

Worcester County Roundtable

Stone Cow Brewery & Carter & Stevens Farm, Barre MA

Meeting: 10-noon; Creamery tour: noon-1pm

Attendees: 45

Ag Commissions: Barre, Bolton, Brookfield, Dudley, Framingham, Hardwick, Holden, Hubbardston, Princeton, Rutland, Sterling, Templeton, Westminster, Winchendon (14)

Sarah Gardner, Conservation Works. Welcome, agenda. Thank you to Mt Grace, Stone Cow, Farm Bureau. In France farmers are referred to as professionals. We all rely on farmers.

Emma Ellsworth, Mt Grace Land Conservation Trust. Grew up farming; experienced the hardship of farming and unpredictability. Witnessed hail storms knocking out entire crops. One disaster can be the death knell of a farm.

Farmers are performing a public service; we must protect farming and we must protect farmland. We can't protect farmland unless we protect farming also. That's what we really need to figure out. We need to actually pay farmers for the work they do; for example, dairy farmers should be paid fair price for their milk.

Phil Stevens, Stone Cow Brewery and Carter & Stevens Farm; Board of Mt Grace Land Trust. Farmers have to be visionaries and creative business people. We are always pushing the boundaries. We are a dairy farm; we are all now in the "part of the farm where the money is made" (the brew pub) and in the back is where the 200 cows live. We have 1300 acres and 2/3 of that is protected through an APR. It's been a rocky road with the APR program. We have all helped to make the APR program a lot better since we locked horns with them. Steve Brewer and Ann Gobi have helped us through the APR program.

After meeting, a tour of the cheese plant we are constructing; it will be up and running in a few months. Daughter Molly makes her own tomato sauce for pizza; she makes all the pizza dough from scratch; everything we have is local and homemade.

Mike Pineo, Vice Pres of Worcester County Farm Bureau. Founding chair of the Sterling Ag Com. Chair of the Montachusett Ag Alliance. Was the Pres of the Mass Association of Ag Coms, but nothing doing there for three years. In Sterling, a house lot is \$300K now. Yet plenty of state land is being wasted. There are places for people to farm, we just need to get the people there. How many full-time farmers are in the room? About 5-6. Not many full-time farmers any more. The average farmer in Mass makes about \$10K from farming. Direct marketing is the only way to go out here. Agritainment is the main way to make money now. Used to be 117 dairy farms in Sterling.

Sarah Gardner. The role of the Ag Com Tech Assistance Project & the Farmland Action Plan. Important role that Ag Coms can play in being the point of contact with farmers. MDAR, land trusts, farmers – no one can achieve this alone; we need to collaborate for farmland protection. Farming Falmouth example: Ag Com co-holder of lease on a community farm: The Patch,

Pete Westover, Conservation Works. How many Ag Coms in the state. All the important things that Ag Coms can do: promoting local farming and improving the climate for local farms and running interference when farms encounter problems locally. Passing RTF bylaw; town wide farm survey; Join Farm Bureau for free; local farm brochures; sponsor open farm days; mapping of farms.

Who can help: Assessors, RPAs, land trusts, Chamber of Commerce, be part of the CPA, Request funds from town, resolving conflicts between neighbors and farms; free farm mediation service; grants for farms, and helping connect young farmers to farmland; working with indigenous tribes.

--New Farmland Protection Tools: Ch. 40, Sec 8L

-Purchase or own farmland to be leased to farmers; land protected by Article 97 – permanent protection.

-Ag Coms can hold CRs or APRs on land and lease land.

-Establish Ag Preservation Funds with money from CPA, grants, farm lease income, donations or town appropriation.

--Ag Coms created before Aug 9, 2016 automatically have all these rights and powers. If created after that time, must go back to town meeting to adopt Ch 40, Sec. 8L.

--Big Picture: 80,000 acres of farmland will be lost by 2055. So Farmland Action Plan v important.

--Exercise Right of First Refusal; can create and use the local Ag Preservation Fund to cover the cost.

--Create a local farmland action plan, as per Ch 40, Sec 8L.

--Mapping & brochures of towns in your farm.

--Do a survey of farms that are active in your town.

--Private APRs: best for land that won't qualify for regular APR; ok for less than 5 acres.

--Funds for a Farmland Pres Fund: CPA, town appropriation, farm lease payments.

--State and Federal farmland preservation program.

--Mass Audubon Catalyst Fund.

--Community Preservation Act: one of the major sources of funding; many small rural towns haven't adopted it. Because town gets a match from the state, it's worth doing. Town can exempt low income residents from the tax.

--Worcester County: almost no CPA towns except Templeton.

--Sterling has tried to pass CPA 4 times; many towns in Worcester County. Have not been able to pass CPA.

--Exercise Right of First Refusal on Chapter Lands. 120 days to act; Ag Com can ask SB to include Ag Com in list of town committees to be notified.

Attendee: Lots of small farms in this region on less than 5 acres; assessors are taxing them as large building lots; what strategies to help with small parcels of land? Private APR could help with that.

Winton Pitcoff: The best way to save farmland is to make sure farms are successful; what farmers need is consistency; farming can't change on a dime, we aren't getting consistency from markets or weather or the federal government. We try to be consistent at MDAR. For every dollar a farmer spends, they make 95 cents. Hard to make a living as a farmer in Mass. The Dept of Ag Resources is always looking for new ideas.

Tyson Neukirch, Farmland Stewardship Manager, Mt Grace Land Trust.

How can land trusts work directly with Ag Coms and munis. Grew up on a corn and soybean farm in Nebraska. Now grows veggies and forage.

--Land trusts can provide technical assistance, all the programs are complicated and you can work with us to get help navigating the complexities; we all need to be working with farmers in the community and farmers can partner with us to provide the tech assistance, to do farmland inventories, to map farmland, to broach the subject of conservation. We can help find funding sources for farms if they don't qualify for APR. We think creatively about how to protect farms. I can work with Ag Coms on how to exercise ROFR and we can partner with Ag Coms. My priority for the year to re-establish good working relationships with municipalities in the region to help with ROFR. Mt Grace specializes in working with farms and working lands. We are careful not to over-restrict what farms can do. We work directly with municipalities and we will work directly with you. Please get in touch!

ROUNDTABLE:

Mike Pineo: Sterling Ag Com. Ag Coms need money; we need a minimum of \$750 in Sterling; we have a revolving account. Town cannot take that money away.

Mary (ML) Altobelli, Westminster Ag Com. Ag Com runs the farmers market—22 vendors; we have more political clout because we fund the farmers' market; that has power; we have a revolving account; our spending limit is 12K; we earn money because of the farm market. The town now backs us. The Ag Com, the Historic Com and Cons Com are partnering on a historical property, house and farmland; land owned by the Cons Com.

--Problem is, Ag Com has no staff; all volunteer; our Ag Com came close to dissolving but we came back because we got some young members; we ought to organize with other towns to hire an Ag Agent who can work with several towns; so many Ag Coms have gone moribund. Reinstating them can be tricky; Select Boards are happy when Ag Coms go quiet; they aren't invested in bringing Ag Coms back.

Look at Worcester County: almost no towns have passed the CPA. We don't have cutesy towns here; Westminster has not passed CPA.

Mary Novak, Chair Templeton Ag Com. We have a chance to acquire a 7-8 acre hay field; that's a good piece of land for Templeton. I am a farmer but farm only 3 acres. Our Cultural Council wants to work with us on that land.

Diana Provencher, first gen farm since 1986. Ag Com Chair, Leicester. We passed RTF Bylaw. I keep bees; I love bees; they are more interesting than people! I train kids about importance of bees. Ag Com runs our farmers market.

Dylan Stinson, Princeton Ag Com, farmer (forage). We are small. We have unsuccessfully tried to have a farmers market. We hold events and have a presentation. I own and operate oldest farm in Mass. Recommendatoin for more regional farmer/Ag Com gatherings.

Katie Young, Hubbardston, Farmers Market, Montachusett Ag Alliance. I talk a lot, I make myself known, I put my foot on the gas for a lot of things in Hubbardston. We are working to prevent what happened in Rutland with all their farms getting gobbled up – they are screwed. We are next door and we didn't want that to happen to us. I don't want to work my ass off all day at a job and then come home and work my ass off after work on a farm. No one wants to do that. We are working on accessory uses for farms. We have CPA funds to help.

Wendy Somerset (?), Hubbardston (Holden?) Ag Com. We are a family farm. Our Ag Com struggles with membership, I run the farm and also serve on the committee. Can use help. Need to work with the schools. We need youth programs: 4H and FFA to get young people into farming.

Jen Anderson Sweeny, Franklin MA. How can we save the small parcels in our town for the next generation?

Maleah Gustafson, Central Mass Grown (board) + Sam Carter, Central MA Regional Planning Commission. Regional Planning Commission can help with grant writing free of charge. Central Mass Grown workshops coming up.

Julia Yang and Angie Tollefson, Bolton Ag Com. Just revived the Ag Com; our Ag Com is brand new, Angie moved to Bolton last year because a RTF community. Angie has 1 acre: horses, sheep and poultry. We are getting restarted.

Linda Lorkiewicz, Dudley Ag Com Chair. Our family farm since early 1900s, had turkeys and pigs, now just me. I have been thinking of ways to use the land more. Close to 80 acres. Surrounded by conservation land. I would like to start something new on my farm. Ag Com wants to do an Ag Day; only 3 functioning farms in Dudley anymore. Other farms sell hay. We want our Ag Com to be notified about Ch 61 land going up for sale. Ag Com does an Ag Reading Day in the elementary schools. We work with the grange.

Lynn Hartman, Barre and Oxford MA. I have an 80-year old roadside stand; The last apple orchard in Barre. Our land is in a CR.

Mary Altobelli, Westminster: The state needs more chicken production and a chicken processing plant; we are working to bring in a mobile processing plant; funding got shut down. Farmers need to talk to other farmers.

Jody Jess, Westminster Ag Com, Central Mass Grown, Montachusett Ag Alliance Board.

Raw milk, 17 cows, breeder of Irish Kerry cows. All towns in North Central Mass, Winchendon, Ashburnham, Barre, Hubbardston: most have Ag Coms. We do training session, speakers, grants, etc. Mentor Training.

--Central MA Grown, focus is on Southern Worcester County.

Jordyn Lyndes, Winchendon Ag Com Chair, farmer, financial advisor.

Winchendon is a big farming town. Lots of small farms; there needs to be more funding for small farms. We need to stay in touch with small farms.

ROFR: is an important last resort.

Issues:

- 1) Worcester County divided by the Mass Pike; farmers suggested that we hold a separate Roundtable in South Worcester County.** Eg: Dudley, Southbridge, Sturbridge, Douglas, Uxbridge, Northbridge, Whittier Farms in Sutton, Oxford, also Brimfield and the Brookfields (Hampden County).
- 2) Loss of hay markets:** A lot of farms are in hay but the hay demand is drying up; need to connect new farmers to available farmland; need to find uses for hay lands. Young farmers looking for land. But no central connection for young farmers to find available farmland. Big problem is the lack of farm housing because retired farmers want to stay in their homes.