

## **X. Agriculture**

### **Introduction**

In 2007, Belchertown's Community Plan Steering Committee noted that action steps involving or supporting agriculture were scattered throughout the 2002 Community Plan. This new section consolidates these action steps and offers an opportunity to create new ones. It is designed to help convening groups, including the town's new Agricultural Commission, focus on ways that agriculture and related natural resource-based businesses can support the town's three Community Plan goals: (1) to maintain Belchertown's rural New England look and feel; (2) to manage residential construction to increase benefits to the community while lessening potentially negative effects; and (3) to evaluate and achieve business development that contributes to town life and mitigates potentially negative effects.

### **A. Overview**

Belchertown enjoys a strong agricultural heritage. The town was settled as a dispersed farming community in the early 1700s. Town affairs centered on a traditional New England town common and extended to several outlying rural villages. Despite the advent to two large state-funded projects, the Belchertown State School and the Quabbin Reservoir, crop and livestock farms and forestry operations in outlying areas have helped maintain Belchertown's rural character over the years. Even today, as the town accommodates rapid population growth and suburbanization, residents prize what remains of the town's "rural look and feel."

Thriving farm and forestry businesses can help promote Belchertown's Community Plan goals in a number of ways. Maintaining our town's rural New England character, mitigating negative effects of residential construction, and fostering appropriate economic development can all be enhanced by the presence of successful natural resource-based businesses. They protect and maintain open space, they are aesthetically pleasing, they make productive use of land while serving an important growth management function, and they place a very small burden on town services. In short, Belchertown can make significant and affordable progress toward achieving Community Plan goals by encouraging and maintaining a healthy farm and forestry industry.

### **B. Goals and Policies**

Belchertown is fortunate in both the number and variety of its current agricultural and forest product businesses. As of 2009, over 4,200 acres of agricultural and woodland are enrolled in Chapters 61 and 61A programs (see Table 10.1 in Section C). The policies described below were developed during the community vision phase of the Community Plan project. They are designed to both support our natural resource-based businesses and to help Belchertown take positive steps toward achieving its three Community Plan goals.

In one of its first steps toward Action Plan implementation, the Town of Belchertown voted to establish a nine-member Agricultural Commission in 2006. It was encouraged to do so by a state-wide initiative promoting formation of town-based agricultural advisory groups, and by an action step of the 2002 Community Plan, "*Appoint an Agriculture Economic Development Council*", that was referred to twenty-six times in the plan. The new commission is completing an inventory of these enterprises and is encouraging townspeople to buy locally by publishing an annual "*Guide to Belchertown Farms*." (Annual updates of the Agricultural Commission's "*Guide to Belchertown*

*Farms*” will be published and made available on the Commission’s web page.) The farms listed in the commission’s 2008 guide reflect the diversity of agriculture found in our community.

Belchertown also has two influential research and educational agriculture operations, the Cold Spring Orchard Research and Education Center of the University of Massachusetts, 391 Sabin Street ([www.coldspringorchard.com](http://www.coldspringorchard.com)), and the New England Small Farm Institute, 275 Jackson Street ([www.smallfarm.org](http://www.smallfarm.org)).

The Belchertown Agricultural Commission has also launched its own web pages on the town’s website (<http://www.belchertown.org/committees/agcomm/>), reviewed and become informed about the provisions of Chapters 61, 61A and 61B (which affect how farm and forest land is valued for tax purposes), reviewed local zoning bylaws and proposed changes to make the town’s zoning more accommodating to agriculture, and has sponsored and hosted several farmer meetings and educational programs. Commission members are committed to continue fulfilling its mandate to inform, support, and collaborate with local agriculture in ways that can help secure its place in Belchertown’s future landscape. They have agreed to be guided by the town’s Community Plan by supporting the following goals and policies:

**Goal 1: To maintain Belchertown’s rural New England “look and feel.”**

Policies related to agriculture for Goal 1:

- Support and promote the development of agriculture and forestry industries as a means of protecting and maintaining Belchertown’s rural “look and feel.”
- Support Community Plan action steps that protect and maintain the town’s natural and cultural resources.
- Support Community Plan action steps that protect and maintain the town’s open space and recreation resources.
- Support Community Plan action steps that enhance appropriate economic development initiatives.

**Goal 2: To manage residential construction to increase benefits to the community while lessening potentially negative effects.**

Policies related to agriculture for Goal 2:

- Support and promote development of agriculture and forestry industries as a means of protecting and maintaining open space.
- Support Community Plan action steps that encourage planned development that protect unique natural and cultural features, and incorporate preservation of open space, recreational features and other amenities.
- Discourage use of toxic lawn chemicals and importation of exotic landscaping plants by educating residents about alternatives.
- Encourage development of zoning, sub-division and other land use tools to discourage development in outer, rural and agricultural areas.

**Goal 3: Evaluate and achieve business development that contributes to town life and mitigates potential negative effects.**

Policies related to agriculture for Goal 3:

- Support and promote development of agriculture and forestry.
- Identify other businesses and activities that support the maintenance of open space, such as horticultural research, fishing, hunting, horse riding and cross-country sports.

### C. Inventory

Completing and maintaining an inventory of Belchertown's agricultural, forest products, and related natural resource-based enterprises is a high priority Agricultural Commission undertaking. Information about local participation in Massachusetts' Chapter 61 tax abatement program, provided by Belchertown Assessors, is a good indicator of our town's natural resource-based land use, as most actively managed farm and forestland is in the program.

**Figure 45: Acreage of Land Enrolled in Chapters 61, 61A, and 61B**

<b>CLASS</b>	<b>PARCELS</b>	<b>ACRES</b>
Chapter 61 – Forestry	105	2,740
Chapter 61A – Agriculture	71	1,500
Chapter 61B – Recreation	56	741
Mixed Use	106	2,468
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>338</b>	<b>7,449</b>

Source: Belchertown Assessors, May 2008

The Massachusetts Department of Agricultural Resources' Agricultural Preservation Restriction (APR) program offers another important means of protecting our town's farmland. This voluntary program enables landowners to sell the development rights of their farmland to the Commonwealth in perpetuity, assuring that the land will never be developed and will remain actively farmed. To date, two Belchertown farms have sold development rights to the APR program. The former Cole farm off Franklin Street, just north of Bondsville, includes 114 acres of protected land; the former Atkins farm, contiguous to the UMass Cold Spring property off Sabin Street, includes over 250 acres of APR land. Though these farms have since been sold, the new owners bought the property for the agricultural value only knowing the land cannot be developed.

**D. Analysis** (this section is under development by members of the Belchertown Agricultural Commission and will be made available as an addendum to the revised Community Plan).

## E. Implementation Actions

I.D.	Action	When Initiate	Remarks:	*Leadership [Others who should be involved]
AG-1 <i>(Part of old H-5)</i>	Research and develop incentives for landowners to keep their land in Chapters 61, 61A and 61B (forestry, agriculture, and recreation).	2009	Assessors are pressed to release Ch. 61 land from favored status if not actively used for forestry or agriculture. Landowners must have knowledge, tools, and markets to keep land active in agriculture and forestry.	*Agricultural Commission (AC)
AG-2 <i>(Part of old ED-10)</i>	Inform newcomers that they are moving to a farming-friendly town.	2009	Communication through the AC website.	*Agricultural Commission (AC)
AG-4 <i>(Part of old ED-3)</i>	Visit all owners and operators of agricultural and agriculture-related businesses. Ask and listen carefully for specific ways the community could help the continued viability of these enterprises.	2009	The Ag. Comm. has embarked on a community agriculture outreach initiative. Contact with all ag business owner-operators is a high-priority Commission goal.	*Agricultural Commission (AC)
AG-5 <i>(New ED-7; Old ED-12)</i>	Work with Quaboag Valley Business Assist. Corp., NESFI and others to encourage eco-tourism to local farms and other open space destinations in town.	2009		*Agricultural Commission, [QVBAC]
AG-6 <i>(Old ED-8)</i>	Support the UMass Cold Spring Orchard and NESFI as major contributors to the town's agricultural base.	2009	Formal acknowledgement of these relationships would enhance effectiveness of this strategy, and would increase public awareness of these institutions and what they provide to the community.	*Board of Selectmen, [Agricultural Commission (AC)]
AG-7 <i>(Part of old H-5 and LU-14)</i>	Appoint a town-NESFI liaison to work with the AC to attract and retain farming professionals.	2009	Coordination is currently informal. Formalizing appointment would enhance effectiveness of this strategy.	*Board of Selectmen, [Agricultural Commission (AC)]