

Notes from the Apr 6, 2023 Community Ag Gathering at BCC

Attendees' Favorite Ideas (ie. notes written on stickies)

Support Food Freedom

- Less government intervention in Ag – food freedom
- Food sovereignty
- Food freedom for small producers

Meaning of Thrive

- What are the specific goals implied by the word “thrive” (referring to third discussion question)

Create Opportunities for Farmer Cooperation/Collaboration

- Farmers used to help each other out – share equipment and labor
- Small farms working with partnerships built in community spaces - “Diversity – community – partnerships”
- Farm equipment library
- People to fix tractors
- Farm labor-sharing
- Co-op to sell products in 1 location

Explore Strategies to Improve Farm Economics

- Farm for the love of it, not for economic independence
- Change the \$10K revenue requirement for ag assessment so smaller farms could thrive
- \$\$ to improve marginal soils
- Taxes need to come down
- Community support \$\$ mechanism
- Can't afford help with the high minimum wage, and can't afford to pay the higher and higher taxes
- Protect farmers' balance sheet: by protecting the value of their land, you create a farm business that can thrive

Grow Local Food System

- Local products <-> local economy
- Small diverse farms selling local and having social gatherings using local produce
- Finding out what the rest of the non-farming community wants from their community. What type of farmers market? What type of community?
- Less nationwide competition – people were more locally focused because they had to be
- Better marketing

Education for Farmers and Consumers

- Mentors/Classes to help people have their own gardens or small farms
- Early education in schools re farming and where food comes from

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- Mail info to every resident
- More people willing to pay prices we need to get for our goods (need to get away from people thinking it should be “cheaper” in the “country”)

What conditions existed in the past that made ag successful?

Could profit when small

Larger families provided a source of captive labor

Farms would trade work with each other

Farms produced local gardens for their own food, extended family and help

Bartered work

Family-based rural economy and knowledge passed along by kids doing chores

Soil productivity was higher (marginal land was overtilled)

Milk price was pegged to inflation (1980's price supports removed)

Didn't have to buy land, so farms had less debt

Neighborhood creameries, milk waste went to pigs

Mostly locally grown food, smaller farms

Was expensive to ship distances

Family based, passed down knowledge

Soil was newer, less fertile now

Smaller distribution networks

Fertilizers and potatoes

Taxes were low; milk checks were high

Cost of fertilizer (and all inputs) was lower

Harder to get off-farm work without leaving home

Caroline used to service dairy and eggs to NYC

Lifestyle expectations were lower – farmers generally didn't pay for 2 cars, lessons and activities for kids, cell phones, internet, travel to other countries, etc

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What are the opportunities and challenges facing existing farmers and people hoping to farm in Caroline?

Challenges:

Food transport costs are too cheap, so it's easy to get food here from across the world
Cost to consumer (local food more expensive)
Competing with cheap food, Walmart
People want to buy cheap from bigger stores
Time to cook meals (many families don't have it)
Many homes with 2 working parents
Kids overworked with other activities – not available to help on the farm
Liability issues
Can't find help
Too much paperwork
"Get big or get out" philosophy
Processing meat, transporting animals
Fencing, shelter, and water
Weather extremes
Less open land – broken up – doesn't work for larger farms
Hard to be big enough to afford processing
\$10K/year gross revenue requirement for ag exemption
Re shared equipment: Narrow windows for planting and haying
Feed markets are a challenge
Fuel prices are a big problem especially for hay season
Inputs cost too much
Taxes are a massive challenge
People to fix equipment
Time to market your crops
Keeping sanity and health to be active enough to keep up
No farmer = no farm
Farm Credit is not a positive experience
Access to credit
Most farms need to have off-farm income, which cuts into time available for farming
How to navigate the system if English isn't your first language
Land access
Lack of information in Spanish or other native languages
Who wants to farm in Caroline? And how do we attract them here?
Solar farms are driving up the price of rural land

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Opportunities:

IFM (Ithaca Farmers Market)

Education – cooking

Community garden plots

TC3 training

School meals as market?

Small tasks for older folks (county farm)

Property tax assessment capped – harmonize across county

Feasibility study – how many acres to break even?

Farming can be more profitable than selling off a lot for development

Need favorable laws to keep parcels of land for multi-generational farms that can protect the land while still borrowing against it

USDA loans for farmers

Creating the infrastructure for collaborative/cooperative marketing

Agrivoltaics

Engaging school kids in farming

A FB group specific to Caroline farmers/producers

Enable farmers to buy enough land

Make farming fun, profitable, and sexy

Local sales of meat, hay, veggies, etc.

Working for yourself, family at home more

Kids learn farming practices, hopefully

Agritourism

Carbon offsets for farmers

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What needs to be done to make farming thrive again in Caroline?

Establish More Channels for Marketing and Selling Local Products

- Establish local markets
- Growing local markets
- Traveling farmers market
- Marketing is everything – need more ways to market
- Markets for farmers to sell their wares – a co-op store for farmers to sell at all week
- Town website for farmers
- Better information-sharing, town mailing to all residents
- What do consumers want?

Build Local Food Production/Processing Infrastructure

- Local cannery
- Canning/processing
- Local family gardens
- Central composting
- Local currency

Facilitate Farmer Community-Building and Collaboration

- We need more social places that foster community – co-ops, cider houses or breweries
- Social gathering spaces
- Cooperative purchasing
- Sharing equipment – town tool library (Shared brush hog and livestock trailer especially)
- Shared equipment (brush hog, tractor)
- Machinery sharing
- Bartering

Promote New Enterprises, Creative Ideas, and Sound Practices for Farmers

- Agritourism/petting zoo
- Sell hunting rights
- Do without equipment
- Indoor ag
- Season extension
- Wild leeks, fiddleheads, ginseng, mushrooms
- Utilize woods for agroforestry crops
- Tree planting
- More local orchards – pawpaws!
- Manage water runoff
- Orchards of pawpaws, berries
- More horse operations

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Change Regulations to Help Farmers Thrive

- Food sovereignty
- Farming needs to be about more than profits
- Thrive does not equal what it was before
- Change expectation about what is needed for land preservation
- Rather than spending Town budget on zoning proposal, some of those funds could be distributed to farmers
- Access to capital
- Reduce taxes further on food-producing or most productive farmland (keep farmland as farmland, whatever it takes!)
- Change in Ag Assessment structure
- Get credit for own hay produced and used at home
- Cost of keeping land is driving it out of production and out of farming families
- The economics of farming needs to be more profitable than the one-time event of selling your land