

SUMMARY OF COMMUNITY CONTEXT

The following provides an overview of strengths and opportunities that have emerged from the process of developing this plan, as highlighted in the Community Profile, Economic Profile, Analysis of Important Farmland, Farm Friendly Assessments and Toolbox, and engagement with the municipalities, stakeholders, and community members through the development of this planning process.

AGRICULTURAL ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

STRENGTHS AND OPPORTUNITIES

- Onondaga County is in the top 10 counties for all agricultural sales in New York State.
- Onondaga County is one of the top agricultural producers of poultry, eggs (#3) and dairy (#9).
- The CNY Regional Market provides a centralized location for reaching diverse markets.
- Numerous large institutions are sited in Onondaga County to provide a steady market for farmer products.
- Workforce development programs that relate to agriculture exist through CCE, BOCES, RISE, etc.
- Tech startups/industries may provide new opportunities for the agricultural sector.
- New crops (e.g., cannabis, greenhouse crops) can provide increased revenues for farmers.
- Biodigesters can provide supplemental income if managed effectively.
- Solar energy development can provide supplemental income to farm families.
- Farm operations are highly efficient, and operators bring a wealth of business knowledge.
- Technology is always improving to maximize efficiency.
- Local businesses collaborating (e.g., distribution providers sharing transportation costs to ship produce to NYS) provide efficiencies that can keep prices down for local producers.
- New facilities can provide packaging opportunities for producers of multiple scales to provide food to local markets.
- Funding mechanisms for producers and agribusinesses do exist (e.g., cooperative agreements, granting programs) to alleviate capital costs for individual operators.
- Strong land base, great soils, plentiful water for irrigation.

ISSUES AND CHALLENGES

- The price of food is often fixed, while the costs of farming continue to increase.
- Institutions are not very adaptable to the seasonality of local agriculture. Also, different institutions can have different packaging needs.
- Not all farmers have broadband internet yet, which is more important than ever with the rise of robotics, drones, internet sales marketing via social media, and other technological advances.
- It will be more difficult to source migrant labor through the H2A program if it not incentivized competitively with other states.
- New overtime pay laws will put a greater labor cost burden on the agricultural community.
- Fluctuating expenses combined with increasing production costs create tight margins.
- Increasingly advanced machinery can create financial and staffing burdens for farmers.
- Value added production typically has limitations (eg. organic dairy markets).

- High property taxes in New York State increase costs for farming.
- Lack of packaging, freezing, and distribution facilities limit economic opportunities for local producers.
- Limited local food-based industries currently exist in Onondaga County.
- Dairy consumes much of the County's agricultural land, limiting the viability or expansion of other food product sectors, such as fruits or vegetables.

PROTECTION OF AGRICULTURAL LAND

STRENGTHS AND OPPORTUNITIES

- Multiple resources incentivize farmland protection, including the FPIG program, CREP program, and collaboration with local land trusts.
- Development pressure to convert farmland can be lessened through farm-friendly land use tools.
- Commercial solar development can bring in steady revenue streams that supplement agricultural operations.
- If panels are carefully sited on marginal lands or combined with agricultural uses, solar development can be an asset to agricultural operations.
- Open farmland, particularly on steeper slopes and hillsides, are highly important for protecting water quality and providing natural habitat, as well as provide scenic vistas.
- Protecting floodplains and wetlands can provide supplemental income/benefits to farmers.
- Communities are knowledgeable and interested in protecting farmland.
- New York State funding is available for the preparation of county and municipal farmland protection plans.

ISSUES AND CHALLENGES

- While resources exist to incentivize farmland protection, not enough resources exist to meet the demand, leaving farmland susceptible to land use conversion.
- Once development occurs on areas of farmed prime soil, it is very difficult, if not impossible, to restore the soil back to its original state.
- Due to ongoing residential and commercial expansion, Onondaga County has lost much of the agriculture that originally fed its population.
- New demands for renewable energy generation have given rise to utility scale solar development consuming rural lands and increasing agricultural land values.
- Commercial solar energy projects are often sited on active agricultural lands, removing prime agricultural land from production, and fragmenting farmland clusters.
- Opportunities to successfully pair solar developments with agri-voltaic solutions or "co-agriculture" are limited.
- Within the farming community of Onondaga County, there may be a lack of awareness of farmland protection services provided (e.g., FPIG and CREP).
- Municipal regulations related to agriculture vary and may not be conducive for farmland protection.
- Expansion of infrastructure can facilitate sprawl and work against farmland protection goals.

- Roadside housing along rural roads is a more incremental form of sprawl, but one that is potentially just as significant in terms of acreage that it removes from production and increases the potential for conflict.
- Proximity to the Syracuse urban area creates inherent challenges for balancing development needs with farmland protection.
- Limited funds are available from the state for agricultural conservation easements, and the program is highly competitive.
- Land trust partners and local governments are limited in their ability to accommodate demand for farmland protection/conservation easement programs.
- Local funds are limited for agricultural conservation or programming.

LINKING LOCAL AGRICULTURE TO THE COMMUNITY

STRENGTHS AND OPPORTUNITIES

- Onondaga County's farms are in relatively proximity to urban populations and major transportation routes, making it relatively easier for residents and visitors to access and connect with farmers.
- Agritourism increases awareness of Onondaga County's agriculture, which in turn, can increase local food sales and tax revenues for rural communities.
- National and local resources exist for farmers interested in conducting agritourism activities.
- The increasing availability of broadband internet is enabling farms to reach new audiences.
- Local interest and incentives for agritourism have increased in recent years.
- Onondaga Grown has provided a framework to market local agriculture to residents.
- Municipalities are tailoring local zoning regulations to address the emergence of agritourism uses within rural areas.

ISSUES AND CHALLENGES

- Despite existing programs, there is always need for more awareness about the importance of local food systems with the public, and how to obtain local food.
- Food deserts, caused by the consolidation of grocery stores and decreased number of farmers markets, result in a lack of access to fresh food to individuals that lack mobility options and further disconnect people from local agriculture.
- Agritourism destinations that become "agri-tainment," or more focused toward entertainment than agriculture, can cause frustration and conflict with nearby farmers and neighbors (e.g., managing parking and crowd sizes).
- Introduction of larger scale commercial land uses affiliated with agritourism can create new burdens on public infrastructure in rural areas.
- Public awareness of farming is often oversimplified and lacks understanding of the difficulties and complexities of agriculture.
- Both "non-farming" and "farming" skills are required to develop links between agriculture and the broader community, and not everyone has both.

- Unintended consequences can occur between different interest groups, causing friction between the farming and non-farming community (e.g., well placement on adjacent properties can interfere with manure spreading on crop fields).
- Farmers can be difficult to contact as a single “farming community” (i.e., no single contact list exists that is useable for programming).

NEXT GENERATION OF FARMERS AND LABOR

STRENGTHS AND OPPORTUNITIES

- Agriculture is a growing and vibrant sector of Onondaga County’s economy and can offer local career opportunities.
- There is a growing interest in farming and models/programming available to connect interested new and beginning farmers to producers.
- Many individuals in immigrant/migrant communities already have a lot of agricultural know-how and want to farm. With the decreasing number of current farm operators, there is an opportunity for land ownership to transfer to farmworkers in order to maintain a diversity of landownership within the agricultural community.
- Opportunities exist to further link existing refugee workforce training programs with the agricultural industry.
- Regional workforce development in warehouse distribution, drone technology, and other tech industries may also attract new workers to the tech-oriented agricultural sector.
- There is a growing interest in farming and models/programming available to connect interested new and beginning farmers to producers.
- Onondaga County hosts or is in proximity to several nearby colleges and universities that offer higher education in agriculture or agriculturally related industries.

ISSUES AND CHALLENGES

- Limited opportunities exist currently to provide mentorships from active farmers to create high quality pathways for agriculture related careers.
- It will be more difficult to attract migrant labor through the H2A program if New York is not as competitive as other states for workers.
- New overtime pay laws will put a greater labor cost burden on the agricultural community.
- Limited access to land, higher startup costs, and increasingly unpredictable and extreme weather are barriers that future generations of agriculture entrepreneurs will face more than their predecessors.
- Farms endure low profit margins making it difficult to innovate and take risks. Additionally, the price of food is too low, while costs of farming continue to increase.
- Farm succession is a major challenge as young people move out of farming as a career; meanwhile, farms are getting consolidated into fewer operations and absorbing small or mid-size farms.
- Small and mid-size farms have difficulties competing with the name recognition, efficiencies, land base, and other offerings of larger farms.

- For new, minority, veteran, and women farmers, the path to a successful farming career can be more challenging, such as difficulties finding financing to purchase land, confronting historical racial and gender inequities, and transitioning back into civilian life after military service.
- Transportation access to agricultural work from urban areas is limited.

AGRICULTURE AND THE NATURAL ENVIRONMENT

STRENGTHS AND OPPORTUNITIES

- Onondaga County is gifted with plentiful water and productive soils.
- Tools, programs, and funding exist (nationally and locally) to balance agriculture with the natural environment.
- Public awareness on the intrinsic relationship between farming and the environment is increasing thanks to internet resources and GIS mapping tools.
- Scenic vistas provided by farmland and nearby steep slopes also enhance agritourism experiences.
- Protecting floodplains and wetlands on farmland can recharge soils, provide habitat, and improve water quality.
- Agriculture is a land use that can benefit from occasional flooding, unlike most land uses.
- Biodigester technology provides agricultural operations opportunities to earn additional revenue and decrease environmental pollutants.

ISSUES AND CHALLENGES

- Increased stormwater runoff from more severe storm events, along with more dramatic temperature fluctuations and unpredictable dry spells, is happening and will continue to increase due to climate change, placing strain on farmers.
- Water quality issues are caused by both residential/commercial and agricultural runoff, leading to conflict and confusion.
- A decrease in pollinator populations and increased invasive species is occurring, negatively impacting agricultural productivity.
- The loss of prime farmland makes farmland more expensive and less productive overall.
- Limited funding and staff capacity exists to protect environmental resources and administer grants at the rate to make programs effective for the landowners.
- Implementation of soil management best practices on farms must continue to protect water quality.
- Air quality issues during times of manure spreading can create conflicts with neighbors.
- Precision technology that can improve environmental impacts can be very costly and create barriers for farmers to implement.
- The management of manure is a challenge for Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations (CAFOs), given trends toward larger scale farming operations and longer transport distances. Manure storage lagoon structures are required by NYS DEC regulations for CAFOs to safely and effectively store manure for calibrated application as a critical nutrient source for cropland.