

Calais Agriculture Task Force Report

The Agriculture Task Force was established by the 1998 Calais Town Plan. The task force consisted of three members, Greg Johnson, Brent Lilley and Max Gray, appointed by the Select Board and three members, Davis Cherington, Cathy Kashanski and Dan Smith, appointed by the Planning Commission, for a total of six members.

The task force was charged with identifying possible means to maintain viable agriculture in town and to report back its findings to the Planning Commission. Specifically, the town plan states: "It is important to protect and maintain farming and forestry as important and traditional uses of our land. The productive agricultural and forest lands are being threatened by development pressures and a variety of economic forces. Agricultural lands are particularly vulnerable to encroachment and conversion because they are generally level, cleared and on good building soils."

One of the goals of the town plan is to "maintain the viability of the town's agriculture and encourage a diversity of agricultural uses". The plan calls for creation of an Agriculture Task Force, which should "determine if the zoning ordinance should be amended to establish an agricultural district overlay... and study ways to help farmers and to encourage new agricultural or land-based enterprises."

The task force held its organizational meeting on January 28, 1999. Succeeding meetings focused first on identifying all properties in present or past agricultural production in Calais and then winnowing down this broad list to an inventory of the significant agricultural properties and their locations in town. Properties were categorized based on their present use as working agricultural enterprises and their potential, whether or not in current production, to support enduring agricultural enterprises in the future.

This review focused more on the historic record of production for the property than on the technically defined soils quality and soils capability, although soils were taken into account, as well. The task force excluded from consideration properties used solely for forest-related operations including timber management, Christmas trees and maple sugar production. Properties were also identified with regard to their participation in the existing state and local programs designed to maintain agricultural land in production. These include the Calais Tax Stabilization Program, the Vermont Current Use program, and the Housing and Conservation Trust Fund program for the purchase of development rights and town taxation contracts. The Committee's list is attached as Appendix A to this report.

The task force had maps made to allow for visual documentation. These maps identify every known property in town presently in agricultural production by type of production and identify whether the properties are included in the Current Use Program. The maps also identify soils types throughout the town. The maps are attached as Appendix B to this report.

The task force reviewed a number of possible strategies for maintaining viable agriculture in town. Following are the strategies discussed and conclusions reached by the task force with regard to their utility.

A) Agricultural Overlay District

As noted above, the task force was charged specifically with determining whether to recommend that an agricultural overlay district be adopted as part of the town's zoning regulations. The task force decided that it could not make such a recommendation. The mapping process revealed that the town's agricultural properties are spread throughout town rather than localized in a specific area. This means the overlay district would in effect have to apply to the whole town, rather than be limited to a particular discrete or localized area. As a result, the task force had to confront the underlying issue of the appropriateness of compulsory zoning and land management. Faced with this larger issue, the task force could not agree to recommend the establishment of an agricultural district for town zoning.

B) Purchase of Development Rights

The task force did reach consensus that the purchase of development rights is a viable means for the town to protect its farmland. The task force recommends that interested residents of Calais meet to consider the establishment of a 501(c)(3) local land trust. The task force expects the land trust would seek Select Board, Planning Commission and Conservation Commission endorsement and would refer to the list of compiled properties below in planning its work. This local organization would partner with the Vermont Land Trust and seek funding from the state Housing and Conservation Trust Fund, which otherwise might not focus on Calais properties.

C) Tax Relief

The review of town farm properties revealed that property taxes remain a severe stress point for the maintenance of land in agricultural production. Current use taxation is an obvious help in reducing the tax pressure, but the homestead tax remains high and the tax on qualified land is still burdensome for large parcels. It is recommended that the Select Board and Planning Commission follow-up on the task force's work with a more comprehensive assessment of the ongoing impact of property taxes on land use in town.

The task force also recommends that the Planning Commission and Conservation Commission send a letter to the Select Board and School Board emphasizing the relationship between high taxes and the need to subdivide land especially for those who have been farming. The task force felt these town and school representatives should consider how taxes affects the ability of residents to maintain large, undeveloped, often agricultural lands when making budget decisions.

D) Other Agricultural Enterprises/Land-Based Business Ideas

In addition to protecting those operating farms remaining in Calais, the task force considered means to promote other agricultural operations, including those that are more on a hobby, small business or supplemental income scale. Following is a list of ideas generated by the task force for how to proceed with promoting land-based enterprises.

1) Do a survey of all farm (including hobby farm and other large (80 or 90 acres and greater)) landowners in Calais. Some survey questions might include: what forms of agriculture do they have on their land?; are they interested in any assistance or support the town can provide such as hosting a meeting or workshop to learn how conservation easements work?; could they use help in mapping their land for Current Use enrollment?; do they want information on matching landowners who want to lease their land for hay to larger farms that need the hay?; would they attend a workshop on raising sheep, goats, turkeys, heifers, or one on how to start a specialty food business?...

When the survey is distributed, it would include a cover letter that explains the purpose of the survey, the history of the agriculture task force, and information on earlier efforts and expressions of interest by townspeople to protect agricultural land.

2) Provide a brochure for prospective and new buyers of property in town, as well as current landowners, that outlines the town's attitude toward the maintenance of agricultural land as specified in the Town Plan. The brochure could include information about the Current Use program, the Vermont Land Trust, the town tax stabilization program, and Land-Link.

3) Organize meetings or workshops on topics in which several landowners or even one large landowner is interested.

4) Find funding and pay for professional assistance (lawyer, forester...) for landowners interested in selling development rights or enrolling in Current Use.

5) Develop a resource list organized by topic (such as raising animals, growing fruits, producing organic milk...).


6) Produce a poster or pamphlet that could go in the general stores, the feedstore, post office bulletin board and schools featuring products and services available in Calais. The poster could highlight Calais land-based goods and services but include others as well. "Buy Close, Buy Calais" - something catchy.

7) Celebrate or feature some of the Calais agricultural enterprises as part of the leaf season tours.

Conclusion

The Calais Agricultural Task Force determined once again that the Town of Calais has strong interest and resolve in promoting working agricultural enterprises and in maintaining its agricultural heritage. The task force also, once again, confronted the difficulty in preserving land through zoning practices. As alternatives, the task force recommends that the Town pursue the purchase of development rights, and community action to promote the viability of agricultural enterprises.

For the Task Force



Daniel Smith, Chair