

# Town of Shawangunk

New York

Executive Summary



## **Farmland Preservation Plan**

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## **Introduction**

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As the face of agriculture changes nationwide, and very specifically in the Hudson Valley, agriculture in the Town of Shawangunk is affected by many outside factors. The intent of the Town of Shawangunk Farmland Preservation Plan (The Plan) is to ensure that agriculture in the Town can survive and prosper with the support of the Town and its citizens.

An example of such change comes from new initiatives to “buy local” and the recent USDA “Know Your Farmer, Know your Food” campaign, which are supporting significant growth in demand for locally and regionally produced agricultural products. Shawangunk’s location of less than two hours from the nearly insatiable New York City market – as well as the broader metropolitan area and the Hudson Valley – makes new agricultural endeavors a reality.

Yet, high land values and pressure from development mean that farmers are hard pressed to purchase existing farmlands to expand operations or to start anew. Because of regional land economics, young and beginning farmers are often forced to start operations on small lots that are frequently close in proximity to non-farm neighbors or with less than optimal soils.

This Plan encourages the Town to support such grows in ways no previously conceived.

## **Agriculture in the Town of Shawangunk**

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The Town has a total area of 56.5 square miles, the Wallkill River flows through the eastern half of the Town. The western half (Walker Valley) climbs the slopes of the eponymous mountains. Shawangunk’s natural terrain is characterized by cliffs, crevices, steep slopes, and numerous ravines in the western portion of the Town. These natural features have made development in the area difficult, but facilitate preservation and conservation efforts. The eastern portion of the Town is characterized by favorable agricultural soils in broad river valleys and hilly terrain, which favor both agricultural production and residential development.

Community surveys and meetings expose a strong connection between the residents of Shawangunk and its long standing agricultural heritage. The desire to maintain agricultural activity in the face of growth is nearly universal among farm and non-farm residents. In terms of residents, the quality of life elements that most often draw new residents are the rural character of the area and the accessibility of agricultural operations, such as the region’s many orchards, wineries, and roadside stands.

Based on records from the Town assessor’s office, there are 8,772 acres of agricultural land on the tax rolls in Shawangunk. Nearly 3,000 acres of the Town’s agricultural land is used for field crops such as wheat, hay, dry beans, corn, and oats. Nearly 1,500 acres can be found in horse farms with the balance in varied uses, the largest of which are livestock (pasture); dairy; and orchards.

Agricultural soils, which are the life blood of agricultural operations, are widely distributed in the Town with concentrations of high productivity soils in the eastern half of the Town (east of the hamlet of Wallkill). The uplands, west of the hamlet of Wallkill, have a lower density of high productivity class soils which makes them more suitable for hay production, pasture, grapes, and forest products. With this variety of soils, the entire Town is suitable for some type of viable agricultural or forestry use.

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With growth in non-traditional agriculture on the rise in the Town of Shawangunk, the Town recognizes that soils may not be the best, or only, criteria for evaluating land resources. Within Shawangunk, operations such as raised bed organic market gardening and grass-fed meat and dairy operations are a testament to this trend. Based on interviews, local organic farmers may value proximity to markets more than previously-determined "good agricultural soils," and are prepared to "build" the soils over several years of time. This may present opportunities for larger farmsteads to attract new farmers through partial development deals, which can sell a portion of the farmstead to a farmer at less than market value.

### **Development Places Pressure on Agricultural Land Use**

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Not unlike other areas in the United States, Shawangunk's agricultural lands are challenged by population growth and the trend of young families and baby boomers to move away from the city center to larger homes on rural lots. This pressure, though seemingly slow due to its dispersion, has a strong affect on agricultural viability. The effects are often felt first by farmers, who find it more difficult to farm due to higher traffic loads or due to increased parcelization of land. It is often hard for the community to feel the same effects of dispersed development particularly since Shawangunk has maintained an image as a tranquil community with a desirable quality of life.

Population trends, household structure, and demand for housing are often good measures for assessing how development is proceeding and therefore, how it may affect agriculture. Within Shawangunk, this pattern demonstrates an all too common theme whereby the area around the village of Walkkill, the historic population and housing center of the Town, shows little growth with the bulk of growth occurring in outlying areas. By example, within a one-mile ring around the village, the number of owner-occupied units declined two percent between 2000 and 2009. On the other hand, growth rates of owner-occupied units within the greater five-mile radius was ten percent between 2000 and 2009 and is expected to be as high as nine percent between 2009 and 2014. This pattern is indicative of sprawling rural development which is driven by Shawangunk's proximity to Orange County, a high growth suburban county; proximity to New York City; and generally low housing prices.

This pattern of development and its associated infrastructure are often incompatible with agriculture. It often leaves those pursuing agriculture in a vulnerable position from a zoning, land acquisition, and production point of view by limiting access to fertile lands, making equipment transportation difficult, and creating an environment of conflict through trespass and nuisance claims. Communities, such as Shawangunk, can also be negatively affected as the cost to service new rural residents rises beyond the tax revenue generated by each additional unit. This adds to the cost of government services which in turn raises the cost of farming.

### **The Town of Shawangunk Supports Agriculture through Policy**

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The Shawangunk Comprehensive Plan serves as a development policy for the future of the Town of Shawangunk and is the primary tool to help guide future growth, while protecting the community's future resources. The Comprehensive Plan recognizes the challenges presented by this type of development and offers community derived solutions, many of which are supportive of agriculture.

The community vision represented in the plan was developed through a process that confirmed that local residents strongly identify with the scenic, cultural, and open space attributes of the Town. With this in mind, the Comprehensive Plan Committee adopted a vision of the development of the Town and

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how that development will contribute to the well-being of the community to include specific guidance to protect natural resources, promote agriculture and forestry, and protect open space.

Shawangunk’s zoning policies are a direct outgrowth of the Comprehensive Plan and are guided by its deep rooted links to its agricultural heritage and natural resources, as well as links to other towns surrounding the Shawangunk Mountains and to the mountain range itself. Thus, policies are directed toward the conservation, preservation, and sustainability of the Town’s natural resources, heritage areas, and agricultural land. Zoning policies are also guided by zoning instruments developed by higher levels of leadership in the State. Legislative enactments from the State of New York declared that it is an important State policy to provide for open space and to conserve, protect and encourage the preservation of agricultural lands and other natural and ecological resources.<sup>1</sup>

Within the Town’s zoning code, there are exemplary, if not underutilized, code elements that could be effectuated to improve agricultural development opportunities. Key among these is Section 177-17 which allows for incentive zoning. This underutilized zoning provision allows developers to avail themselves of several development benefits, such as higher density, lower road frontage requirements, and decreased setbacks. Protections of open space and provision of public services are the general incentive requirements offsetting the increases allowed in density.

Collectively, the Town’s planning and zoning processes set the regulatory stage for community growth and development, while supporting agricultural activity. The Farmland Preservation Plan extends this reach to provide directed support to the agricultural industry in the forms of agricultural land preservation programming, enhancement of zoning and land use controls for agriculture, and support the economic vitality of agriculture. A summary of these recommended actions is provided below.

### **Farmland Preservation Recommendations**

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Farmers in the Town of Shawangunk share the Town’s interest in conserving critical natural resources, particularly its working lands. There are however, significant challenges in developing a specific farmland preservation program at the Town level that include cost, administrative burden, and development of local expertise. With these challenges in mind, the Farmland Preservation Plan recommends targeted actions that fit the nature of farming in Shawangunk while matching the needs and resources of the broader community. These include:

1. Explore the development of a Town of Shawangunk Agricultural Land Preservation Program that provides a formal structure for long-term planning, coordination, and management of farmland preservation efforts. Such an endeavor must incorporate the unique geographic and cultural situations facing Shawangunk.
2. Create a Shawangunk Strategic Farmland Map to be used as a strategic planning tool by the Town, Ulster County, and State of New York. Such a map can help Shawangunk decide where to start with limited funding to permanently protect their most valuable and threatened farms, where to work for zoning and land use regulation changes, and where to direct land trust donation solicitation. Such a mapping exercise is best coordinated on a regional or countywide basis to ensure that local efforts are not wasted or orphaned.
3. Support an update of Ulster County Agricultural and Farmland Protection Program to bring the Town up to date with local farmland preservation efforts and to establish the Ulster County

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<sup>1</sup> State of New York General Municipal Law § 247 and Environmental Conservation Law § 49-0301.

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Agricultural and Farmland Protection Board as the lead agency in land preservation programs in the County.

### **Zoning and Land Use Recommendations**

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Despite its rural nature, Shawangunk is quickly becoming a residential community rather than a farming community. The dispersed nature of development and the small geographic area of the Town make it difficult for the Town and land owners to make the best use of conservation techniques such as incentive zoning, cluster subdivisions and transfer of development rights. If development pressures rise and create the economic imperative to use conservation tools, the Town must be positioned to capture this advantage, without jeopardizing the future of working farms. The following recommendations are intended to support this transition in land use code.

1. Update zoning code and subdivision regulations to improve agriculture's ability to operate. Such a change would include an update of the Town's definition of agriculture as well as examining means to improve utilization of conservation tools such as cluster subdivision.
2. Support improvements to New York State Right to Farm provisions to provide additional protections to farmers from spurious claims made against sound agricultural practices. This type of additional protection often relieves pressure on operating farms from new residential neighbors.
3. Act on the New York Planning Federation Zoning Review. In 2008, the New York Planning Federation reviewed land use code in the Town of Shawangunk to assess its "agricultural friendliness." This recommendation suggests that the Town act to update its code according to the prescriptions given.

### **Economic Viability Recommendations**

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It is often argued that profitability at the farm level is the best form of conservation. The economic viability recommendations in this Plan reflect this sentiment with a particular focus on supporting young and beginning farmers as well as leveraging key regional resources such as tourism and the Town's proximity to large, urban markets.

1. Support a regional agribusiness incubator to serve as a catalyst to create new agricultural ventures and grow existing ones. The incubator will do so by providing networking, industry specific consultation, and access to capital and markets, as well as, leveraging regional resources such as the Ulster County Development Corporation and the Hudson Valley Agribusiness Development Corporation.
2. Create a virtual "farm-mart" for agricultural resources to act as an information hub for farmers and showcase Shawangunk's agricultural assets. The concept of a virtual "farm-mart" borrows on the idea of a hub as a center for innovation, interaction, and commerce, but on a hyper-local level. The farm-mart would be a living resource with peer reviews of local vendors and service providers, land and capital resources, and discussion forums for relevant current topics.
3. Support development of a micro-farm and small farm education and marketing network to enhance the working environment of this growing segment of agriculture. This recommendation would focus on creating or adapting programming to assist in the development of small farm enterprises in the Town to include providing assistance with business planning, marketing, and expansion.

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4. Support regional agritourism development as a means to leverage an existing regional tourism base for the benefit of agriculture. This recommendation suggests a regional approach to offering family, private, and corporate events; entertainment; and education on existing, operating farms and forestland. Agritourism development should build on the existing success of the Shawangunk area as a tourist attraction, including the existing farm venues, trails, parks, festivals/events, and natural assets. Leveraging these assets to create a series of promotions targeted at weekend trips, corporate events, and weddings would sustain existing farm operations or provide cash flow to further develop these businesses into diversified farm operations.

### **Implementation of the Plan**

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The Town of Shawangunk Farmland Preservation Plan provides a guiding vision for agricultural preservation and development in the Town, as well as a strategic direction for achieving those ends. Both the vision and strategy are based on long-held community interests, as well as the current economic realities of the agricultural industry.

Developing a process to accommodate change while keeping the Plan relevant will, therefore, be critical to the success of farmland protection efforts in Shawangunk. Developing a farmer-led committee to conduct an annual review of the Farmland Preservation Plan and to prepare an annual work plan for implementing the Plan elements is essential to maintaining the relevance of the Plan to the industry and community. This agricultural advisory committee would be officially created and charged with identifying the top two or three initiatives annually to be incorporated into the Town's agricultural preservation work plan. At a minimum, the annual work plan will include specific actions to be taken, a budget note, staffing requirements, and other information as needed.

If it is to positively influence the future of the agricultural industry, the Town of Shawangunk will require support and cooperation from its farmers, agribusinesses, neighboring jurisdictions, Ulster County and many others. Necessary support will come in many forms, ranging from funding to technical service provisions. The Shawangunk Farmland Preservation Plan provides a framework for developing these invaluable partnerships.