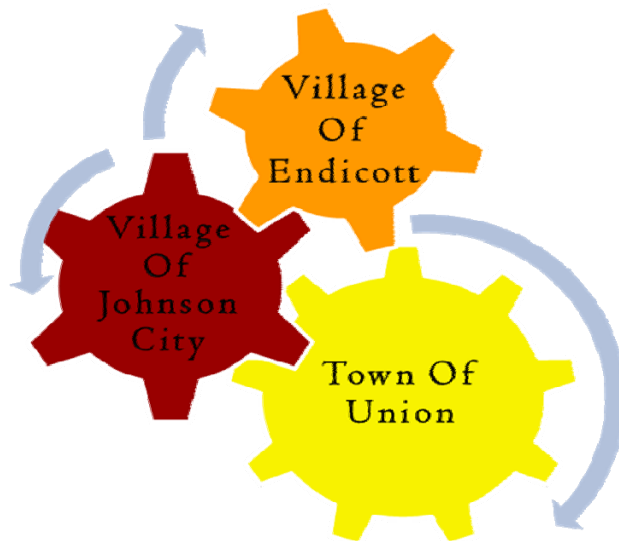


Goals & Objectives

Chapter 17



Agriculture

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Agriculture

17

MISSION STATEMENT: TO PROTECT AND MAINTAIN AGRICULTURAL ACTIVITIES AS A LAND USE OPTION IN ORDER TO PRESERVE OPEN SPACE.

In 2000, there were approximately 38,000 farms in New York State down from 40,500 in 1987 (New York Agricultural Statistics Service, 2000). Coupled with an upstate population decline, agriculture in New York and the Town of Union has become more of an exception than the rule. The agricultural practices that remain continue to change with a decline in traditional dairy farms and increases in other areas such as vegetables, fruits, poultry, maple syrup, and additional specialty agricultural items.

There are only a handful of working farms remaining in the Town of Union. The decline of agricultural practices has been the result of many factors. In a survey of 448 owners of idle agricultural land in New York, forty-one percent said that they wanted to sell their land because they couldn't afford the taxes. Thirty-one percent wanted to sell because they needed the money. In most cases it has just become more profitable to sell the land to developers than to try to make a living selling agricultural goods. Twelve percent said that farming was impractical (Kay, D. & Bills, N., 2007). Whatever the reason, agriculture in New York and the Town has seen a steady decline in recent years.

Despite this decline, agriculture is still important to the region. Agriculture represents an enormous business investment in Broome County and provides major year-round business for other county enterprises. Recent new development in the Town of Union has provided an opportunity for agriculture to increase. Increased "smart growth" development can result in increased demand for agricultural products, which could translate into increased demand for local farming goods.

Agriculture is also essential because it preserves natural environments, supports wildlife and sport hunting, and is an invaluable resource for future generations (Broome County Agricultural and Farmland Protection Board, 2001). This land is also essential to limiting suburban sprawl, and farms, even idle agricultural land, help keep taxes low. If a subdivision is built on open farmland outside of the urban core taxes would likely increase for everyone. Developers often point to an increase in the tax base, and while this may be true, it might not be enough to offset the costs of

sprawl. New roads, water lines, and sewer lines have to be built and subsequently maintained. Services such as police, fire, and education may see increases in demand. This scenario can result in an overall net increase in taxes (Ewing, 1997).

Natural Resources for Agriculture

The Town of Union borders the Susquehanna River to the south, and has numerous creeks and ponds (both natural and man-made). It encompasses five soil associations described in the Broome County Soil Survey, which is depicted in Map 4 in Chapter 8. These associations, in order of their magnitude within the Town, are as follows:

MARDIN-LORDSTOWN-VOLUSIA

This association makes up over half of the town at fifty four percent. It is found in the upland areas throughout the Susquehanna River watershed portion of the town. Low fertility, seasonal wetness, shallow rooting zones, and steep slopes significantly limit the types of agriculture in this area. This association does support forest growth and is home to many Christmas tree farms.

BATH-MARDIN-LORDSTOWN

This association represents approximately seventeen percent of the town. It is found in the hilltop areas of the town. Crop agriculture is very limited in this area with low fertility, shallow rooting depths, rockiness, climate, and slope. However, as with the Mardin-Lordstown-Volusia association, certain species of trees are able to grow in this soil.

URBAN LAND-HOWARD-NIAGARA

This association also covers approximately seventeen percent of the town. It borders most of the Susquehanna River and extends north within the low-lying areas of the town. It includes rocky outwashes and streambeds along the Susquehanna River and its creek tributaries. Before it was developed, it constituted some of the best farmland in the town. This can still be seen in some of the open green spaces still left throughout this area. The areas that are undeveloped could support dairy farming and garden crops, but most of these open spaces are too small to farm.

CHENANGO-HOWARD-PALMYRA

This association covers approximately nine percent of the town and can be found mainly along Nanticoke Creek and State Route 26. It is similar to the previous soil association being that it is found in alluvial floodplains and terraces along major streams. It has well drained soils and can support dairy and crop farming. Crops include corn, grain, hay, and sometimes more intensive crops such as vegetables and nursery stock. This association along with the previous one may represent areas of the town that may qualify under some form of farmland protection program.

However, most of the areas are either already developed or are in a floodplain, which already protects these areas to some extent from future development.

TIOGA-MIDDLEBURY-CHENANGO

There is a small portion in the southwest section of the town that is comprised of this association. It constitutes approximately three percent of the land area of the town, rounding out the five soil associations. These soils typically have some limitations or require moderate conservation practices and have moderate to high infiltration rates. Tioga-Middlebury-Chenango soils are deep, well drained to moderately deep, and moderately well drained.

New York State Designated Agricultural Districts

Agricultural Districts were created under a 1971 New York Agricultural District Law, which sought to protect farmland and create economic and regulatory incentives to encourage farming. An Agricultural District is a geographic area where at least fifty percent of the land consists of mostly viable agricultural land. Agriculture is the primary land use within the district, and these areas can benefit from tax incentives used to promote farming and the protection of agricultural land. Districts include areas that are actively engaged in farming, idle, forested, or part of residential and commercial land. A district is created upon request of the property owner and after the land has been determined to meet certain standards and criteria. Districts are reviewed about every eight years, and some are added, removed, or modified.

State designated Agricultural Districts provide many benefits to an area. Not only does it ensure that land is left for the production of food and other goods, but it also has environmental benefits such as groundwater recharge, open space preservation, and scenic views. These districts help local governments preserve farmland and manage growth. One of the most important aspects of these districts is that they safeguard against the enactment of laws, plans, ordinances, rules, or regulations that unreasonably restrict or regulate agriculture (Agricultural Protection & Developmental Services, 2004).

Despite the fact that there are very few working farms, a large majority of land in the Town of Union is zoned Agricultural. A recommendation of the Comprehensive Plan is to rezone many of these areas to a Rural Residential category that would actually decrease the overall density of residential development. However, because of the protections mentioned above, the new zoning designation would still allow for agricultural pursuits that would be permitted by right. As a result, areas rezoned and designated as state Agricultural Districts would benefit from even greater protections. These safeguards are essential in a town that has seen a recent surge in residential development despite losses in population.

It is important to distinguish the difference between a state designated Agriculture District and the Town's Agricultural zoning district. A state designated Agricultural District is primarily used to protect areas from unreasonable policies that restrict or regulate farming operations, while Agriculture zoning is land use designation, which allows for certain uses within an area. The town has fourteen individual tax parcels that are designated as Agricultural Districts, accounting for approximately three percent of the land. Most are north of the Village of Johnson City in the northeast section of the town. A map depicting these areas can be seen in Map 1.

Agriculture and Planning

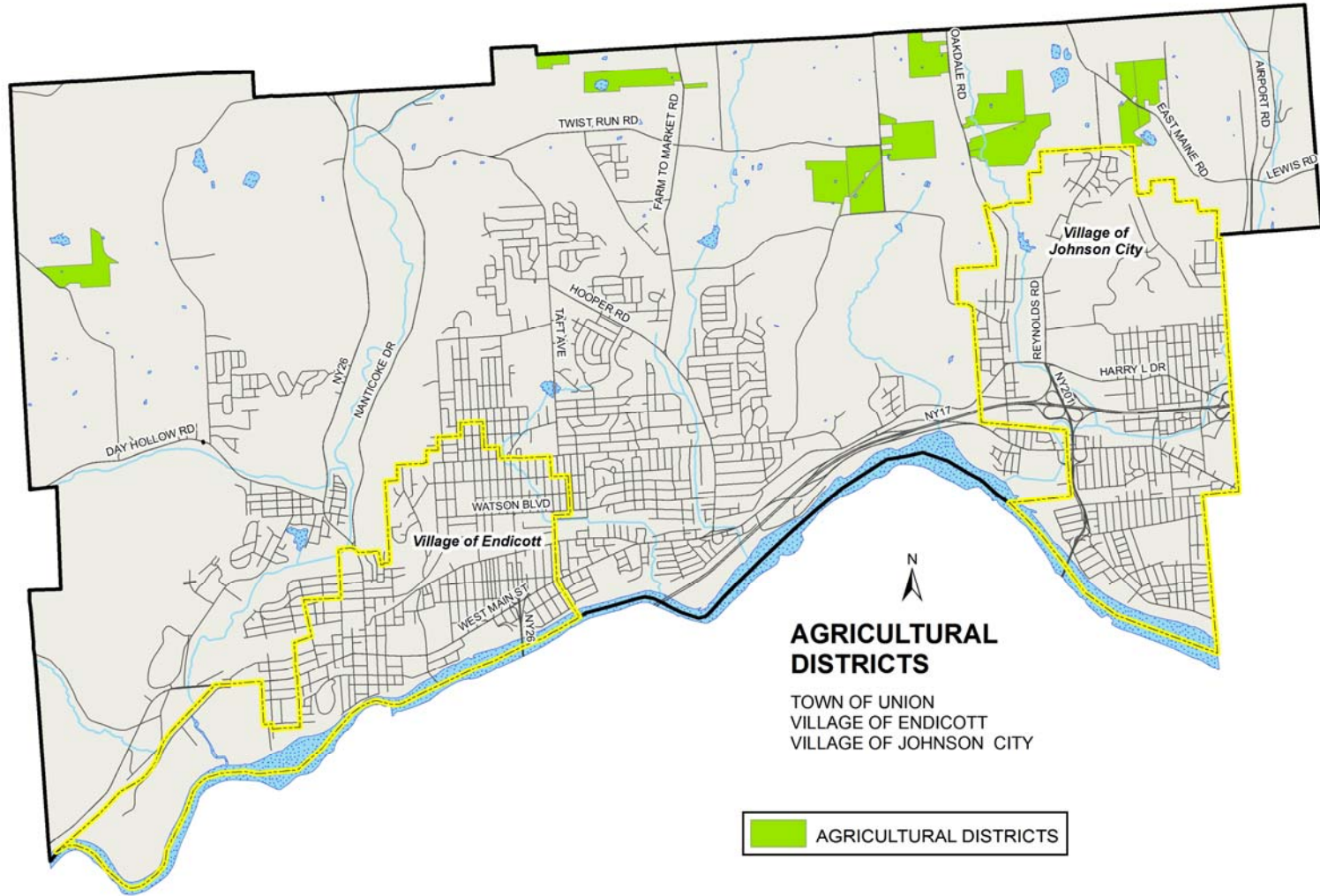
Since 1980, the Town has experienced an eight percent decrease in population. Coupled with this decline has been a loss of farmland that began in the 1960s. Whether or not these two issues are related is difficult to establish, and any conclusions drawn would be based purely on speculation. The decline in farmland is more likely attributable to factors such as low profitability and shifts to other less intensive agricultural practices than it is population loss. Despite population losses there has been increased development and growth in the residential and commercial sectors, which lends itself to some important observations and strategies regarding agriculture in the town. There must be some effort to protect farmland, and at the same time balance new residential and commercial development.

Some of these observations and strategies as they relate to planning involve quality of life issues. Businesses and people moving into new areas often point to open space as an important quality when considering where to locate. Making sure that the town preserves some open space would therefore be important to attracting new business and people to the area. Many studies and plans relating to agriculture often state that farming in New York is limited and in decline, and while this may appear to be the case farming in New York is actually up nine percent since 1994. New York was the number two producer of apples in the United States in 1998 and was in the top ten in other agriculture products that same year. So, why is farmland decreasing in the Town of Union and other towns within Broome County? The answer lies in the type of farming that was historically practiced in the region. Previously farms would focus on one traditional product. Today farms need to diversify and pursue agricultural activities that might not be the type people normally associate with farming. Other strategies to improve and increase agriculture in the town could involve training, market research, and promotion of local crops particularly in local farmers markets (Broome County Agricultural and Farmland Protection Board, 2001). There are currently two farmers markets within the town according to 2002-2003 New York State Farm Fresh Guide prepared by New York State Department of Agriculture and Markets. One is the Endicott Farmers Market located at parking lot B on Washington Avenue, which operates from mid-June to the end of October. The other is the Johnson City Farmers Market located at the intersection of Main Street and Lester Avenue which operates from late June to the end of October.

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Map 1 ~ Town Of Union New York State Designated Agricultural Districts



Source: Cornell University Geospatial Information Repository (CUGIR)
New York State Department of Agriculture and Markets