



Farmers and Farmers Markets Round Table Summary 7-9 pm, February 8, 2022

Attendees:

In-person – Brent Green, Chris Cruz, Bob Mills, Georgianne Hunsicker, Sharon Fournier, Pat Knopf, Northampton Farmers Market manager, Roger Unangst of Unangst Tree Farms, Garry Hunsicker and son Stephen of Twin Maple Farms, Chris Colitas of Valley Fruits and Veggies, Tyler Smith of Smith Family Farm, Dan Seiple and daughter Andrea DeLong of Seiple Farms, Jill Seitz of LVPC, Matt Assad of LVPC, Brad Stewart of LVPC.

Virtual: Allison Czapp, Buy Fresh Buy Local Director, Brian Moyer of Penn State Extension, Jennifer Wendling of Penn State Extension, Travis Hahn, Victor Rodite of Northampton Borough, Eric Ruth of Kellyn Foundation, Dan Snyder of North Catasauqua Borough, LeRoy Brobst of Northampton Borough, Julie Benco of LVPC.

Discussions of note:

1. Farmland Preservation rates are far too low to compete with what developers can offer. Dan Seiple -- “Rates should be at least two to three times higher. Where it’s at now is a joke.” The farmers in the room universally agreed, though Unangst noted that its understandable that it isn’t higher. It’s taxpayer funded and no amount will really compete with the prices being paid by developers, he noted.
2. River Central farmers must evolve if they have a chance to survive. Those in the room said they have changed the way they do business, including more promotion and switching what they grow to better cash crops. And they’ll have to continue to adapt.
3. River Central has transitioned to an area of mainly “specialty crop” farms, selling trees, strawberries and pumpkins. Many have added agritainment to their repertoire, with mazes, hay rides and pumpkins, apples or strawberry picking.
4. Of the group, only Tyler Smith’s family sells grain, and the majority of their crops are sold to wholesalers.
5. With not enough land to compete with giant corporate farms, the other families grow “specialty crops” that can be sold directly to consumer, enabling them to charge a retail rate – the only way to wring enough money out of each acre. Unlike the Smith farm, most have farms along heavily traveled roadways in East Allen Township that can attract consumers.
6. Direct to consumer farms see customers from as far away as Delaware, New York and Philadelphia. Proper promotion may be able to build on that.

7. Garry Hunsicker, with 250 acres, said smaller farms cannot abide by the rigorous regulation and record-keeping of Good Agricultural Practices (GAP) certification. As a result, some groceries such as Wegman's won't buy from them. All of the farmers said federal and state regulations, in general, make it expensive to farm.
8. Seiple said the break-even point for farmland is \$2,000 to \$3,000 per acre, while most farmland in the region is selling for triple that and more.
9. Farmers said a single tractor can cost more than their homes, taxes have gone up and land prices have skyrocketed, while the price of most food commodities has barely tracked inflation, Seiple said. "Crayola is paying \$50,000, with bonuses and vacation and people leave work at 5. Why should a farmer stay in the business?"

Chris Colitas -- "My 17-year-old wants to stay in the business, but we're not sure if he can. If you can't afford to do it, the only alternative is to sell. Succession is a big problem".

Stephen Hunsicker -- "My Brother is at Keystone Cement, where he gets 4 weeks vacation. We can never do that."

Seiple said, "If you can't make a living, anything the government does is just a band-aid."

10. Several farmers own some land but rent more. Unangst owns 199 acres and rents 35 in Moore Twp. Colitas owns 10 acres and rents 25 acres.

What Will Help?

- Increased farmland preservation prices. All farmers agreed with that.
- Better promotion of farms that sell direct to consumers. The municipalities can use their existing resources -- utility bills, website, street signage -- and add to it paid broad-based promotion programs through other media.
- No devaluing farmland through zoning. This was a big one among the farmers.
- Install a farmland purchase program like the one used in Moore Twp., where they buy farmland, preserve it through farmland preservation program, and then auction it off at a fair price to farmers willing to work it. East Allen is considering a version of this through a referendum on the May ballot.
- Farmland Trust, (offered by Czapp). Municipality or other entities create a foundation that would buy farmland and sell it at a fair price to farmers willing to work it.
- Offer GAP certifications assistance to small farms.
- Eliminate the state death tax that makes it difficult to leave farms to children.

What Will become of this farmland in 15 years?

Every farmer in the room said they still expect that their families will be farming it.