




American Farmland Trust
SAVING THE LAND THAT SUSTAINS US



ERIE COUNTY:

Farming

ON THE

Urban Edge





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We are committed to remaining in agriculture, but without the Marilla PDR program, we probably wouldn't have stayed in this area because of the development pressure.

We wouldn't have become involved with the PDR program if other farms hadn't also participated. We're not interested in being an island of agriculture in a sea of development.

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– Leonard Janiga,
Erie County Farmer

Western New York's Erie County has a long-standing agricultural tradition. Blessed with fertile soils and a moderate lake climate, Erie County farms produce an abundance of products: milk, beef, poultry, greenhouse plants, vegetables and fruits – including the juice grape farms along Lake Erie.

Farms are critical to Erie County's economy and quality of life. More than 20 percent of the county's land base is used for farming. Still, Erie County farms are challenged by their "urban edge" location. From 1969 to 1996, Erie County lost 27 percent of its farmland due mainly to sprawl from poorly planned development.

At the same time, Erie County's large urban and suburban population benefits from its proximity to local farms. Erie County's fresh fruits and vegetables are sold at roadside stands, farm markets, stores and restaurants throughout western New York. Local events and festivals draw millions of people each year to celebrate agriculture.

Erie County Farms Support the Local Economy

Communities often fail to recognize the economic value of their farms. In 2000 alone, Erie County farms sold more than \$89 million in products. They also employed nearly 1,900 people. Several food-processing plants – including Sorrento Lactalis and Upstate Farms/Bison Foods – are located in Erie County, where they are close to a source of raw agricultural products. According to the United States Department of Commerce, county food-processing businesses employed almost 6,100 people in 2000.

Farms also support many local businesses, including hardware and equipment dealers, feed stores, trucking companies, veterinarians and other service providers. In 2000, Erie County farmers spent more than \$30.4 million on animal feed, new livestock, seeds, fertilizers and petroleum products alone.

Erie County Farmers Are Stewards of the Land

Farmers have been the stewards of Erie County land for generations. County farms maintain scenic landscapes. They also protect wildlife habitat and guard environmentally sensitive areas like meadows, woodlands, wetlands and streams. Farms are a major land use in the county's three main watersheds: Eighteen Mile Creek, Buffalo Creek and Cattaraugus Creek. Watershed farms can help protect the region's water quality by following soil and water conservation plans, participating in New York's Agricultural Environmental Management (AEM) program and using environmentally sound farm practices.



Erie County Supports Its Farms

Communities in Erie County increasingly recognize the need to support farm businesses and protect farmland. The following programs and initiatives help strengthen county agriculture.

- **Right-to-Farm**

In 1999, Erie County enacted a local right-to-farm law. Right-to-farm laws strive to minimize conflicts between farmers and their nonfarming neighbors. They also help farmers who have been following generally accepted “sound” agricultural practices to defend themselves against nuisance lawsuits. Several Erie County towns, such as Marilla, have enacted their own right-to-farm laws as well.

- **Planning for Agriculture**

In 1996, Erie County developed an agricultural and farmland protection strategy called “Farms for the Future.” The strategy’s goals are to strengthen county agriculture; help communities approach open space and farmland preservation issues; preserve county farmland; and increase public and government support for agriculture.

In 2001, the towns of Brant, Evans and North Collins received an Erie County Regionalism Grant to develop a three-town farmland protection plan. The plan’s regional approach is important, because high-quality soil resources and contiguous parcels of farmland are not confined by political boundaries.

- **Agricultural Economic Development**

Local initiatives that improve farm profitability help farmers stay in business and keep their land in agriculture. The town of Brant has undertaken a farmland viability study to revitalize existing agribusinesses and attract new ventures. In Eden, county officials provided funding for a hydro cooler that will increase the shelf life of local vegetable crops, allowing area farmers to compete with producers from other regions.

- **Purchase of Development Rights (PDR)**

Several Erie County towns have active programs that purchase development rights on farmland, while other communities in the county are considering land protection programs. Purchase of development rights (PDR) programs pay farmers to permanently conserve land for agriculture by placing legally binding restrictions, known as conservation easements, on their property. The farmland owner retains all other rights of ownership, and the land remains private and on the tax rolls.

A combination of federal, state, county, town and private money may be used to purchase development rights. Typically, a town or a local land trust holds the conservation easement and monitors protected land. Landowners may contribute to the process by agreeing to sell development rights for less than the appraised value. In Erie County, the towns of Marilla and Amherst have active PDR programs. The town of Clarence has passed a \$12.5 million bond act for open space and farmland protection.



Farming in Erie County:

Maelen Farms

As farmers in Erie County, Leonard and Mabel Janiga have become accustomed to change. In 1999, they sold their dairy herd and dedicated their 300-acre Marilla farm to growing hay, soybeans and corn. In 2000, the Janigas bought 90 acres of farmland that had been protected by a conservation easement, allowing them to afford the purchase. The town of Marilla and the Western New York Land Conservancy are helping the farm protect an additional 84 acres.



**For more information
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What More Should We Do to Support Local Farms?

Erie County and its towns have already done a great deal to strengthen agriculture, but more work must be done.

As a county, we should continue to:

- Recognize the importance of agriculture to the local economy and environment
- Highlight agriculture in economic development efforts and land use plans
- Engage the Agricultural and Farmland Protection Board in important county agricultural issues

As towns, we should:

- Reflect the importance of agriculture in comprehensive plans
- Develop farm-friendly land use policies and incentives
- Include farmers when reviewing local policies that may affect agriculture

As individuals, we should:

- Educate ourselves about local farms by taking farm tours or visiting farm markets
- Support local farms by buying local farm products
- Be more understanding of farm practices and slow-moving farm vehicles
- Inform local, state and federal officials about the importance of supporting farmland protection and farm viability initiatives



American Farmland Trust is a private, nonprofit farmland conservation organization founded in 1980 to stop the loss of productive farmland and to promote farming practices that lead to a healthy environment.

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