

Information and Tools for Citizen Planners

Farming-Friendly Communities

Maintaining rural character, creating economic opportunity, buying local, building community – many communities are talking about one or more of these ideas. Has your community identified any one of these as important goals? Are there farms and/or farmland in your community? If so, then actively supporting farming may help accomplish some of your community goals. **Think “farming-friendly”!**

Farming in Maine is making a comeback. In 2016 the USDA reported 8,200 farms in Maine, an increase of almost 14%*. Maine leads the nation in growth of organic farms adding over 100 new organic farms from 2008-2014 (Bangor Daily News 9/26/15). Local farms mean local foods, and many Maine communities are embracing this by supporting farming, by taking steps to ensure they are “farming-friendly”.

Farming-friendly communities support farming through local planning, policies, ordinances and activities.

Farming-friendly communities encourage active participation from farmers, residents and town officials to keep farming viable. Your community can take steps to become farming-friendly.



Maine Farmland Trust photo

Benefits of Strong, Healthy Agriculture

A strong, healthy agricultural economy comes from supporting farms of *all* types - traditional dairy and crop farms, and smaller-scale farms growing produce, herbs, flowers, seedlings, meats or other specialty products. And these farms provide a number of benefits to a community.

Economic Opportunity

- The market value of Maine’s agricultural products increased 24% from \$617,190,000 to \$763,062,000*.
- Farms support and serve a broad base of local businesses. From equipment and farm supply stores, to mechanics, to veterinarians, to fuel suppliers, farming helps create a diverse economic base for a region.

- “Agritourism” provides opportunities to visit farms and observe farm activities. Participating farm numbers increased from 112 in 2007 to 270 in 2012, or 141%*.

Environmental Benefits

- Farm fields and wetlands are important areas for groundwater recharge. Farm hedgerows filter rain and surface water runoff helping to protect water quality.
- Farms provide essential habitat for fish, birds and other important wildlife species.

Rural Character and Legacy

- Farms provide natural areas and rural vistas that are important landscapes for “rural character”.
- Maine’s farms are a historic/cultural legacy in many communities.

Build Community

- Farms days, harvest suppers, farmers’ markets all offer opportunities for bringing people together to build new connections between farms and their community.

Protect Working Farmland

Farmers need productive, and affordable, land to run a viable farm business. As communities grow, new development may put pressure on farmland (e.g. acquisition for house lots) and/or compatibility may become an issue (e.g. noise and/or odor from farm operations). The challenge is how to provide for and protect agricultural land use while also accommodating growth. Planning for agriculture helps to ensure that farming will have a place as your community grows and that your community is “farming-friendly”. Some steps your community can take to protect working farmland include:

- Work with farmers to identify and prioritize farmland.
- Support landowners’ enrollment in Maine’s current use tax programs: Farmland, Tree Growth, Open Space and Working Waterfront.
- Support landowners’ efforts to permanently preserve their land for agriculture.

It’s not farmland without farmers.™

Without farmers, there is no “farm” in farmland. When planning for agriculture, **the most important step is to engage your community’s farmers.** Reach out and bring farmers in to the conversation with residents and town officials, to envision the community’s farming future.

Meet with farmers

- Understand their needs.
- Learn about changes affecting their industry.
- Identify ongoing ways for working with them.

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Support farmers and farming

- Adopt farm-friendly policies and ordinances that enable farms to diversify and expand their businesses.
- Help farmers access good farmland.
- Encourage farmers who sell direct to consumers to sign up on [Get Real Maine](#). Then help everyone learn about local farms with a link on the Town's website.
- Promote [farmers' markets](#), community supported agriculture ([CSA's](#)), farm days and other events.
- Encourage beginning farmers to move to your community. Check out the "[Beginning Farmer Resource Network](#)" page.
- Recognize the farm families for their land stewardship.

For more ideas on engaging farmers, visit "[Know Your Farmers](#)" on the Maine Farmland Trust website.

The Farming-Friendly Toolbox

Wondering how to turn the above steps in to action, to create a "farming-friendly" community? Fortunately, there are public policies, programs, organizations, resources and a growing number of local examples to help towns take action to support farming – a "farming-friendly" toolbox!

State Policies, Programs and Organizations

- [Maine's Agriculture Protection Act \("Right-to-Farm Law"\)](#) protects farmers from complaints from neighbors about odors, noise and other aspects of properly-conducted farming operations. Maine Farmland Trust provides a link to a model local ordinance [Right-To-Farm-Ordinance](#)
- [Maine Department of Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry \(MDACF\)](#) offers programs and resources to support farming, forestry, parks and lands and land use planning. For example, its [Maine's Farms for the Future Program](#) helps established farms with business planning to increase profitability. Explore [MDACF's "support center"](#) website.
- [Maine's Farm, Open Space and Tree Growth Programs](#) allows owners of eligible properties to voluntarily enroll with their town for their land to be assessed at its current, rather than "highest and best" use, helping to reduce economic pressure to convert farmland to other uses.
- [Maine's Voluntary Municipal Farm Support Program \(VMFSP\)](#) allows communities to preserve farmland by purchasing 20-year agricultural easements from eligible landowners who voluntarily apply. The **Town of Winslow** is the first Maine community to create and adopt a VMFSP in May 2016 ([Kennebec Journal 10/30/16](#)).
- [USDA Agricultural Conservation Easement Program \(ACEP\)](#) provides financial and technical assistance to governments and local land trusts to

protect working agricultural lands and limit non-agricultural uses of land.

- **Maine Farmland Trust (MFT) supports farmers and farming** through programs for farmland protection and access, farm viability, and public outreach. MFT's [Cultivating Maine's Agricultural Future "A Guide for Towns, Land Trusts, and Farm Supporters"](#) provides examples and "how to" ideas.

Local Policies, Programs and Strategies

- **Comprehensive Plans** lay the foundation for supporting farming and farmland protection. Establishing agricultural goals, policies and actions promotes awareness of the benefits, and needs, of farming in a community. See [Municipal Action: Local Planning](#) on the MFT website.
- **Local ordinances** help implement the Comprehensive Plan, and provide regulatory support for farming.
 - Land Use or Zoning Ordinances establish appropriate districts/standards for agriculture uses and practices,
 - Conservation/Open Space subdivision ordinances and Transfer of development rights programs can preserve farmland.
- **Local farming groups** can help raise awareness of the value of agriculture. Groups like [Cape Farm Alliance](#), [Monmouth Grows](#), [Bowdoinham Community Development Initiative](#) hold events, educate, and provide assistance to support farmers and farming.
- **Agricultural Committees/Commissions** are farm-focused groups that work to protect and promote agriculture in their communities. The **Winslow Agricultural Commission** was appointed in 2014 to help ensure that the town is friendly to agriculture.
- **Collaboration with Land Trusts** can often help towns complete farmland protection projects (e.g. conservation easements) and can provide technical, and sometimes financial, assistance with these efforts.

Many Maine communities are working on being "farming-friendly". Check out the **Municipal Farming Friendly Provisions and Strategies Overview Table** to get ideas! bit.ly/Ag4Maine Let us know what your town is doing!

References and Additional Resources

- * 2002, 2007, 2012 USDA/NASS Census of Agriculture, and 2016 Agriculture Overview
- American Farmland Trust www.farmland.org
- Facilitating Innovative Agricultural Enterprises [VT-Ag-Guide.pdf](#)
- Maine Federation of Farmers Markets mainefarmersmarkets.org
- Maine Land Trust Network mltn.org
- Maine Organic Farmers and Gardeners Association (MOFGA) www.mofga.org
- Preserving Rural Character thru Agriculture [Resource Kit.pdf](#)
- The Community Institute Session 5: "Farms, Food and the Conservation Connection to Economically Healthy Communities"