farmers on farming practices as well as farmland protection.
- See brand NEW Farmland Protection Guide—v comprehensive!
- Ag Coms are important ambassadors for farms to the town.

Burt Hansen and Jennifer Diprieto, Southwick Ag Com

Challenges our Ag Com has faced: finding Ag Commission members: when we started, we had to convince some farmers in town that we are not the government.

- Also took work to get a budget from the town: ours is \$2700.
- An active Ag Com and a Right To Farm community. We have a community garden organized & maintained by the Ag Com but the land is owned by the Conservation Commission. Also: annual tractor rally, annual farm forum with all farmers in town where we present helpful info, we leave time for networking among farmers, open farm day with 9 farms and historical society, “farm hops” to help elderly get to the farms (a farm hop every month in the summer—guided tour for seniors), farm parade, youth outreach program at the school greenhouse.
- Much interest in succession planning and Ag Com has helped farmers with that.
- Currently working on: irrigation issues (much interest in irrigation systems to withstand drought and systems to drain water from fields); invasive species.
- Lack of respect for farm vehicles on the roads: we have a lot of tobacco farms and we put up signs that say “harvest season.”
- Farmers pay same water rate as residents.

Nina Gordon, Collaborative Resolutions Group, Ag Mediation Program (free service for farmers in Mass).

- Mediation is voluntary and flexible.
- Can occur between two or more disputing parties.
- Can help with succession planning with families.
- Can cover legal, financial and relational issues.
- Meeting facilitation.
- Mediation usually takes less time and less cost and has better results than litigation.
- There are mediation centers in the state.

Doug Coldwell, Whately Ag Com

- Ag Com: 7 members, RTF town, shop local pamphlet, help with elementary school garden, survey of farms in town.
- About 33 farms in town.
- Hard to communicate with farmers--we never get an email back.

Julie Chalfant, Deerfield

- Deerfield used to have an Ag Com, passed RTF, and then it disappeared.
- We are thinking of bringing it back. RTF has come back to forefront recently because of farm noises and truck noises that are part of regular farming;
- Farms on a sewer or town water get a reduced rate.

-We need young farmers: “None of this matters if there are no more farmers.” I can drive down the road and tell you every farm that is going out of business sooner or later. No younger people coming up to take on farming.

Mark Zinan & Nora Zinan, Sunderland. No Ag Com in Sunderland. Mark is a Cons Com member. Strong APR program. RTF bylaw.

Lily Gigante, Hampden Hampshire Conservation District, offer low cost equipment rentals and free soil testing.

Matthew Karas, NRCS and HH Conservation District, currently forming a local working group to get input from the farming and forestry community to inform the programs that we offer to farms.

Adrienne Bashista, Florence, Passalongs Farm, flowers

Steve Tarantino, CISA, Tech Assistance for climate/extreme weather; funds for tech assistance, marketing to business planning to tech assistance.

- Working on an MVP action plan grant with FRCOG.

-Workshops on climate adaptation. Federal funded project—AMP-Advancing Markets for Producers—we just can’t call it “climate” anymore—\$34 million over next few years (nationally)

Ed Bourgeois, Amherst. No Ag Com anymore. Would be helpful to have county and state support for Ag Coms. UMASS used to organize a statewide ag conference every year, v valuable. This would be helpful now. Farmers need to work together. UMass isn’t involved anymore. We used to be cutting edge in Central Mass, but no longer.

Russell Braen, Easthampton Ag Com, Active Ag Com: created a water ordinance with dual meters—so sewer use is free for farms.

-City asked Ag Com to review about 100 small parcels of land for potential use by farmers.

-Working on a potential farm purchase.

-Wrangling with forever chemicals and dual use solar & writing position papers: tension between what’s good for the city and what’s good for farmland.

Laura Fisher, Easthampton Ag Com, Ag Com was asked about PFAs because someone in town asked for a ban on land application of pelleted human waste; started a community garden on city owned land.

-Old Town Farm initiative: hoping to turn it into a vocational program for veterans.

-Interested in farmland preservation.

-Ag Com has no budget. Want to start an Ag Preservation Fund.

Tamsin Flanders, FRCOG, Farmland Partnership Program: Won a FPP grant to work with the Pioneer Valley Planning Commission, Berkshire Regional Planning Commission and Franklin

Regional Council of Governments to develop local farmland protection plans for the three western MA counties (two towns in each county).

Lindsey Sabadosa, State Rep. Supportive of farms and here to help get the message out.

Rena Grover, Bernardston Ag Com, Ag Com hasn't met since Covid. We have a farmers market but only a few farmers and little business.

David Carrington, Lee, former Ag Com member. Big problem is no farmland left and no farmland access. Land is too expensive for farmers; a hay field I used for 30 years went on the market and a solar company bought it. No place for anyone to get a start farming. I have a hay ride in the fall.

- Major issue with PFAs and PCBs. We need regs in place to keep forever chemicals out of farmland.

Caroline Young, Lee Ag Com, Our Ag Com was gone for 10 years, but we are up and running again. Just a few farms left in Lee. We have no budget.

-We are starting the only 4H in Berkshire County.

-Starting a speaker series.

Fred Beddall, Northampton Ag Com & Pie in the Sky Farm.

- Ag Com gatherings are an important social opportunity for farmers.

-Issue: stormwater surcharge that all landowners pay.

John Omasta, Northampton Ag Com, No budget but we have something better—an administrator—Tom Annese! He can follow through on our ideas.

-We have a town farm with a few different farm uses; we have a community garden.

-The Meadows are a problem for us: people are trying to farm it but the public uses it as their playground.

-We've held a regional meeting for 10 years. We try to give farmers exposure to things that can help them.

-We held a farm succession program. "Farmland disappears and the population keeps growing."

-Big issue: solar on farmland: solar is big money and farmers can't compete.

Christmas tractor parade: a huge success! From Smith Voc to Florence. 1000s of people.

Matt Barron, Chesterfield Farm and Forest Commission. Started in 2004 came out of Open Space plan, then we went into hibernation.

-Two recent things: put up RTF signs designed by Smith Voc student;

-Farm and Forest producers list on the town website: 21 producers on the list.

-Working with 3 state legislators to get the state to adopt Taste New York for Mass: to provide local products on state owned rest stops on Mass Pike, airports, train stations etc. One Berkshire farm store at Logan airport.

Caroline Wheeler, Wheelview Farm, Shelburne. Beef farm. Ag Com & RTF law.

-Farmers are busy but if you have a project they want to work on you can get them together. We hold Shelburne Grown Dinners with all Shelburne grown ingredients. Raised money from the dinner to give mini-grants to kids for Ag Projects. Up to \$200 for ag such as buying chicks or pigs. Farm history: collected old farm photos and scanned them!

Tom Chalmers , Gill Ag Com, \$500 budget, But we lack a sense of purpose and relevance. We have a farm harvest fest in the fall – a small block party.

-Getting together like this is v important—good to hear about other ideas from other Ag Coms.

Jesse Robertson, Northfield Ag Com, RTF bylaw, a farm support section in the town zoning bylaw, stronger than the state RTF law. Farm map brochure...needs updating. Main cause of farm loss in Northfield is abandonment—no large scale development pressure. Land is getting dropped from production. Silviculture operations are planting trees in fields; farm stays are ok but opposition; bylaw protects livestock guard dogs, agrivoltaics. Used to work with Blue Wave solar. Can advise on solar that works withj Ag.

Denise Leonard, Greenfield Ag Com, a member since the beginning.

-RTF was vetoed by the mayor, but then we got it passed.

-Biggest problem if lack of support by the City officials & government.

Sid St. John, Greenfield Ag Com chair, we need more members, the city government is not supportive of ag, we didn't know what Ag Coms could do until learning about Ch 40 Sec 8.

-Budget \$600.

-We don't have a good way to convey information or let people know that we exist and we want to help mediate neighbor disputes.

Bob Skalbite, Monson Ag Com

-No budget

-Passed RTF

-Commission fell off and get restarted during Covid.

-So far: RTF signs posted, once a year farmers market, hosted an open forum with building commissioner and zoning officer about permits and zoning, Town is reviewing master plan and zoning bylaws.

-Finalizing Farmland of Local Importance

-We have a farm directory brochure.

Challenges: no budget

-Cons Com wants Ag Com to manage town owned farmland in town

Caroline & ? , Southampton Ag Com, Whittier Farm?, cows and sheep.

-No budget, not many members.

-We need a sense of purpose—we did RTF, we did FLI, but we need more to do.

-We need to contact more farmers and get more participation and more ideas.

Mark Fraser, Montague Ag Com, sheep farmer.

-No Ag Com

-I do lamb therapy in March; I invite people visit and hold a lamb.

Tom Annese, Planning staff to Northampton Ag Com

Mark Wamsley, Conservation Director, Kestrel Land Trust – regional LT since 1970. Conserved 30K acres of land in Pioneer Valley.

-How land trusts can be helpful with farmland protection:

1) We don't seek to acquire and own farm land, we may own land and lease it to a farmer;

2) Most of our work with farmland is to understand all the farmland protection programs; we help farms understand the right route to go;

3) We can pay for the appraisal;

4) We can help raise the local match for farmland protection;

5) We can hold private CRs or APRs.

6) A lot of changes proposed for Chapter 61: towns need to know they can assign their ROFR to a local land trust; LT can step in to buy the land protect it, and sell it to a farmer. (Buy, Protect, Sell)

*Good proposed changes to Ch 61 in the Envi Bond Bill: a requirement that when the opportunity for ROFR (Right of First Refusal) arises there must be a public hearing and all town boards and committees must be notified.

-Governor: proposed giving MDAR the ROFR on farmland.

John Pease, Hatfield Ag Com, chair, since 1990s,

-Town working on new master plan. Farmland issues are all throughout the master plan. -

McMansions are moving into Northampton—all overlooking Hatfield farmland.

-Ag Com has a farm brochure, conserved land in town through the Cemetery Commission for a public garden, started farm murals by art students—6 murals around town.

-We try to save as much farmland as we can.

Corinne Coryat: Running for state rep, used to work for Natalie Blais. Pro Ag: 61A, succession planning, etc.

Jen Sweeney, Town of Franklin, here to learn.

Ag Com 2/28/26 Roundtable, Smith Vocational & Agricultural HS
Notes by Tom Annese
Land and Planning Projects Assistant
Northampton Planning and Sustainability Department

Sarah Gardner–Introductory Remarks

With recent changes, Ag Coms can have new, larger roles. They can be a bigger player in farmland presentation. The State passed the Farmland Action Plan. If farmland is not protected it won't be farmland in 20-50 years so the next few years are critically important. Most farmers can't compete with exurban and suburban development pressures.

Under Chapter 40 8L (?)

- Ag Coms can set up a farmland preservation fund.
- Ag Coms can go to the CPA to seed the preservation fund
- Williams Ag Com got \$25k from CPA for a preservation fund. It's hard to know how much to ask for. We asked for \$25k and some people questioned, "Well what can you possibly preserve with \$25k?"
- Some Ag Coms are creating town farmland preservation plans with the idea of using the preservation funds to help with APR purchases.

A lot of Ag Coms are working to support farmers and farmland by raising the profile of these farms and helping them with advocacy and promotion of farming.

Burt/Jennifer – Southwick Ag Com (They were wearing matching AgCom T-shirts)

We're fortunate to have a very engaged and active AgCom. One of the first things we had to do was convince some farmers that we are not the government. We try to maintain the farming community and provide opportunities for farmers to talk to one another. Sometimes farming can be isolating. We host a farm forum. The last one highlighted Chapter 61. We want spaces for farmers to talk to each other. We have an Open Farm Day at the end of August. We find the end of August to be a good time as it's not a heavy harvest season for most farmers, school kids are still around helping on the farms. The Southwick Historical Society also participates, which is helpful. We have senior farm hop tours, where we take seniors to different farms in town. We also sponsor the Southwick Farm Parade. We get a budget from the town of \$2700 (TA: *Many in the audience were impressed with budget—only a few other AgComs had a budget.*)

Doug – Whately Ag Com

We have 7 members. We helped pass a Right to Farm ordinance. But none of this matters if there's no one there to farm the land. In Whately there's so much land available but very few younger people with the experience and interest in farming it.

Julie – Deerfield

We had an ag com, but we haven't met lately. We did get right to farm passed. The right to farm has been helpful as some neighbors complained about truck issues and bird deterrent noises. In Deerfield you get rebates if you're farming on City Water.

Mark – Sunderland

I'm on Ag Com and Cons Com. Ag Com doesn't meet but the City has a strong APR program.

Adrienne Bashista – Northampton

I'm not on the local AgCom, but I lease land that they oversee. I'm interested in starting a farm tour and looking for help. I'd like to start a working group.

Ed Bourgeois (sp?) – Amherst

I'd like there to be regional, county-level, or state gatherings instead of just town ag commissions. In a lot of towns there are just not enough farms to have a strong active ag com. It's really hard to maintain an Ag com in a town the size of Amherst.

Larger gatherings like this one have been so valuable to me as there are so few places where farmers can meet and work together.

The Fieldlark AI app has been so helpful for monitoring soil health. <https://advancingecoag.com/land/fieldlark/?accordion=0> (TA: *I have no idea if this is legit or how secure it is—might be worth checking in with others before downloading it.*) Cutting edge tech has been really lacking in the farm sector and I really like FieldLark.

Russell Braen – Easthampton

We have an active ag com. We created a dual meter system so you pay for the water but not the sewer. The sewer fees are like 60% of the bill. Ag Com has to sign off.

We work with landowners to see if they can lease farmland to farm lands.

We're trying to preserve the Lodging House, which is a historic building
<https://easthamptonma.gov/782/Town-Lodging-House>

We've had issues with one or two farmers spreading forever chemicals on hay land and so we've been working with the town to ban that practice and mitigate the effects of the chemicals.

It's really important for Ag Coms to work with other boards and commissions in town about what AgCom does and the expertise they have.

Laura Fisher – Easthampton

We've been working on position papers regarding dual use solar and forever chemicals. What we consider best practices.

We have an AFT and MDAR employee on Ag Com.

I am a practicing attorney who grew up on a farm that was lost due to a lack of succession plan.

We are very motivated to preserve farmland. We have no budget and are interested in going to CPA to procure preservation funding.

Tamsin of Franklin Council of Governments and Assemblywoman Lindsay Sabadosa

Introduced themselves and spoke briefly—mainly about here to listen.

Rena – Bernardston

Bernardston Ag Com hasn't met since Covid. We have a tiny farmers market. I'm here looking for ideas to get people more engaged.

Dave Carrington – Lee

I'm retired from Lee Ag Com. The biggest issue is accessibility to farmland. There's virtually none left. There's no place for anyone to get a start in farming due to the high cost of land. Virtually all the farmland in Lee is gone.

Big issue in Berkshire County: Forever chemicals and PCBS on farmland over our aquifer.

Caroline Young – Lee

We are a right to farm community. Ag Com disappeared for a decade but now it's back up. We don't have a budget.

Lee is starting a 4H program.

We started a "Seeds in the Library" program that are given away. So many people are thrilled to get seeds at the library.

We're trying to start a community garden but that takes a lot of time. We're also starting a speaker series.

Fred Beddall – Northampton

Through Northampton Ag Com, I've gotten to know David and Caroline which has been great. We have a regional conference with speakers and is a great social opportunity for farmers to meet. We've had an issue with a stormwater surcharge that we have fought the City on as it impacts farmers much more than other users and we generally keep the storm water on our land.

John Omasta – Northampton

The City of Northampton provides us with an administrator which is more valuable to us than a budget, as he handles a lot of the background stuff that we don't really have time to do.

We have a Regional Conference with speakers from around the Valley.

One issue that concerns us is solar on prime agricultural land.

We oversee some public farmland.

One of our Commissioners has helped started an annual Holiday Tractor Parade with the Florence Civic Association. It's been hugely popular. Thousands of people attend.

Matt Barron – Chesterfield

I'm on the Farm and Forest Commission in Chesterfield. We're a right to farm town. We have a farm and Forest producers list on our website (TA: *I downloaded list – will add emails to our Regional Conference list.*)

New York has a Taste NY program for state events. I'd like to see Healey Driscoll start a similar program that would require that local farm products be sold at state run facilities.

Carolyn Wheeler – Shelburne

Shelburne AgCom sponsors a "Shelburne Grown" dinner with only Shelburne grown food. We raise money off the event and used the funds to give grants to children to purchase ducks, hens, pigs.

We also have been scanning old farm pictures and had an event for the effort where we printed and highlighted some of them.

Tom – Gill

We have a budget of \$500 but are lacking a sense of purpose. We do sponsor a farm harvest event in the fall which is basically a glorified block party.

More coordination between towns would be good.

Jesse Robertson – Northfield

We produced a farm map but it seems a irrelevant now that everyone uses there phones.

The number one issue for us is farm abandonment—we don't have a lot of development pressure. Big Farms where heavy equipment of good size can be used stay in production but a lot of the smaller farms are getting abandoned.

We're working on agrivoltaic bylaws.

Denise Leonard – Greenfield

We had to get Right to Farm passed over the Mayor's veto. There's a lack of support from the City generally speaking.

Sid – Greenfield

There are only three of us. We have a budget of \$600. We advise people on what they can grow in their yard. We let people know we exist and that we can help.

Bob – Monson

Right to farm bylaw passed. We sponsor a farm event each year.

We hosted an open forum with City government officials and farmers about permit and zoning compliance.

We're trying to start a farmer's market.

We have no funding and no account with the City.

Cons Com wants the Ag Com to take over public farm management so we may get a budget there. There are conflicts in the town about farm preservation.

Carolyn – Southampton

Zero budget. Our Ag Com is disengaged and often doesn't have a quorum.

Mark – Montague

I wanted to let you know that municipalities can transfer their right of first refusal to a land trust for APR land.

There's currently an amendment to a state bill that states that there must be a public hearing when APR land becomes available. It would be good to let our legislators know we support this bill.

John Pease – Hatfield

We have a farm brochure program.

We're able to conserve property through the Cemetery Commission.

Sponsored farm murals in town

Seed projects with school children.

We have 600 acres in APR, which is not a lot.

"You can wipe your ass with a dollar but you can't eat it."

Carolyn Coryat (Natalie Blais aid)

Introduces self. Running for Natalie Blais seat. Here to listen and learn. Please come to talk to me after the round table.

