

Middlesex County Ag Roundtable

Prescott Community Center, Groton MA

Oct 18, 2025

Attendance: 32

Agricultural Commissions: Pepperell, Dunstable, Framingham, Westford, Chelmsford, Needham, Billerica, Dracut, Stow, Fitchburg

Speakers: Margaret Scarsdale, Pete Westover, Sarah Gardner, Janet Morrison, Sherrill Rosoff, Charlie Tully, Tony Scibelli, Bob O'Connor

Sarah Gardner: Welcome and plan for the morning

Pete Westover: Introductory remarks

Rep. Margaret Scarsdale: The importance of farms in the region; to strengthen farms and the agricultural sector we need to work together and partner with each other. She is here to support. The legislature is important and pro-farming policies can help.

H112: An Act fostering agricultural resilience;

S2231: An Act to boost agritourism

John Muir quote: If you tug at a piece of nature, you find it's connected to everything else.

Sherill Rosoff: Co-chair of Pepperell AgCom

Our goals:

- 1- To be visible in our communities
- 2- To be relevant to our farmers and communities
- 3- To preserve and protect local farms

Ag Coms need to step up and be visible and make presentations to other boards and committees. Farming is such a high-risk business: we need to take care of our farmers. We encourage farmers to have open farm day, to be more public. Agritourism is how communities get onto farms.

Being relevant means doing FLI- Farmland of Local Importance: We did that in Pepperell, which helps farmland score higher on NRCS evaluations.

We did a stakeholder involvement process: we went to our planning board to beg to get the money to hire a consultant to do a stakeholder engagement process: to find out what our farms are producing, how they are accessing market channels, what their capacity is to grow and continue into the future. We send the report to all the Ag Commissions.

We did a Cost of Community Services study: Mass Woods has the protocol online. You can do it with your town assessor; it's critical when you talk with your Select Board. They think the way to get out of financial crisis is by building more houses. Impossible to have a conversation with Planning Boards and SBs to defend the farmland in town, unless they understand the true Cost of Community Services.

Right to Farm: We are Just becoming a Right to Farm Community. I am always trying to find partners. I have presented to the Select Board, to the Planning Board and to the Conservation Commission.

Ag Com partnered with a food hub—Growing Places. Together we applied and were awarded an FSIG grant for a cold storage facility.

H112: An Act Fostering Ag Resilience

Sec 1: Directs MEMA to create an emergency plan for farms (eg: flooding); towns have already gone thru the Municipal Vulnerability Program – food security does not play a prominent role in the plan. We can only produce about 20% of our food in NE.

Sec 2: MDAR AND DTA must maximize local food. EG: HIP is critical.

--Act allows infrastructure in the APR program. Need to allow houses and barns in the APR program.

Sec. 6: Codifies the Food Security Infrastructure Grant Program.

Gives MDAR right of first refusal on chapter lands

Charlie Tully, Dunstable AgCom Chair & Middlesex County Farm Bureau Pres & Tully Dairy Farm

Our Ag Com not very active but Pepperell has helped us become more active.
Rep. Scarsdale has helped to keep us active by holding the regular meetings.
We are interested in doing more.

Tony Scibelli, Land Protection Specialist, Sudbury Valley Trustees

We work in 36 towns; 6000 acres conserved. Have done 105 CRS and manage 95 reservations.
We are v interested on conserving farmland.

Conservation tools for farmland: The process runs thru MDAR; APR is a restriction that removes building rights on a piece of land; extinguishes the building right. As a private land trust, we can also hold an APR.

- 1) Private APR: land trust holds the APR, LT funds it thru donations, grants, etc. We work to provide the funding. Mechanics of APR: Can do with a private APR; we will partner with you; can do private APR on parcels less than 5 acres. Farm housing can be allowed.
- 2) Conservation Restriction: extinguishes the building rights; does not have to have an OPAV (Option to Purchase at Agricultural Value); does not require farming.

- 3) SVT could purchase your farm and lease it back to you; we can purchase and give you a life estate to allow you to continue to farm it.

Your farmland is a big, important generational decisions. Must consider the tax and legal implications. We are very willing to talk with you.

SVT: Stearns Farm: we have a farm lease for a 5-acre CSA farm. Less than \$50/acre per year. The farmer can use what they need to farm; herbicides if needed. We approved their greenhouse, pavilion, shed.

Linda from Framingham has a share at Stearns Farm.

“Please contact me if you want to talk about partnering with SVT for farmland preservation.”

Janet Morrison, Conservation Works

New powers for Ag Commissions: presentation (please see the Ag Com Technical Assistance Project website for these slides)

State Grant Programs for Farmland Preservation: towns need an updated OSRP (Open Space and Recreation Plan) to apply.
Also need a current appraisal

Land Grant Program (provides a percentage of the value depending on the town's wealth)

Landscape Partnership Program

Conservation Partnership (LTs apply for this)

Conservation Land Conservation Program (oversubscribed but worth trying-may take several years)

Federal Programs

ACEP ALE (up to 50% of the land value)

Forest Legacy Grant Program: up to 20%; property can be non-forested ag land (up to 75% of full value of the land)

Need municipal approvals to apply/accept grants: private APRs helpful because sometimes Select Boards refuse to sign Conservation Restrictions (CRs). CRs need Select Board approval.

Definition of Ag: Mass General Law: Ag is a commercial enterprise; horse farm only considered ag if horses are grazed or bred.

Ch 61A: ROFR: Statute does not require notice to the Ag Com when land is proposed to come out of Chapter 61A; only to the ConCom and the SB. Must get your town to give notice to the Ag Com—very short time frame (120 days) to exercise ROFR.

Chapter 61A Right of First Refusal

(See more information on the Ag Com Technical Assistance Project website)

- 1: Is the ROFR a bonified offer? (many are not)
2. Is not a bonified offer, town has to let owner know w/in 30 days.
3. If town exercises ROFR or assigns the ROFR to a land trust there's much work to be done: figure out how to pay for the land; potentially borrow money to meet purchase price within 120 days. A good idea to put a restriction on 70% of land and sell restricted land to a farmer.

Bob O'Connor, Conservation Works: Mediation services for farmers in Middlesex and Worcester County. Grant Covered - Free mediation. Conflicts with neighbors, town, DCR.

ROUNDTABLE CONVERSATION

Jenny Raitt, Exec Dir of Northern Middlesex County of Governments, Lowell

NMCOG provides technical assistance in planning, environment, transportation, OSRPs, economic development planning. Will help with grant writing for farms.

Susan Konick, Dunstable

I want to learn about Ag commissions; we raise pigs and sell meat at the Tully Farm Dairy Store.

Linda K., Framingham Agricultural Committee

Working with SVT to protect one of our farms. We have chicken issues, issues with board of health, trying to build relationships within the city, upcoming project is a community farm on community land.

Diane Suillard, Framingham AgCom

I am a beekeeper. Here to learn.

Eric Piper, Pepperell AgCom

We own a horse farm. The Planning Board almost shut down our business. The Ag Com rescued us.

Dwight Sipler, MAAC

Manages the MAAC Website; got it up to date.

Albert Brox: Dracut AgCom, retired farmer

A lot of farmland in town; I stopped farming 2 years ago. My farming operation paid for all the expense of taking care of the land. I also was a handyman. I tried to put my land in APR: it was a clunky program, I didn't get helpful feedback; after 8 months they gave me an appraisal that

was way too low – but over 1 million. Not realistic. Some people wanted to buy my land for conservation. Dracut is a pro-farming town. I had developers trying to buy the land every month. I offered to sell to the town for 1 million for the people of Dracut. But I didn't want to put a restriction on it. I wanted the people to decide. Town bought it and they have no plans for it. I am maintaining the property for the town for \$1/year.

Jennifer Raitt, North Middlesex Council of Governments

NMCOG will write a grant for your Ag Commission or for farmers who want grantwriting assistance.

Jamie Jergen, Chelmsford AgCom

Maple farmer 12 years; my farm includes my land, town land, and leased land.

Mike Raisbeck, Chelmsford AgCom

Sugaring and market farming. 15 acres of farmland. When I got on the AgCom 3 years ago, it was sleeping, and now it has one eye open. I am also on the Planning Board.

Paula Cherasi, Pepperell Conservation Admin.

Nashoba Conservation Trust. Conservation Administrator Town of Pepperell. We work with our Ag Com. We write grants and look for donors. We will pay for appraisals, we will be creative. We don't want to lose any farmland.

Tony Beattie, Farmer, Pepperell Select Board member

Thank you Rep Scarsdale for organizing the regular ag meetings. MDAR is very important—we are lucky to have them. Having written the Mass Farmland Action Plan, I am trying to help with succession planning for farmers. The Farmland Plan is paradigm shifting; our food supply is vulnerable. Growing Places and locals have started a committee to get a grant from MDAR to do succession planning.

Mark Olalor, Westford AgCom

I should have been here 6 years ago. Homesteader. Raise chickens. Peaches. Berries .

Ag Com

We have a community apiary; flower empower.

Maria McFarland, Stow AgCom

Our AgCom is basically non-existent; trying to bring it back. I am waiting on a 3rd member; I am also on ZBA. We had a horse farm with a lesson program. Had to shut down our trail program due to local issues. We couldn't use the trails on conservation land that allowed for horses because we had no access. Want to revive the Stow Ag Com.

Lee, SB, Dunstable

We have a great Ag Com; we are all here at this meeting. This is a very relevant and important and exciting conversation. This is going to revive our AgCom. Dunstable wants to maintain its

ag identity. I never realized an AgCom can purchase property. Our town will do a COCs Study; We need up to date data to do our work to advocate for farms.

Adrian Card, Billerica

We just created an AgCom and passed Right To Farm. We do beekeeping and xmas trees, I run 4H; I raise animals. Active with Farm Bureau.

?? Billerica, Conservation Commissioner

Former beekeeper; APR was designed to create farmland that young folks could afford; a lot of young people want to farm and programs that match young folks to land. Farm families often run out of people who want to farm. Conservation Commissions have a lot of CRs all across the state.

Joan Simmons, Dunstable Ag Commission, CPA, Planning Board, greenhouse business

I am hearing grumbling from younger people in town who are not happy that farmland isn't paying as much taxes. That is scary. We are blessed to have several farmers in town and they own a lot of farmland. If price starts going up, we are going to have a problem. We need more funds from the state to the towns for this. Do a COCS to show that agriculture is part of the commercial base of town. Ag land does not require any community services.

Robert Kennedy, Dunstable, Land Trust

50 years at the land trust

Sarah Gardner, Conservation Works, Williamstown Ag Com

It was tough to find the AgComs and farmers in Middlesex County; there's no comprehensive farm guide- would be useful to help organize for agriculture.

Janet Morrison, Conservation Works, Fitchburg Ag Com

World Farmers community farm (immigrant farmers); 82% students in Fitchburg HS are minority students. Urban area. 80 farmers are Fitchburg residents.