

# KEEP IT GROWING!

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AN AGRICULTURAL AND FARMLAND PROTECTION PLAN FOR RENSSELAER COUNTY

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*American Farmland Trust*

AND

*Rensselaer County Cornell Cooperative Extension*

FOR THE

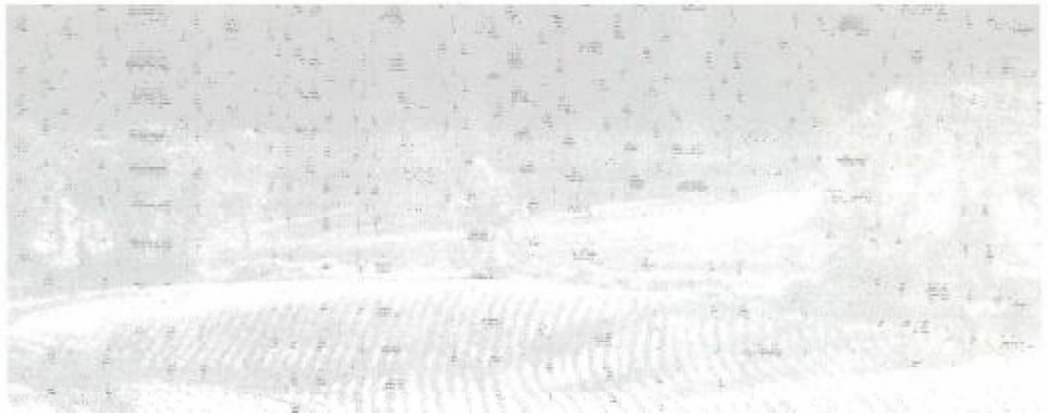
*Rensselaer County Agricultural and Farmland Protection Board*

## Keep It Growing!

### MISSION

*To develop strategies to preserve, support and enhance Rensselaer County's agricultural industry and resources.*

*New York State Department of Agriculture and Markets provided funding for this plan with a matching grant from Rensselaer County. Cornell Cooperative Extension, Rensselaer County Economic Development and Planning, Rensselaer County Environmental Management Council, Rensselaer County Soil and Water Conservation District, USDA Farm Service Agency, USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service and the Rensselaer-Taconic Land Conservancy have provided technical assistance. The Board also was assisted in developing the plan by its consultant, American Farmland Trust, whose Northeast Regional Office is located in Saratoga Springs.*

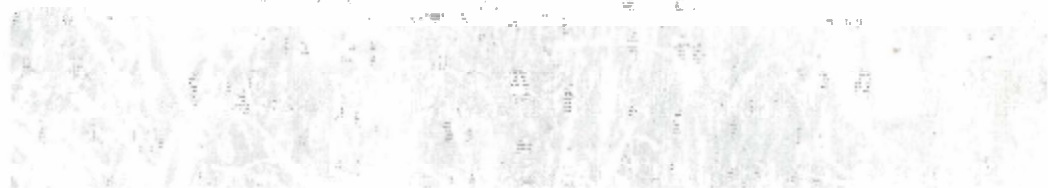


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May 29, 2001

Dear Rensselaer County Residents:

A healthy and sustainable agriculture industry in Rensselaer County benefits all Rensselaer County residents in many ways. Land in agriculture helps keep the taxes in a community low because farmers pay up to four times more taxes in relation to the services they receive as compared to residential property owners. Additionally, farmers in Rensselaer County spend over \$23 million in supplies and services to generate nearly \$30 million from the sale of farm products. Finally, lands in agriculture protect water quality while providing beautiful scenic landscapes that make Rensselaer County a popular tourist attraction and an appealing place in which to live and work.

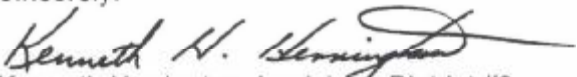
Over the last four decades, 80,500 acres in Rensselaer County have been taken out of active agricultural use. This trend has resulted in the designation of Rensselaer County as part of one of the ten most threatened agricultural regions in the nation. It is therefore in the best interest of all Rensselaer County residents that steps be taken now to promote, preserve, and enhance agricultural resources throughout the county.

This Rensselaer County Agricultural Farmland Protection Plan outlines actions that can be taken to ensure the viability and sustainable future of agriculture in Rensselaer County. By becoming familiar with the plan and assisting in its implementation, residents, elected officials, and government agencies can help support Rensselaer County farmers now and into the future.

At the same time, farmers have much to gain from joining forces with non-agricultural interests. In doing so, farmers can receive support and recognition for the many services they provide.

On behalf of Rensselaer County farmers, I would like to thank you for your support of our family farms and farmland. We all need to work hard together to Keep Rensselaer County Farms Growing!

Sincerely,

  
Kenneth Herrington, Legislator District #3  
Chairman, Agricultural and Farmland  
Protection Board

# Benefits Local Farms Provide Rensselaer County

## **Economic**

### *Money for the community*

Farm businesses pour capital into community businesses when they buy local equipment, supplies and insurance. Every year, farm businesses in Rensselaer County spend more than \$23 million for supplies and services to produce \$30 million in sales. Overall, farms have an economic impact of more than \$74.6 million in local economic activity.

### *Property tax surplus*

Population density is extremely low on farmland. On average, one farm family lives on more than two hundred acres. Farmland actually pays more in taxes than it requires in municipal services. Cows, corn and trees do not attend school or drive the roads. For every dollar of tax revenue, farmland produces an average surplus of 71 cents. Taxes on residential uses, in comparison, consistently fail to cover costs, requiring 27 cents more in municipal services for every dollar paid in taxes.<sup>1</sup> Residents require education, utilities and other costly amenities that farmland does not.

### *Goods and Services*

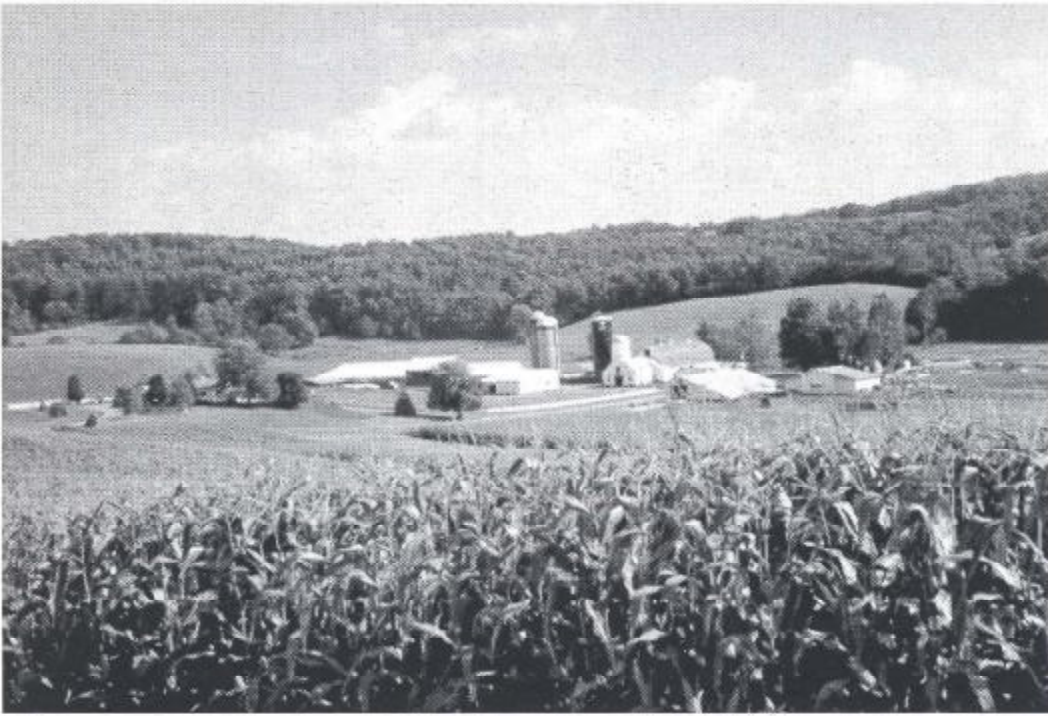
Farms provide locally grown fresh produce, bedding and nursery stock, hay and recreational services such as riding stables. Farmers also help nonfarmers maintain large properties by cropping and mowing the farm fields.

### *Tourism*

Farms provide the scenic countryside and rural character that draw tourists to our communities.



<sup>1</sup> See pages 23-24.



## Environmental

### *Clean Water and Air*

Well-managed farmland protects soil, air and water resources—preventing flooding, absorbing carbon, providing clean groundwater recharge and producing oxygen. The county's 25,000 acres of farm woodlots also slow and filter storm water runoff into streams and underground aquifers.

### *Fish and Wildlife Habitat*

Crop and forestland on area farms provide habitat for a diverse array of wildlife. Farm ponds and streams also are home to a variety of fish and waterfowl.

## Aesthetic

### *Open Space*

Scenic rural vistas provide a sense of peace and tranquility in contrast to crowded, hectic urban areas.

### *Recreation*

When permitted by farm owners, cropland, forestland, streams and ponds provide good hunting and fishing. Farmers often open their property to hikers, horseback riders, cross country skiers, nature lovers and photographers.

## Heritage

### *Local History and Legacy*

The very first settlers were farmers. Historic farmhouses, barns and the mosaic of farm fields provide a window into our agricultural history. Farmers today retain a historical understanding of the science and art of farming—the flow of the seasons and the science of soils and climate—reinforced with modern practices.



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# Executive Summary

Rensselaer County's family farms are extremely diverse. Some are small, part-time operations, while other county farms work more than a thousand acres. County farms produce a bounty of products from milk to vegetables and flowers to livestock—even buffalo and orchids.

The talent and dedication of Rensselaer County farmers have made agriculture an integral part of the county's economy, landscape and culture. County farmers are blessed with fertile soils, a moderate climate and abundant water. In addition, our farmers are supported by an extensive network of government agencies, agricultural organizations and agribusinesses.

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### **Benefits of Rensselaer County Farms**

Each year, Rensselaer County farmers produce nearly \$30 million in farm sales and create many seasonal and full-time employment opportunities. Farms help drive the local economy, since many of the dollars spent by farm operations stay within the county.

Rensselaer County farms also help lower the property tax bills of county residents, since farmland requires few community services. Studies across New York state have shown that for every dollar generated in tax revenue, farmland requires an average of only \$0.29 in local services. It is often said, "cows and crops don't go to school." That means that having more farms in your community contributes to lower taxes!

Rensselaer County farmers also are stewards of our county's land. Well-managed farms maintain water quality, protect wildlife habitat and provide recreational opportunities for residents. Our family farms maintain the county's attractive countryside that draws tourists and adds to the quality of life for residents. Agriculture—the focus of local fairs and festivals—also is integral to the culture of our rural communities.

### **Rensselaer County Farmers Face Challenges**

Rensselaer County farmers, as do farmers across the nation, face increased challenges: low commodity prices, high overhead costs, a tight labor market, government regulations, and consecutive years of bad weather. In addition, development pressure threatens Rensselaer County's family farms.

Farmers face increased pressure to sell their land when farm profit margins are tight, the public undervalues agriculture, and developers are willing to pay exorbitant amounts for farmland. In the past 40 years, Rensselaer County has lost 80,500 acres, nearly half of its farmland, to other uses. American Farmland Trust has identified Rensselaer County—because of its agricultural productivity and high level of development pressure—as part of the tenth most threatened agricultural region in the nation.

### **Rensselaer County Takes Action**

There is good news about Rensselaer County farming. Many programs and policies are currently in place to support Rensselaer County family farms. In addition, county farmers



can benefit from their proximity to large urban markets such as New York City and Boston. However, Rensselaer County's agricultural industry needs a strategy to take advantage of such opportunities and to strengthen its farms.

Responding to the challenges facing its farmers, Rensselaer County has created a plan that recommends actions to improve farm viability and protect farmland. This plan arises from the visions of many farmers, agency staff, conservation and agricultural organizations and community members dedicated to supporting Rensselaer County farms.

The seeds for this plan were sown in the summer of 1999, when the county received a grant from the New York State Department of Agriculture and Markets. Since then, the planning process has encompassed an array of activities: public outreach activities at the Schaghticoke Fair, a farm tour for community leaders, mapping of important agricultural resources, surveys of farmers and farmland owners, and a series of public meetings about county agriculture and farmland protection efforts. Throughout the planning process, important strategies to enhance farm viability and protect farmland have been identified.

Chapters 4, 5, 6, and 7 of this plan recommend 20 major actions for the county and towns to take in promoting agricultural and farmland protection efforts. These actions address four areas: economic development, business environment, farmland protection and public education and outreach. The plan also lists more than 100 specific strategies that the county and towns can take to implement the 20 recommendations.

## For Immediate Action

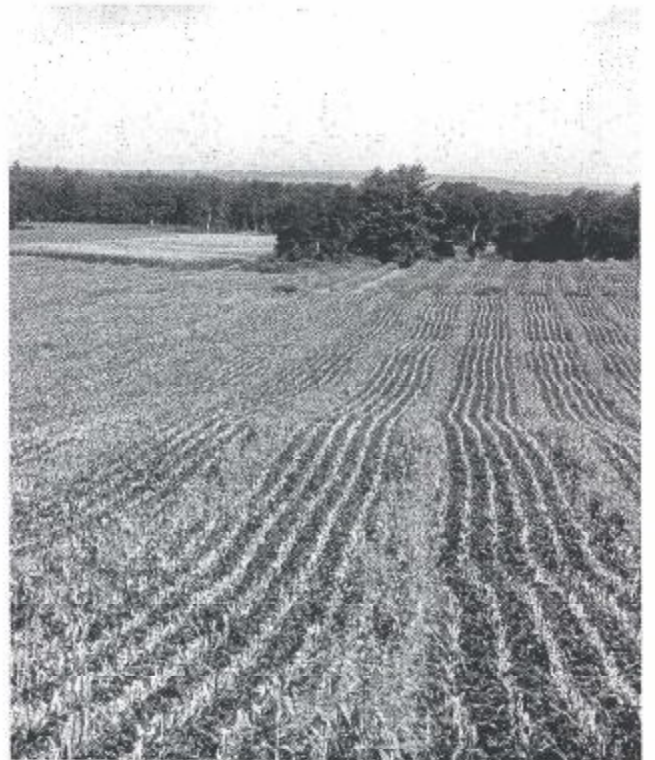
The following steps have been selected for immediate action. They should yield tangible results and significant benefits.

1. ***Improve communication and neighbor relations between farmers and nonfarmers.*** Create a "Neighbor Relations" packet for farmers to give to nonfarm neighbors. Provide realtors and lawyers with maps of agricultural districts, information about right-to-farm legislation, disclosure notices and fact sheets that describe typical farming practices. Create and distribute a brochure for realtors to give to potential buyers that explains the realities of living in an agricultural district.
2. ***Urge towns to strengthen or pass right-to-farm laws and erect right-to-farm signage.*** To demonstrate support for farming and prevent unnecessary lawsuits, adopt a resolution urging towns to pass or strengthen right-to-farm laws that require alternative dispute resolution and early disclosure notices. Assist towns in the production of signs that advertise town right-to-farm laws.
3. ***Promote the property tax advantages of farmland.*** Promote the property tax advantages of farmland as compared to residential development. Develop a package that can be presented to towns and residents clearly stating the fiscal benefits of farmland.
4. ***Encourage respect for farm property.*** Encourage respect for farm property by preparing information materials about the dangers and impacts of trespassing on farm property. Encourage the County Clerk and Department of Motor Vehicles to distribute information materials about the impacts of motor vehicle trespassing on farmland.
5. ***Extend economic development to the expansion and retention of farm businesses.*** By hiring an agricultural economic development specialist, the county can extend economic and business development efforts to the agricultural sector.
6. ***Expand diversification and marketing efforts.*** Focus economic development efforts on expanding diversification and marketing opportunities for Rensselaer County farms. Implement an Agricultural Entrepreneurial Assistance Program that provides training, business planning, marketing, management assistance and funding to farmers, modeled after the Rensselaer Entrepreneur Assistance Program (REAP). Explore grants and funding opportunities for agricultural economic development projects.

7. ***Expand efforts to promote Rensselaer County farm businesses and farm products.*** Expand efforts to promote Rensselaer County farm businesses and farm goods by working with local retail stores, such as Price Chopper, to purchase and promote products “Grown in the Capital District Region.” Work with local institutions such as state offices, hospitals and schools to utilize food produced locally or regionally. Expand cooperative efforts with neighboring counties in the areas of tourism, promotion and marketing of agricultural products and services.
8. ***Conduct outreach at the county and local level.*** Conduct outreach to town and county officials and landowners by making presentations on the importance of agriculture and agricultural and farmland protection tools. Cornell Cooperative Extension, American Farmland Trust, USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service and the AFPB will develop and sponsor the presentations.
9. ***Support the purchase of development rights on farmland.*** Support the purchase of development rights (PDR) on farmland. Conduct outreach efforts regarding PDR and assist eligible farmland owners in completing applications. Study possible funding sources for the local match to PDR projects and urge towns to consider funding mechanisms for local farmland protection efforts.
10. ***Bolster education and outreach efforts.*** Bolster county outreach efforts to the nonfarm community that promote the economic, environmental and social benefits of agriculture. These efforts could include holding a *Keep It Growing!* Farm Tour for local officials and community leaders, increasing positive media coverage of local agriculture, establishing an active spokesperson’s group and securing funds for high quality outreach efforts.
11. ***Expand the farmer-to-farmer network.*** Expand networking within the farm community by creating and hosting a list serv/bulletin discussion board and Web site wherein Rensselaer County farmers can pose and answer questions as well as promote joint marketing and buying opportunities.
12. ***Develop a directory for agriculture.*** Develop and distribute a directory of existing agricultural and non-agricultural technical assistance providers for Rensselaer County farmers. Make the directory available on CCE’s Web site.
13. ***Improve labor availability.*** Improve labor availability by exploring the use of shared labor among farm enterprises. Assist farmers in obtaining affordable employee benefits such as health insurance. Help farmers meet the housing and bilingual needs of immigrant laborers.
14. ***Improve the business environment needs of the farm sector.*** Improve the infrastructure needs of the farm sector by encouraging the county and towns to review bridge, road and wire specifications to ensure compliance with requirements for farm vehicles. Monitor discharge from road repairs to prevent damage to farm fields. Include farmers in county transportation planning to ensure that their needs are addressed. Advocate that utility companies supply three-phased power to farm operations.
15. ***Increase assistance to farmers in the areas of environmental plans and wildlife control.*** Expand technical and possible financial assistance for farmers to develop essential CAFO/AFO Comprehensive Nutrient Management Plans that meet state and federal regulations and qualify farmers for agricultural environmental programs. Also provide technical assistance to help control wildlife damage.
16. ***Promote tax relief incentives.*** Towns can promote tax relief incentives in various ways. Utilizing agricultural assessment values when taxing farmland for service districts such as fire and ambulance is a relatively easy measure to implement.

By becoming familiar with the plan and assisting in its implementation, residents, elected officials and government agencies can help support Rensselaer County farmers now and into the future.

# Background



## CHAPTER ONE

# Why Keep Farms Growing in Rensselaer County?

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Rensselaer County's family farms produce a diverse array of fresh farm goods—including milk, vegetables, flowers and livestock. Rensselaer County farms also safeguard many economic and natural resources, such as the county's clean drinking water and air, scenic natural landscapes and open space, and economic livelihood.

As do farmers throughout New York, Rensselaer County farmers face increasing challenges. Low commodity prices, high costs of business, a tight labor market, development pressure and consecutive years of bad weather threaten our farms. When Rensselaer County farms go out of business or are sold for development, our communities lose the many resources they provide. An important first step toward keeping our farms in business is recognizing what we gain by supporting farmers and protecting farmland.

### **Keeping Farms Growing—**

#### *Sustains the economic impact of agriculture*

Agriculture is a major industry throughout the state and in Rensselaer County. New York farmers produce more than \$3 billion annually in gross receipts, and Rensselaer County farmers produce nearly \$30 million in annual farm sales. Farms provide employment, generate local economic activity and add diversity to the county's economy. Many of the dollars generated by family farms are spent at local businesses across the county, helping support local economies. Strengthening the farm sector helps ensure that agriculture remains a source of income and employment for the county economy.

#### *Safeguards farmland*

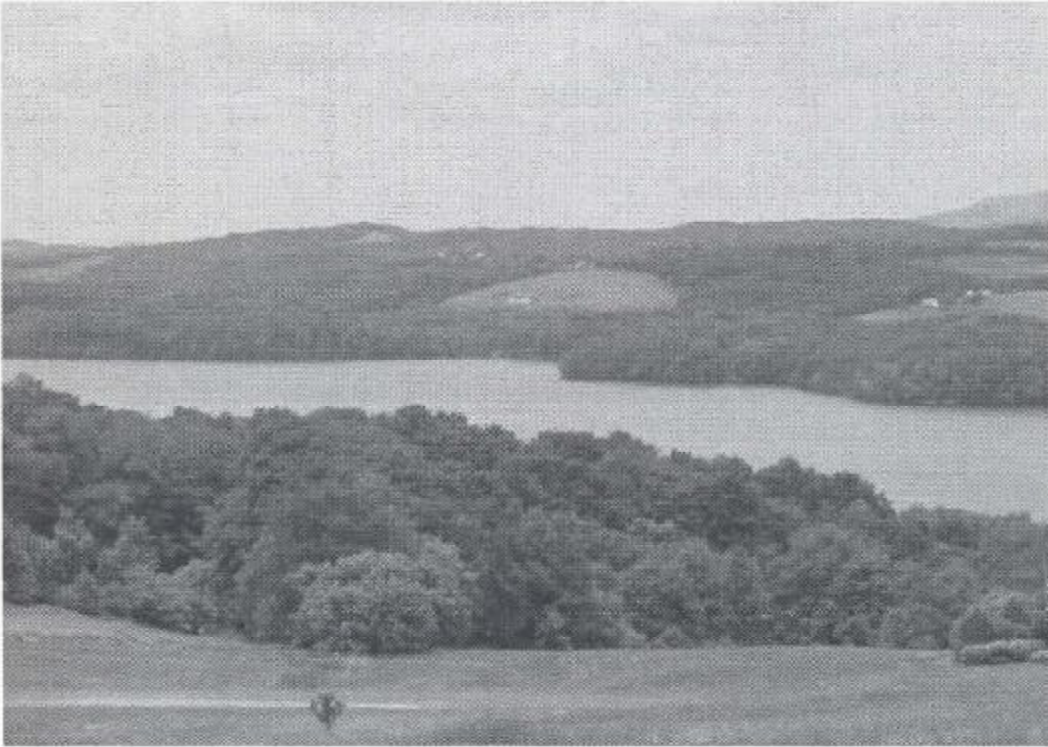
Farms support nearly 99,000 acres of farmland—approximately 23 percent of the county's land base. The majority of Rensselaer County farmland is in production; cropland covers 59,400 acres and pastureland 7,200 acres. Farm woodlots alone make up 25,000 acres of county land. Protecting Rensselaer County farmland guarantees that a critical farming resource will be available in the future.

#### *Provides an alternative to sprawling development*

Communities pay a high price for allowing unplanned growth. Scattered development contributes to traffic congestion, air and water pollution, loss of open space and increased demand for costly public services. Protecting farmland provides a hedge against fragmented suburban development while supporting a diversified economic base. Protecting farms can make the difference in efforts to contain unplanned sprawl.

#### *Keeps taxes lower*

By keeping land in agriculture, towns are better able to manage the cost of providing services to new residences. Numerous Cost of Community Services (COCS) studies show that farmland generates more in local tax revenue than it costs towns in services. COCS



## Why Keep Farms Growing in Rensselaer County?

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studies analyze revenues and expenditures on a land use basis, helping towns assess the costs to town and school budgets of development as opposed to other land uses.

In New York state, 15 COCS studies have found that farm and forestland cost an average of \$0.29 in municipal services for every dollar they create in tax revenue. By comparison, residential properties demand \$1.27 for every dollar of municipal revenue. While it is true that an acre of land with a new house generates more total revenue than an acre of hay or corn, farm and forestland require much less in public infrastructure and few community services—in fact, they actually provide a net tax gain for local communities.

### *Maintains water quality and wildlife habitat*

Protecting farmland can be an important way to maintain the water quality of our reservoirs, streams, rivers, lakes and aquifers. Well-managed farms often are considered a better land use for water quality protection, because agricultural activities generally create less nutrient and pollutant runoff than residential activities on a per acre basis. Septic system waste and failure, runoff from lawn chemicals and contamination from road salts, heavy metals and oil are well-documented causes of water pollution from urban and residential land uses.

In the New York City Watershed, officials have recognized that well-managed farms protect water quality better than residential uses. New York City now funds an easement program to protect farm and forestry land in the Catskill Mountain towns that make up most of the watershed.

Similarly, in Rensselaer County's Tomhannock Reservoir, efforts are underway to fund the establishment of Best Management Practices on farms in the reservoir watershed. The voluntary projects—made possible by federal Natural Resources Conservation Service funding and the New York State Environmental Protection Fund—will help maintain good soil and water conservation practices by area farms.

Farmland also provides habitat for wildlife, including many game species such as turkey, pheasant and deer. At the national level, farmland provides more than 70 percent of the habitat for America's wildlife.

*Preserves scenic landscapes, open space and quality of life*

Rensselaer County family farms provide the scenic landscapes that cover much of the county. The county's attractive countryside is a draw for tourism. Many visitors come to drive the pastoral country roads and visit farm stands. Agriculture also is integral to the culture of Rensselaer County—the focus of local tours, fairs and harvest festivals such as the Schaghticoke Fair and Goold's Harvest Festival.

## Why Rensselaer County Needs to Act Now

Rensselaer County's family farmers face intense economic pressure from national and international competition. Government food policies, environmental regulations and economic inflation all affect farmers' profitability. When farm profit margins are low, and developers are willing to pay far more than the agricultural value for farmland, farmers often feel pressure to sell their land. Unless Rensselaer County takes immediate action to support its farms, it is likely that development will occur and farmland will be lost. Once farmland is lost to development, it is gone forever.

Forty years ago, there were 1,150 farms in Rensselaer County and 179,500 acres of farmland—42 percent of the county's land base. Since then, Rensselaer County has lost 80,500 acres of farmland. By 1997, only 23 percent of county land was farmed, and much of the county's remaining farmland is in the shadow of suburban areas. American Farmland Trust has identified Rensselaer County—because of its high rate of farmland loss and amount of development pressure—as part of the tenth most threatened agricultural region in the nation.

Much more must be done to reverse the county's decline in agriculture. Local and state leaders must recognize that farm loss is a problem worthy of significant attention—including investment of fiscal resources and efforts to address the problem.

Greater support also is needed from Rensselaer County residents who want to maintain farms for scenic beauty, environmental benefits and rural character. Agricultural and farmland protection efforts will not succeed without the active, and united, participation of the county's farming and nonfarming communities, who must reach out to each other. By doing so, there will be broader understanding of, and support for, public investment in agricultural and farmland protection programs.

By developing this plan, Rensselaer County's Agricultural and Farmland Protection Board (AFPB) has taken the crucial first step in protecting county agriculture. This plan offers 20 recommended actions that are needed to address the challenges facing agriculture. Listed under each action are suggested measures to be taken by the county and towns in implementing the 20 recommendations.

### **Background**

Since the passage of the 1971 Agricultural Districts Law, New York state has enacted a variety of policies to confront some of the issues affecting agriculture. The landmark agricultural districts legislation was designed to shield farmers from some of the impacts of development: higher property taxes, increased nuisance suits, restrictions on agricultural practices and taxation on additional infrastructure. Agricultural districts contain right-to-farm provisions and provide protection from restrictive local ordinances. Perhaps most importantly, they allow for the assessment of farmland at its agricultural value rather than its value for development.

In Rensselaer County, agricultural and farmland protection activities date back to 1973, when the first agricultural districts were created. Rensselaer County farmers played a major role in their formation, organizing a total of eight districts that contain most of the county's important farmland. The county and state then ratified the districts. Every eight years, the county's agricultural districts review committee evaluates the districts and advises the county on their re-certification. The eight districts have since merged into six districts.

## CHAPTER TWO

# Agriculture in Rensselaer County

Agriculture is an important industry in Rensselaer County. The county's 459 farms—family owned and operated—contribute millions of dollars to the local economy, employ more than 700 full-time, part-time and seasonal laborers, and provide tax revenue profits to local budgets. They also maintain thousands of acres in farmland and woodland, providing many valuable non-market goods and services that are harder to quantify in monetary terms.

Many elements contribute to the success of Rensselaer County's agricultural industry: fertile soils, a moderate climate, abundant water and a rolling landscape. Slopes and soil conditions in the county are favorable for dairy and livestock production. Rensselaer County farms also produce more than 100 different crops—from alfalfa and asparagus to zucchini and zinnias.

The success of county agriculture also is due largely to the many talented farmers and farm families who make their livelihood from the land. Throughout the generations, these farmers have made extensive investments to improve their farm businesses and produce commodities for the market place. Rensselaer County farmers also participate in a wide variety of programs, available through agencies and organizations that help farmers strengthen their operations. In addition, an extensive network of area agribusinesses provides supplies and services for local farmers.

This chapter summarizes the economic contributions of Rensselaer County farms, and discusses economic trends affecting county agriculture. Unless noted, Census of Agriculture data from 1997 and preceding years were used in this report, providing a historical perspective of trends affecting Rensselaer County farms.

### *Economic Impact*

Each year, county farms generate nearly \$30 million from the sale of farm products. Dairy farms are the highest producers, responsible for nearly 60 percent of overall county agricultural sales. Nursery and greenhouse operations—a rapidly growing sector—produce another 20 percent of farm sales. Other major local farm commodities include cattle, grain crops, vegetables, hay and silage. Many specialty products are produced on county farms including organically grown produce, berries, sweet corn, apples, garlic, daylilies, buffalo, hogs, sheep, wool, maple syrup, fire wood, Christmas trees and fallow deer.

Production expenditures are the most significant agricultural contribution to the local economy. Rensselaer County farms directly spend more than \$23 million per year for supplies and services, generating a high economic multiplier effect. A complex support system of seed and grain companies, insurance agents, bankers, veterinarians, consultants, hardware stores, lumber companies and petroleum suppliers services local farmers. As farms purchase goods and services, they support many local businesses.

Rensselaer County farms provide the primary livelihood for farmers and family members on 200 full-time farms and are a source of income for 259 part-time farmers. In addition, farms employ another 731 full- and part-time employees and seasonal laborers.

Farms support local municipal budgets by providing a tax surplus for communities.

Why Keep  
Farms Growing  
in Rensselaer  
County?

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Studies consistently have shown that farmland provides more in tax revenue than it requires in services. For every tax dollar received from farmland—minus expenses for education and municipal services—farmland provides, on average, a 71-cent surplus. While agriculture may not generate large tax revenues, it provides a revenue surplus rather than a drain to local budgets.<sup>1</sup>

Farming also supports the county's economic well being in other important but less tangible ways. For instance, groundwater recharge and open space are just two examples (discussed in Chapter One) of the many non-market goods and services that local farms provide.

### *Family Farms*

Families form the foundation of Rensselaer County agriculture. The vast majority of county farms are family-run businesses, many of which extend back several generations. Nearly 84 percent of county farms are owned by an individual or family; 11 percent are held by partnership (which may be family owned); and five percent are family-held corporations.

In 1997, half of Rensselaer County farmers considered agriculture their principal occupation, a decrease of five percent from 1992. Approximately 40 percent of farmers currently work full-time on the farm. However, many farm families now depend greatly on off-farm employment for expensive health insurance benefits and to offset the current low profitability of agriculture.

Successful farms are built throughout a lifetime and over several lifetimes. Farmers in the county, on average, are 20 years older than the general public. In 1997, the average Rensselaer County farmer was 54.7. This is close to the national average of 54.3, and higher than the New York state average of 53.5. Currently, the number of New York farmers older than 65 is five times greater than the number of farmers under 35. Younger farmers will continue to be essential to the future success of family farms.

### *Agricultural Economic Trends*

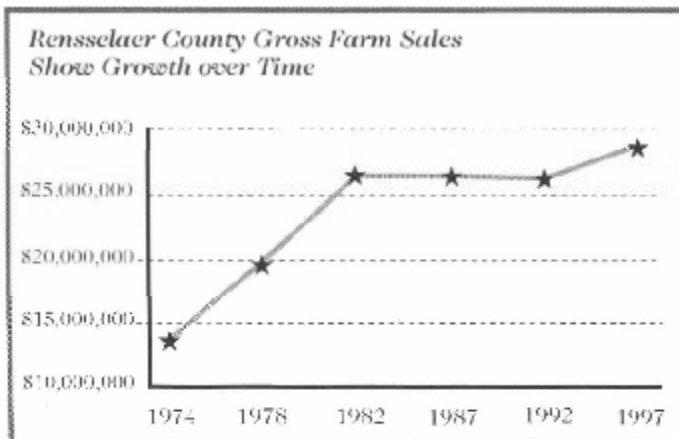
Between 1982 and 1997, Rensselaer County lost 132 farms, representing a decline in farms by one-fifth. Dairy farms declined by 51 percent between 1987 and 1997, with the loss of 76 farms. The high loss of dairy farms during this period is largely a result of the federal dairy farm buy-out program of the late 1980s to early 1990s. Overall, the decline in Rensselaer County farm numbers is consistent with the region. Despite tremendous farm consolidation, the economic impact of the county's agricultural industry continues to grow.

The average farm size in Rensselaer County is on the rise. In 1997, the average farm size was 216 acres—up eight percent from 1982. This trend toward fewer but larger farms reflects the national trend. In Rensselaer County, 122 of the largest farms own nearly 70 percent of the farmland. The number of farms larger than 1,000 acres has increased from seven in 1982 to 13 in 1997. These larger farms tend to rely heavily upon rental land as well.

### *Agricultural Sales*

Despite the decrease in number of farms, the market value of agricultural products sold in Rensselaer County has been increasing. Sales of agricultural products were \$28.7 million in 1997, up nine percent from 1992 and more than double the gross in 1974.

On average, sales of products per farm in 1997 were \$62,528. This amounts to a 28 percent average increase per farm, and a seven percent increase overall since 1982. For farms with sales of more than \$50,000, the average amount of sales per farm was \$240,000.



<sup>1</sup> See pages 19–21.



### *Agricultural and Farmland Protection Efforts*

In 1992, New York state amended the Agricultural Districts Law by passing the Agricultural Protection Act. Agricultural districts advisory committees were expanded and renamed as agricultural and farmland protection boards (AFPBs). The Agricultural Protection Act also set in motion the development of county agricultural and farmland protection plans. Counties who applied to the program were awarded matching funds of up to \$50,000 to develop the plans. Since then, 42 out of 57 counties have developed, or are in the process of developing, plans.

Agricultural and farmland protection plans play an important role in sustaining New York agriculture. Across the state, the plans have drawn attention to the importance of farming and to issues affecting the agricultural sector. They also have raised awareness about the need to integrate agriculture into economic and land use initiatives and have fostered community and government support for agriculture and farmland protection.

In the summer of 1999, Rensselaer County was awarded a grant to prepare this agricultural and farmland protection plan. By fall, a working group—spearheaded by Cornell Cooperative Extension and made up of farmers, county agencies and a land conservation organization—formed to work on elements of the plan. American Farmland Trust, a national farmland conservation organization with an office in Saratoga Springs, was hired as a consultant to assist county planning efforts.

With the completion of this plan, Rensselaer County and its towns became eligible for further state implementation funding—including grants to purchase the development rights on farmland and to improve farm viability.

### *Planning Efforts*

The development of the Rensselaer County agricultural and farmland protection plan involved numerous planning activities, including GIS mapping, surveys of farmers and landowners, outreach activities and analyses of trends in agriculture and growth patterns. The planning efforts culminated in a set of recommendations that will help maintain and strengthen the county's farm industry.

To facilitate the planning process, three committees were formed to focus on the areas of land use, economic development and outreach. Committee activities included:

**LAND USE** – Identified agricultural land use issues and developed recommendations. Developed an Agricultural Resource Guide and a presentation for town outreach meetings.

**OUTREACH AND PROMOTION** – Selected and implemented outreach activities. Developed an exhibit and banner for the 2000 Schaghticoke Fair. Created a logo and staged a farm tour event for legislators and community leaders.

**ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT** – Identified economic development opportunities in Rensselaer County for the agricultural sector. Provided assistance in creating the agricultural economic development specialist position. Developed a Beginning Farmer Guide.

Outcomes from planning efforts include:

**AGRICULTURAL DEVELOPMENT SPECIALIST POSITION** – Under the leadership of the AFPB, a new county specialist position was created to aid in plan implementation. This position grew from the realization that the plan's success hinges on having a qualified and committed staff person to implement its recommendations. The AFPB researched the establishment of agricultural development specialists in other counties and worked with the county legislature to establish a similar position.

**KEEP IT GROWING! FARM TOUR AND LUNCHEON** – The working group developed an informative bus tour of several local farms to give legislators and community leaders a first-hand view of farming operations and their importance in the local community. Farmers talked with tour attendees about the challenges they face and what can be done to enhance the agricultural industry.

Why Keep  
Farms Growing  
in Rensselaer  
County?

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Why Keep  
Farms Growing  
in Rensselaer  
County?

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**AGRICULTURAL AND FARMLAND PROTECTION CONFERENCE** – In January 2001, the AFPBs of Rensselaer, Albany and Schenectady counties co-sponsored a regional conference. More than 200 people attended the event, which featured presentations from New York and Massachusetts experts. Attendees included many farmers and town officials from Rensselaer County.

**AGRICULTURAL RESOURCE GUIDE FOR TOWNS** – The guide presents individualized information about local farms and farmland protection strategies for each rural Rensselaer County town. A listing of resources provides contacts for those interested in more detailed information.

**TOWN OUTREACH MEETINGS** – In the summer of 2001, the working group held five town meetings throughout the county to outline what towns can do to strengthen farms and stabilize the land base.

**GIS MAPPING OF AGRICULTURAL RESOURCES** – GIS maps were produced of farmland, soils, agricultural districts, significant natural resources and development activity. County and town maps now are available from USDA NRCS. The mapping system can identify key agricultural areas based on soils, significant natural resources, conversion pressure and other criteria.

**SURVEYS OF FARMERS AND FARMLAND OWNERS** – Three surveys were undertaken in winter 1999 and spring 2000 to gather information about county agriculture. Two were surveys of farmers. The first questionnaire gathered information from part- and full-time farmers about their future plans, issues affecting farming, and their interest in farmland protection tools. It was followed by a more in-depth survey of commercial farmers on issues related to business environment, taxes, rental land and plans for expansion and development. A third survey of farmland owners gauged their concerns and interests about renting land to farmers. Results from the three surveys were used to identify target issues and to create the foundation of the plan's recommendations. Survey results are summarized in Appendix B.

**AGRICULTURAL AND FARMLAND PROTECTION FORUM** – In April 2000, the AFPB sponsored an informational forum in Brunswick on various farmland protection tools. The program was well attended by farmers and landowners.

In terms of sales and the number of farms, dairy continues to be the largest sector of the county's agricultural industry. Dairy farms generated \$16.4 million in sales in 1997, accounting for 57 percent of Rensselaer County's total agricultural sales. Dairy farms comprise 17 percent of the county's total number of farms.

Despite a dramatic decrease of dairy farms in the past ten years, Rensselaer County has held its position in milk production and sales. Increased farm size and more efficient facilities have allowed farms to milk more cows with less labor. Increasingly, efficiency is becoming a necessity as low milk prices place many family dairies under pressure.

In sales, nursery and greenhouse products represent the second largest sector of Rensselaer County's agricultural industry. In 1997, nursery and greenhouse products captured 17 percent of market sales, producing \$5 million. The number of farms in this category increased a tremendous 40 percent from 1987 to 1997. Currently, there are 69 Rensselaer County farms producing nursery and greenhouse products. The direct sale of these products generates sales tax revenue for local communities.

The value of other major commodities produced by Rensselaer County farms in 1997 included cattle and calves at \$2.2 million, grain crops at \$2 million, hay and silage at \$1 million, and vegetables at \$1.2 million.

#### **Farms by Agricultural Sales**

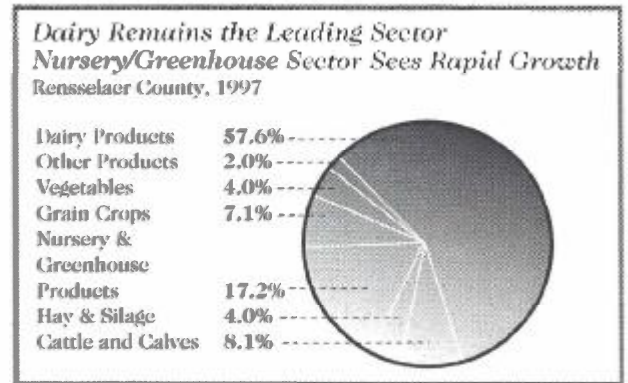
In relation to the amount of county agricultural products sold, a smaller number of farms are capturing a larger portion of the sales. In 1997, for example, nine farms sold at least \$500,000 worth of agricultural products. The nine farms had total combined sales of \$9.4 million. In contrast, 251 farms sold less than \$10,000 of agricultural products for a total of \$694,000 in sales.

The largest category of farms has sales of less than \$10,000. This category contains 55 percent of all farms, but accounts for only 2.4 percent of all agricultural sales. Farms with sales of \$500,000 or more make up two percent of county farms and account for 33 percent of all agricultural sales. This tends to be the trend in neighboring counties as well.

Like most counties in the Hudson Valley, Rensselaer County has a high percentage of part-time farms. In 1997, nearly 76 percent (352) of the county's 459 farms were part-time with sales of less than \$50,000. For those farms, agriculture tends not to be the primary source of family income. This group of part-time farms sold approximately \$3 million of products—10 percent of the total. Farms with sales less than \$10,000 increased by 12 percent. Part-time farms play an important role in the overall picture of Rensselaer County agriculture. They maintain a sizeable portion of the county's farmland, and their purchases help support larger farms and local businesses. Agricultural and farmland protection policies should consider the needs of smaller part-time farms as well as the needs of larger commercial farms.

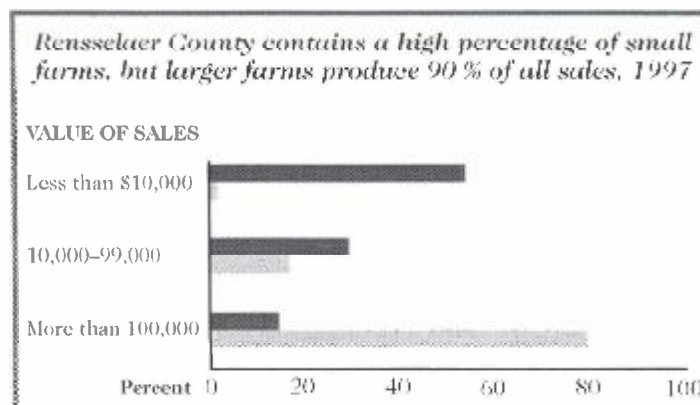
Although they make up only 23 percent of the county's farms, farms with sales of \$50,000 or more are responsible for the vast majority of agricultural sales. Most of the 107 farms in this category derive their primary income from farming.

The farm sector that saw the largest decline between



## Agriculture in Rensselaer County

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## Farms by Agricultural Sales

Rensselaer County, 1997

	1992	1997	Total Value of Sales 1997
Total	444	459	\$28,700,000
Less than \$10,000	224	251	694,000
\$10,000 to \$50,000	98	101	2,276,000
\$50,000 to \$250,000	104	79	9,590,000
\$250,000 to \$500,000	11	19	6,693,000
More than \$500,000	7	9	9,446,000

## Agriculture in Rensselaer County

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1992 and 1997 were farms with sales of \$100,000 to \$249,000. However, the two largest sales groups saw an increase in sales. County farms with sales of \$50,000 or more produced ninety percent of all agricultural sales.

### Farm Production Expenses

Rensselaer County farm production expenses totaled approximately \$23.4 million in 1997. This was an average of \$102,600 in expenses for each commercial farm (farms with sales of \$10,000 and more). Payment of farm expenses injects millions of dollars each year into the local and regional economy.

However, escalating expenses reduce farm profitability. Overall, farm production expenses rose 18 percent in the ten-year period between 1987 and 1997. Feed and "other" expenses contributed largely to the increasing costs. Farm labor, property taxes, repairs, maintenance and energy costs also represent a significant expense. "Other" expenses consist primarily of agricultural chemicals, contract labor, custom work, and miscellaneous expenses.

The recent trend of rising energy costs, particularly for fuel, has had a significant impact on the profitability of county farmers. Fuel costs for dairy farms directly increased by 47 percent from 1999 to 2000, according to the 2000 Northern Hudson Dairy Farm Business Summary. Rising energy costs also increase the costs of other inputs such as fertilizer and feed.

Escalating expenses and low commodity prices have created slimmer farm profit margins—a major challenge facing farm families. In 1997, net cash return per farm was \$28,900, much more than the statewide average of \$16,100. Such slim profit margins can evaporate quickly in an economic downturn, forcing generations of farmers off their land.

### Farm Employment

Overall, the number of hired farm laborers—mostly part-time and seasonal—increased 28 percent in Rensselaer County between 1992 and 1997. Of the 731 workers employed in 1997, 73 percent (535) worked fewer than 150 days. Part-

### Farm Production Expenses Totaled 23.3 Million

Rensselaer County, 1997

Feed for Livestock .....	17.2%
Hired Farm Labor .....	10.6%
Property Taxes .....	9.9%
Repair and Maintenance .....	9.4%
Energy and Petroleum Products (including electricity) .....	8.9%
Commercial Fertilizer .....	5.3%
Interest Paid .....	4.6%
Seed Purchased .....	4.0%
Livestock Purchased .....	3.6%
Other .....	26.5%

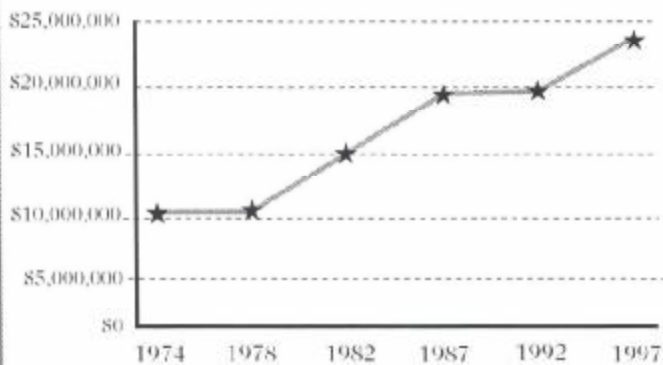
time and seasonal workers are becoming critical components of the agricultural economy, in part due to the increased number of nursery and greenhouse farms. The tight labor market—exacerbated by the struggling farm economy and competition from other industries—is a critical issue for Rensselaer County farmers, many of whom have become increasingly reliant on hired farm labor.

### Value of Land and Buildings

The total value of Rensselaer County agricultural land and buildings reflects a substantial investment of \$188 million. Average farm real-estate values have increased significantly in Rensselaer County. In 1997, the average estimated market value of land and buildings

### Farm Production Expenses Up Dramatically

Rensselaer County, 1974-1997



was \$407,172—twice the amount it was in 1974.

Unlike other businesses, farms cannot improve profitability by selling cropland or laying-off cows. Higher land and building values make it harder for farm families to carry the “opportunity cost” of farming. High land values are a considerable barrier to farm expansion. New farmers who wish to purchase farms often are forced to carry large debts and rent or lease farmland from nonfarmers because they cannot afford to purchase farmland.

## Farmland in Rensselaer County

### Farmland Trends

Approximately four decades ago in 1959, farms made up 42 percent of the county’s land base. Now farms occupy 23.6 percent of the total county land area (approximately 99,000 acres). In just forty years, Rensselaer County lost nearly half of its farmland.

Next to forestland, farmland is the second largest land use in the county. Farms currently occupy a land base equivalent to the size of North Greenbush, East Greenbush, Schodaek, Sand Lake and Troy combined. The 1997 census reflected a 6.5 percent gain in farmland, all of which was in harvested cropland. By far, this was the largest gain in comparison to neighboring counties and most counties in the state.

Rensselaer County has lost less farmland than other Capital District counties. Between 1982 and 1997, Rensselaer County lost 16 percent (18,650 acres) of its farmland. Albany County lost 29 percent; Schenectady lost 26 percent; and Saratoga lost 20 percent. In comparison to other Capital District counties, this may reflect Rensselaer County’s comparatively less development pressure, stronger farm economy and county efforts to maintain agriculture.

### Growing Conditions

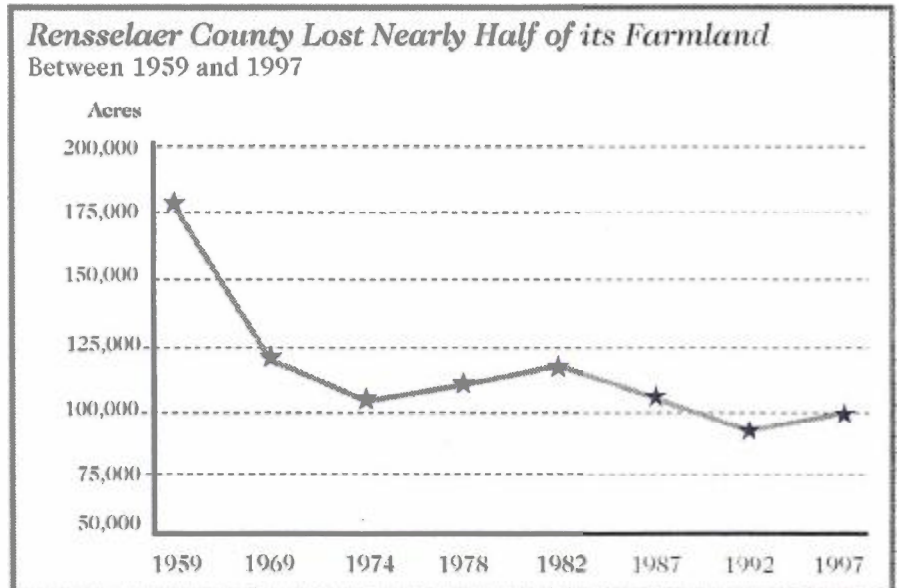
Rensselaer County’s moderate climate is favorable for corn production, an important crop for dairy farming. On average, natural rainfall is sufficient for most county crops, and irrigation is used only for high value crops. The county is drained by the Hudson River, streams are abundant and most farms have adequate water supplies. The county—especially its northern tier—also collects rain from summer storms since its highland receives storms from the Mohawk River Valley.

Fertile soils are scattered throughout the county in valleys and in flat and undulating plains. The majority of county farms are located where there are better soils—the northern tier, the Taconic Valley and in the southwest.

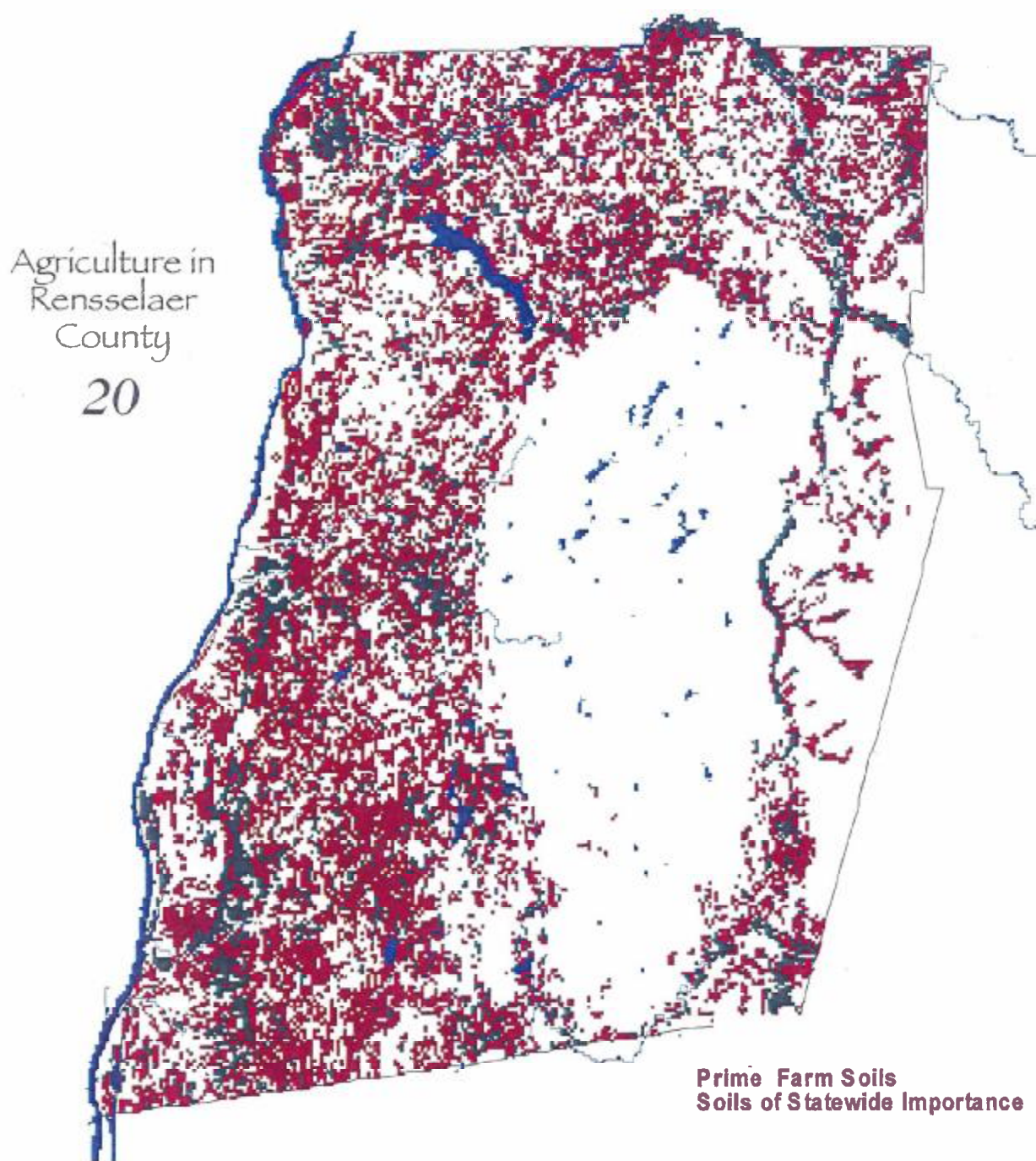
The better agricultural soils also tend to be those most easily “developed.”

Map 1 (see page 20) shows important Rensselaer County agricultural soils, including soils of prime and statewide importance. Prime soils are those with the soil quality, growing season and moisture supply to produce high yield crops. Rensselaer County prime farmland is concentrated in major valleys and on the nearly level plains of the western and central part of the county. Map 2 (see page 21) shows agricultural land in relation to forest and urban or built-up land.

The majority of Rensselaer County cropland has soils of statewide importance. These



**Productive Agricultural Soils in Rensselaer County**  
Based on attribute data from the NRCS SSURGO Soil Survey database



**Rensselaer County Agricultural and Farmland Protection Plan**

Map created for the Rensselaer County Agricultural and Farmland Protection Board by the Rensselaer County Soil & Water Conservation District from data provided by the NRCS - Troy Office.

### Land in Farms in the Capital District Region

(Acres) 1982 and 1997

	1982	1997	% Farmland Lost
Rensselaer County	117,612	98,965	16%
Albany County	82,788	58,782	29%
Saratoga County	91,445	72,928	20%
Schenectady County	24,405	18,168	26%

## Agriculture in Rensselaer County

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soils are nearly prime and are capable of producing high yield crops when managed with modern farming practices. County farmers successfully produce high yields on soils of statewide importance.

The towns with the largest percentage of farmland relative to their total land area are Hoosick, Pittstown, Schaghticoke, Schodack, Brunswick and Stephentown. The areas with high quality soils and high potential for crop productivity are also closest to the urbanized areas and intense development pressures. Towns such as Schaghticoke, Brunswick and Schodack contain large

portions of farmland that are directly in the path of development. The three towns are adjacent to urbanized areas and are bisected by major transportation routes. Land use conflicts in these areas are bound to intensify as development pressure increases.

The Route 7 corridor in the Town of Brunswick demonstrates the startling transformation that takes place in a community when agricultural land is lost to development. Here, development pressure has led to the conversion of large tracts of farmland to retail establishments, resulting in traffic congestion and the loss of rural character. Several large parcels of land adjacent to the retail strip are under increasing pressure from development. The next generation will decide the fate of these parcels.

Rural areas also experience the effects of sprawl in the form of single-family homes scattered on large lots and commercial strip development along highways. Nearly 90 percent of farmers surveyed felt that the development pressure on farmland in their towns has increased over the past five years. Chapter 6 discusses the effects of increased development pressure in greater detail.

A study of the Capital District Region shows that the pace of construction between 1986 and 1997 was twice the population growth-rate. During that time, the amount of "developed" land per person in the region doubled from what it was in the late 1980s.<sup>2</sup> Development trends in Rensselaer County are only expected to accelerate in the future. New water and sewer lines, improvements to I-90 and the potential high-speed train will hasten development and drive sprawl into more rural areas of the county.

### Cropland

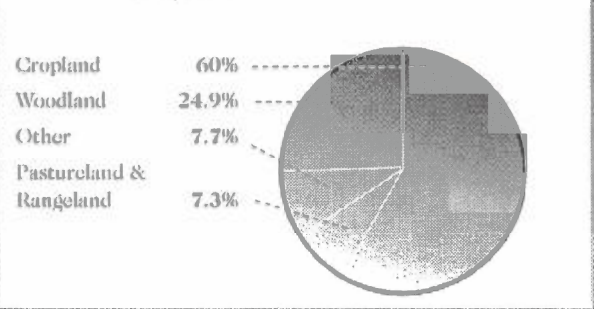
Rensselaer County farmland consists mainly of cropland. In 1997, more than 60 percent of county farmland was cropland—slightly higher than the 58 percent of cropland in 1992. Cropland has remained relatively stable. As farms have gone out of business, the better cropland has stayed in agricultural production.

Farmland also contains nontillable land such as woodlots, pastures and wetland. Woodlots made up a quarter of Rensselaer County farmland. Pastures covered 7 percent and other land uses such as house lots, ponds, etc. made up a little less than 8 percent of farmland.

### Woodland

Forests—owned by more than 2,400 private landowners—cover 62 percent of Rensselaer

**Cropland Makes Up the Majority of Farmland  
Rensselaer County, 1997**



Cappiello, Dina. "Suburbia Gobbles 10,000 Acres," *Times Union*, March 24, 2000, p. A1.

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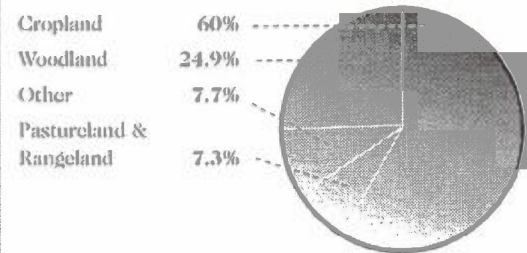
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**Cropland Makes Up the Majority of Farmland**  
Rensselaer County, 1997



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### Woodland

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### Land in Farms by Major Category

Rensselaer County and New York State, 1997

	Rensselaer County Acres	Rensselaer County % of Total	NYS % of Total
Total Cropland	59,409	60.0	65.1
Harvested	47,805	48.3	51.2
All Other Cropland	11,604	11.7	13.9
Total Woodland	24,687	24.9	20.5
Woodland Pastured	1,791	1.8	3.1
Woodland Not Pastured	22,896	23.1	17.4
Other Pastureland	7,224	7.3	6.5
Land in House Lots, etc.	7,645	7.7	7.9
Total Land in Farms	98,965	100	100

Most farmers, not knowing the value of their timber, do not manage their woodlots as efficiently as their cropland. Farmers therefore are at risk when selling their timber to unscrupulous loggers who do not pay close to the true value of the timber. Such loggers also may cause soil erosion and woodlot damage to the extent that farmers may never be able to harvest again during their lifetimes.

#### Rented Land

Rental land is increasingly important to Rensselaer County farm businesses. In 1997, more than 25,000 acres—26 percent of the total land in farms—were rented. This represents a 6 percent increase from 1982. Larger dairy farms have a much greater reliance on rental land. The 1999 Northern Hudson Dairy Farm Business Summary showed that the percentage of land rented by 70 participating farms had increased to 55 percent from 48.6 percent in 1979. The high percentage of rental land indicates that farms, as they grow, rely more on land owned by others.<sup>3</sup>

#### Agricultural Districts

In 1971, New York state passed landmark legislation that allowed for the creation of agricultural districts. The districts—established at the request of farmers and landowners in an area—are meant to promote commercial farming by creating an attractive economic and regulatory climate for farmers. They provide farmers with property tax relief, right-to-farm protections and other provisions in exchange for a commitment to keep the land in agricultural use. Statewide, 408 districts have been created to date—encompassing more than eight million acres.

Rensselaer County farmers have actively supported and implemented agricultural districts since 1973, when the first district was created in the Breese Hollow area. As a result of community-wide efforts, eight districts (encompassing more than 98,000 acres) were established in the county between 1973 and 1981. Rensselaer County's eight original districts since have been consolidated into six and have grown to encompass more than 135,000 acres. They are located within all of the county's towns except Grafton. Most of the county's important farmland falls within an agricultural district, including nearly 70 percent of the county's prime agricultural soils. In total, district farms have gross sales of approximately \$29.5 million.

One of the major provisions of the Agricultural Districts Law is agricultural use value assessment on farmland. The agricultural assessment reduces the real estate tax burden on farmers by assessing farmland based on its agricultural use—not on a "higher" residential,

County. The soft and hardwood forests are typical of the Northeast, consisting primarily of maple, oak, ash, beech, red and white pine and hemlock. More than 25 percent of these forests are farm woodlots and are a critical component of the county's extensive logging and wood milling industry.

When properly managed, farm woodlots are an important economic resource.

Agriculture in  
Rensselaer  
County

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<sup>3</sup> Wickswat, Cathy. "The Dairy Business in the Northern Hudson Valley: How It Has Changed During the Last Two Decades." *Cornell Cooperative Extension Agricultural News*, July 2000.

commercial or industrial use. Any owner of land in agricultural production may qualify if the land meets the requirements or is rented to an eligible farmer. Land does not have to be within an agricultural district to receive the assessment. Towns are required to collect conversion penalties when land receiving a benefit is converted to a nonfarm use. Map 3 (see page 26) shows the parcels enrolled under this program.



In 1992, the Agricultural Districts law was amended to add right-to-farm protections for farm businesses. Generally, these provisions aim to strengthen the ability of farmers to defend against a nuisance suit brought by a neighbor or local government. Right-to-farm provisions provide farmers protection from neighbors who may not understand nor appreciate farm practices.

Seven towns in Rensselaer County have adopted local right-to-farm laws. These include Brunswick, Hoosick, Petersburg, Pittstown, Poestenkill, Schaghticoke and Stephentown. Right-to-farm laws help make nonfarmers aware of local farms and their special needs.

#### *Tax Advantages of Farmland<sup>4</sup>*

Because of the long-term tax implications, town officials and taxpayers often are reluctant to accept a program that permanently protects farmland. They argue that restricting the development potential of land prevents the possibility of construction that could bring in substantial property tax revenue. Instead, they often encourage residential growth as a way to increase their tax base and lower their tax bills.

But a look at what actually has happened as towns have converted farm and forestland to built uses dispels this misconception. Recent studies of towns in New York and New England have found that as towns become more developed, their tax bills generally increase rather than decline. On average, the tax bill on the median-value house increases as town population increases. Development attracts residents, and residents require education that costs far more than the tax revenues they generate. The town's other taxpayers make up the difference.<sup>5</sup>

Other studies (referred to as Cost of Community Services studies) approach the issue by examining the difference between taxes generated by different types of land uses, and the costs of services they require.<sup>6</sup> Although the ratios vary from town to town, the studies generally conclude that farmland pays more than it costs, while residences cost more than they pay.

Studies of towns in New York found that only 29 cents, on average, of every tax dollar generated by farm property was needed to provide services to farm parcels. Farmland actually produced a surplus of 71 cents.

**Did you know that your taxes would probably go up if farmland were developed?**

*Studies have found that as towns become more developed, tax bills generally increase rather than decrease. Even communities with the most taxable commercial and industrial properties have higher-than-average taxes. Keeping land in agriculture often is cheaper for the taxpayer than developing it.*

<sup>4</sup> This section has been largely excerpted from two publications prepared by Ad Hoc Associates entitled "Sustaining Agriculture: A Handbook for Local Action" 1994 and "Land Conservation, Development and Property Taxes in New York" 1997.

<sup>5</sup> Ad Hoc Associates, "Land Conservation, Development and Property Taxes in New York" (Salisbury, VT, 1997); Ad Hoc Associates, "Tax Base and Tax Bill" (Montpelier, VT: Vermont League of Cities and Towns and Vermont Natural Resources Council, 1990); Ad Hoc Associates, "Property Tax Bills and Development in South Carolina" (Salisbury, VT, 1994).

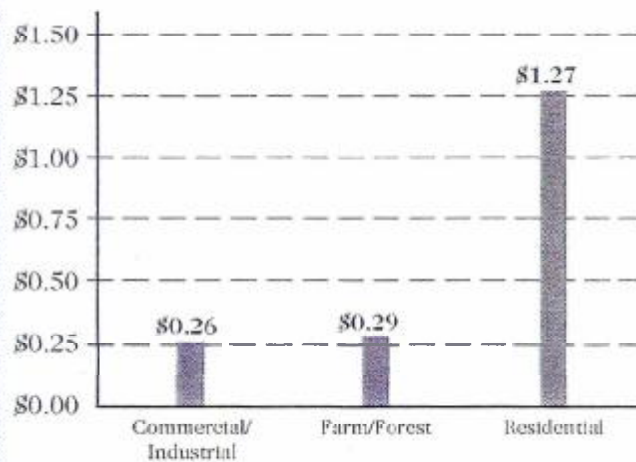
<sup>6</sup> Cost of Community Services (COCS) Studies were pioneered by American Farmland Trust.

Residences, on the other hand, created a deficit by requiring \$1.27 in services for every dollar they generated.

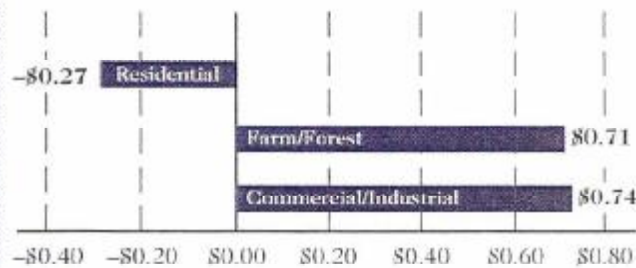
Taxes on residential uses consistently fail to cover costs, requiring 27 cents more in municipal services for every dollar paid in taxes. Residences generally do not pay enough in taxes to offset the cost of educating their children. Most fiscal impact analyses have found that residences are a "tax negative." The deficit that results from residences is balanced by surpluses from "tax positive" properties and from state aid. The types of property generally considered to be "tax positive" are farmland, commercial property, retirement property, vacation property and open space.

The point to be made by these studies is not that growth is bad, but that we should not be expecting development to lower taxes. Towns should reconsider how they value farmland. In addition to the many benefits associated with farmland, farmland also provides a net tax gain. Farmland protection may be viewed as a strategy to improve the long-term fiscal health of a community.

***Farmland Pays More Than It Costs,  
Residences Cost More Than They Pay***



***Net Tax Surplus from Farmland;  
Net Tax Deficit from Residences***



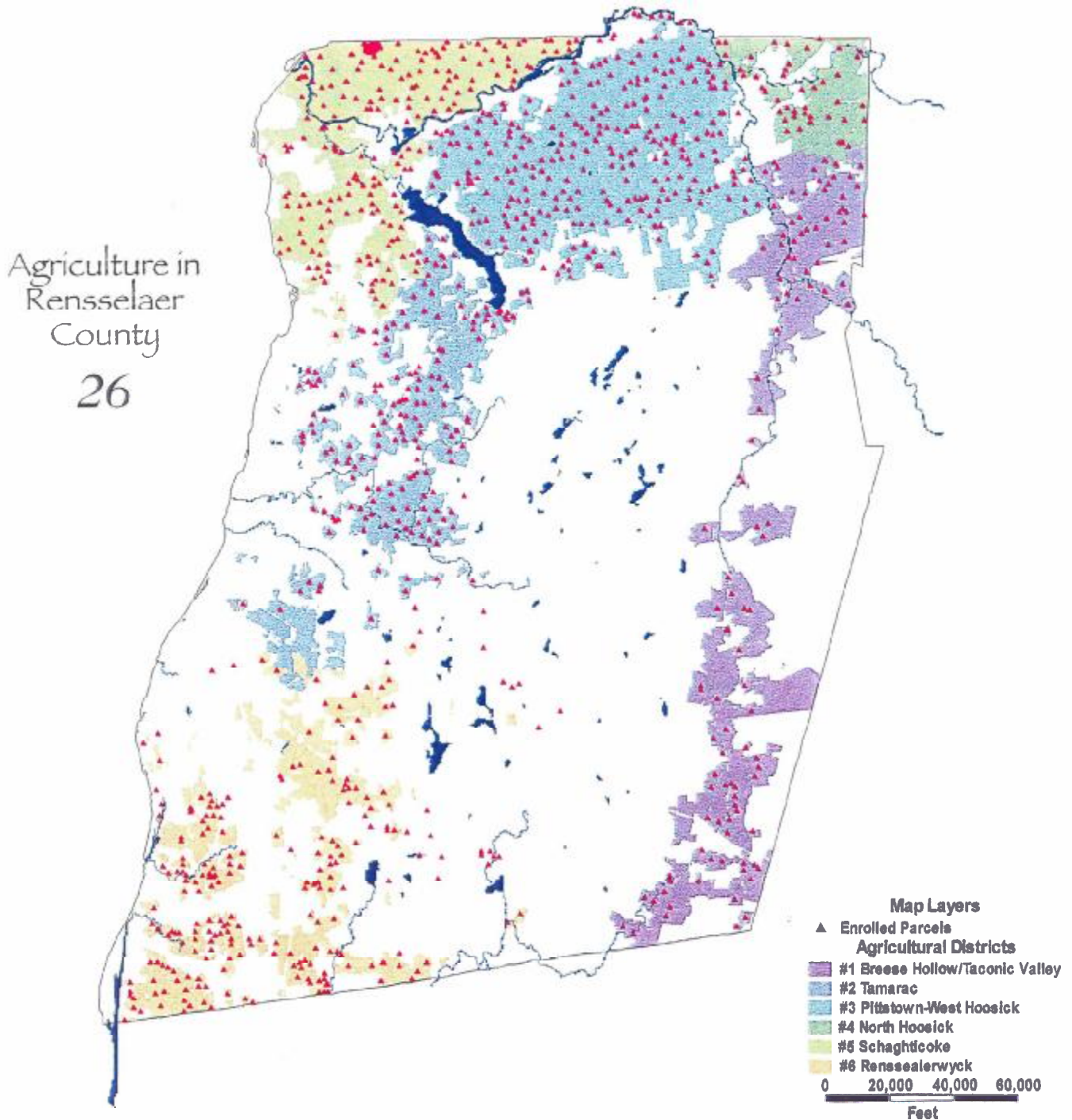
Studies of towns in New York found that an average of 29 cents from every farm property tax dollar went to provide services to farm parcels, resulting in a tax surplus from farmland of 71 cents. Residences, on the other hand, do not pay enough to offset their costs and require an additional 27 cents for every dollar of revenue they generate.

***Agricultural Support System***

Rensselaer County farmers participate in a wide variety of programs that help them strengthen their operations. Several agencies and organizations have been very effective in providing support to county agriculture. They include Cornell Cooperative Extension, USDA Farm Service Agency and Natural Resources Conservation Service, Rensselaer County Soil and Water Conservation District, Rensselaer County Economic Development and Planning, Rensselaer County Environmental Management Council and Rensselaer County Farm Bureau. A list of the agencies and the major services they provide is included in Appendix A.

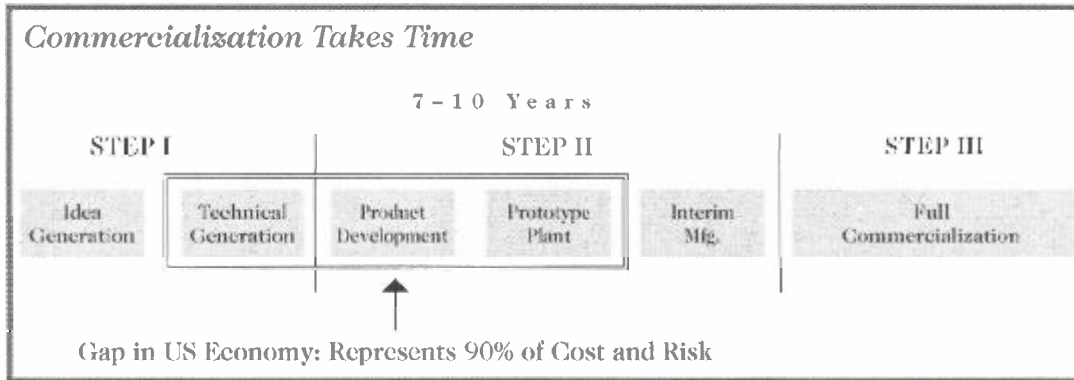
<sup>7</sup> Paul O'Connell. "Commercializing Promising Technologies: One Answer to U.S. Farm Problems." *Choices*, First Quarter, 1989, pp 26-27. Source: Cooperative State Research Service, USDA American Agricultural Economics Association.

## County Agricultural Districts and Parcels Enrolled under the New York State Agricultural Districts Law.



### Rensselaer County Agricultural and Farmland Protection Plan

Map created for the Rensselaer County Agricultural and Farmland Protection Board by the Rensselaer County Soil & Water Conservation District from data derived from the USGS Land Use - Land Cover (LULC) data files.



Addressing the challenges facing Rensselaer County farms—including pressure from the urban-edge location and low profitability in traditional commodity markets—requires expanding business development assistance so that farms can take advantage of new opportunities. New ideas, niche markets and innovative products do not appear out of nowhere, pre-packaged and ready for an eager market. Commercialization of a new product takes time, as is seen in the figure above. Ninety percent of the cost and risk occurs after the idea is born and before a single product is sold.<sup>7</sup>

In addition to the agricultural business development programs already in place, Rensselaer County farmers need assistance from specialists to facilitate in-depth technology generation and product development. Demands for product development assistance currently are greater than available staff resources. Increased county investments through the established and proven framework of existing organizations would give the greatest return to the county in the shortest amount of time.

Farmers also need help turning marketing concepts into profitable businesses. The agricultural development specialist will help bridge this gap between developed ideas and full commercial production. Filling this final void gives county farmers a competitive edge in niche markets, innovative products and developing alternative markets. This will help keep farmers farming, a major component of agricultural and farmland protection efforts.

## CHAPTER THREE

# Tools to Keep Farms Growing!

Rensselaer County and its towns can employ a variety of tools to enhance farm viability and protect farmland. Some of the techniques described below are regulatory, while others are compensatory and voluntary. No single means alone can keep Rensselaer County farms growing.

The following recommendations serve as a guide to implement agricultural and farmland protection programs and policies.

1. Integrate economic development with farmland protection. Keeping farms viable is as important as protecting the resource base essential for farming.
2. Target agricultural and farmland protection initiatives toward blocks of viable farmland.
3. Give farmers incentives to protect farmland. Treat farmers fairly by giving them a fair return for what they provide to the public.
4. Examine the long-term cost effectiveness of incentive programs that compensate farmers for not developing their land. By combining tax, spending and regulatory programs, local communities can strongly support agriculture and meet budgetary needs.
5. Develop land use policies and zoning ordinances that work for agriculture. Conventional “large-lot” zoning is ineffective because it accelerates residential development and converts agricultural areas into lots that are too small to farm.
6. Encourage inter-municipal cooperation. Since farming spans town and county borders, farmland protection requires cooperation between towns and among levels of government. Efforts to promote development in one town can derail farmland protection efforts in bordering towns.
7. Develop a coalition of interests to support agricultural and farmland protection efforts. Reach out to nonfarmers by organizing farmers’ markets, farm events and workshops. Unite the farmland protection interests of farm and nonfarm community members by protecting farmland that provides scenic views, includes important water resources, or preserves historic landscapes.
8. Promote thoughtful planning to prevent conflicts between farmers and neighbors. Manage residential growth in farming communities; buffer farms from neighboring residences.

Following are brief descriptions of some of the state, federal and local tools available to enhance agriculture and protect farmland. Changes may occur to some of the federal and state programs if new legislation is enacted.

Across the nation, communities making the greatest advances in farmland protection have utilized a combination of tools, including:

- Adopting right-to farm ordinances and educating residents about farm practices;
- Promoting farms and facilitating the development, retention and expansion of farm businesses;