

Growing the Landscape for Urban Agriculture in Oneida County, New York

An Opportunity Assessment



PREPARED BY
AMERICAN FARMLAND TRUST
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About American Farmland Trust

American Farmland Trust (AFT) is dedicated to saving the land that sustains us by protecting farmland, promoting sound farming practices and keeping farmers on the land. In New York state, AFT coordinates a nation-leading farm linking program, Farmland for a New Generation New York. This program works to support aspiring and new farmers in their search for farmland, supports farmland owners to make their land available for farming, and to ultimately transition their land to a new generation.

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Introduction

Farmers in urban and urban-influenced areas increasingly play an important role in feeding their communities and building stronger, healthier, and more localized food supply chains. These farms and gardens produce local food and often unite farming with nutrition and community development to spur public health outcomes and economic opportunities.

Urban agriculture has also been a fertile ground to develop a new, more diverse generation of farmers through localized training. A third of the state's farmers are at or near retirement age, many without an identified successor. The lack of transition planning for farmland owners leaves the future status of as much as two million acres of New York farmland in limbo, increasing the probability that this land may be lost forever to other interests. In 2020, American Farmland Trust's (AFT's) Farms Under Threat: The State of the States report showed that Low-Density Residential (LDR) land use accounted for 78% of the farmland converted from agriculture in New York state between 2001-2016 and heavily concentrated in urban-influenced areas like Utica and Rome. Without policies and programs that enable agriculture to remain viable in LDR and urban areas, the farmland most accessible to support local food systems for higher population centers – and most convenient for urban farmers to scale their operations – is at the highest risk of being lost.

Whether actively farming or non-operating, farmland owners who are looking to make farmland available through a lease, sale, or other arrangement often do not know how to find farmers or negotiate suitable arrangements with them. Farmland transition issues are aggravated by other conditions, such as increased competition for spaces to accommodate public and private development, the creation of renewable energy, or cultural variances between different generations of farmers. Nationally, today's new and beginning farmers and their production practices are more diverse than prior generations of farmers and farmland owners, 98% of whom are historically white.

A perfect storm is brewing, one that limits the opportunities for farmers trained or farming in urban environments to support a resilient food system in and around their communities if surrounding farmland continues to be threatened, unavailable, or unaffordable. At the community level, there is a need for supportive policies, processes, and programs that facilitate secure land transition, built on a better understanding of how to match the potential supply of available farmland with the needs of new, urban-based farmers and gardeners seeking land to feed their families and communities.

Building upon the Farms Under Threat research, AFT's many years of experience providing land linking and technical assistance to farm seekers and landowners through Farmland for a New Generation New York, and strong partnerships with organizations and individuals in the region and across New York state, the following objectives were met:

- 01 **Assessment of farmland demand**
through a survey and Community Listening Sessions of new and emerging urban farmers in Utica and Rome

- 02 **Mapping of farmland supply**
through GIS mapping and survey of farming and non-operating landowners in the county

- 03 **Recommend local food policy strategies**
that support land access for urban farmers and gardeners and avoid conversion of farmland at state, county, and municipal levels.

This opportunity assessment summarizes the results from the two-year planning project and provides the foundation for future work needed to support a new generation of urban-based farmers and gardeners in accessing land in and around the urban areas of Oneida County, New York, to create and sustain a vibrant and resilient food system in New York's Mohawk Valley.

Understanding the Needs of Urban Farmers and Gardeners

The first goal of this project was to gather information from current, past, and aspiring urban farmers and gardeners about their urban agriculture needs, especially related to accessing land in and around urban areas in Oneida County. To do this, AFT partnered with Cornell Cooperative Extension of Oneida County to develop an Urban Farmer and Gardener Survey and held four Community Listening Sessions in Utica and Rome. The Urban Farmer and Gardeners Survey was designed to understand how urban farmers and gardeners are already producing food and what their future land needs and farming plans are. The questions on the survey were created with input from the advisory group as well as the project partners. It was important to make the survey available in multiple languages as there are many refugees and new Americans living within the cities of Utica and Rome. In Utica alone, about a quarter of the population are refugees. [1]

Table 1: Language of Respondents of Farmer Gardener Survey

| Language | Farmer/Gardener |
|---------------------------|-----------------|
| English | 46 |
| Karen | 24 |
| Ukrainian | 5 |
| Burmese | 2 |
| Spanish | 1 |
| Total Participants | 78 |

In Utica alone, about a quarter of the population are refugees.

Based on feedback from the advisory group, the survey was made available in seven languages: English, Karen, Burmese, Arabic, Spanish, Somali, and Ukrainian. TONE Translation at The Center in Utica, New York, translated surveys that were made available online via Survey Monkey and in print. Karen was not supported by the online platform, so the survey in Karen was only available in print.

Advisory group members and partners on the ground played a key role in ensuring farmers and gardeners received and submitted the survey. Printed versions of the surveys were provided to both the advisory group members and project partners, coupled with outreach language to share via email newsletters, and listservs. The survey received 78 complete responses (Table 1). The vast majority (84.62%) of respondents currently live in the cities of Utica or Rome with an additional 10.26% of respondents currently living within an 11-mile radius of either city. The remaining 5.13% of respondents live in non-neighboring towns.

Demographic information was requested, but not required, to help AFT and partners understand the community interested in urban farming in Oneida County and who to target with future outreach. Demographic information provided by respondents on race and ethnicity, gender, age, and other characteristics can be found in Figures 2-5.

The survey first set out to assess the respondents' current and past farming or gardening experience. Over 60% of respondents are currently growing crops and/or raising livestock or had previous experience doing so. Most respondents have less than ten years of production experience, though nearly 23% have been producing for more than ten years. They have experience producing a wide range of products, from livestock, like pigs and poultry, to crops, including grains and vegetables. Currently, most of the respondents are producing in their own backyards, not in community spaces or land that is rented or owned outside of their neighborhood.

The respondents also indicated that their primary purpose for growing crops or raising animals is for personal family use (42.19%) or to feed their community (17.97%).

“I need more land. I desire education. I’d love to meet with other urban gardeners to share experiences.”

-Survey Respondent

Figure 1

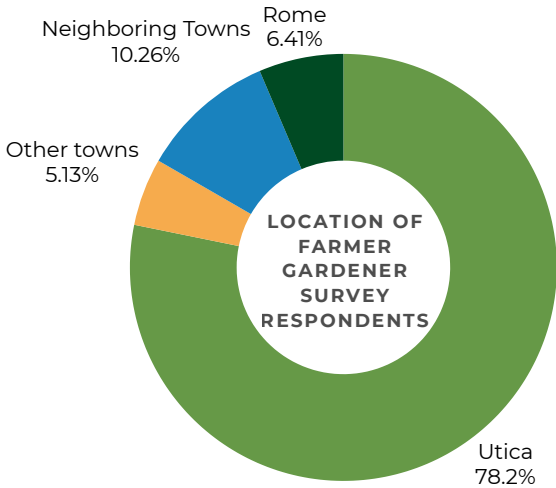


Figure 2: Race & Ethnicity

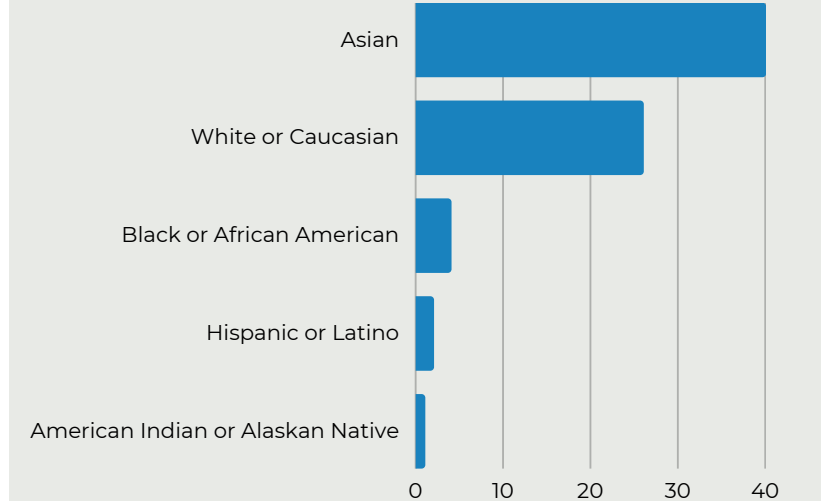


Figure 3

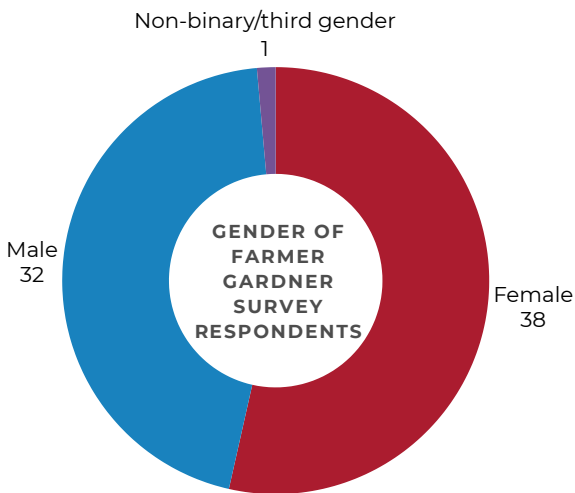
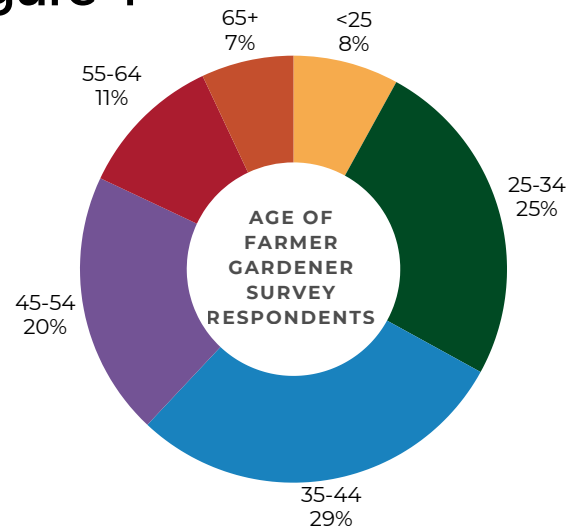


Figure 4



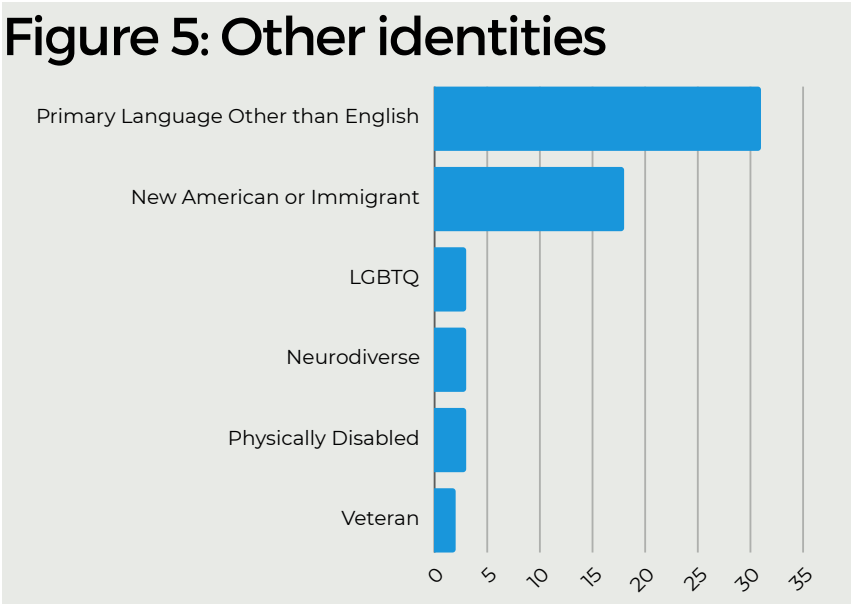
The next series of questions addressed the future land needs of the survey respondents. Over 70% are seeking additional land for farming or gardening purposes. Those who are seeking additional land are primarily interested in finding parcels that are five acres or less in size (63.38%). They are also interested in parcels located in Utica or within a five to 10-mile radius of the city (85.92%). However, most respondents (40.85%) would prefer to find land that is even closer, within walking distance of where they live. This desire reflects the responses to a previous question, in which just under half of respondents (45.07%) indicated that they lease their homes, while more than half (53.52%) indicated that they own their homes. Presumably, respondents feel settled in their current location and are looking for land that fits their current routines and lifestyles. When asked how they would like to access additional land, respondents indicated they are primarily interested in sharing land with others in their community (32%) or purchasing land (28%).

With access to additional land, the respondents indicated they would grow or raise more products (45.36%) and expand their current production (35.05%). If they could secure access to additional land, over half of respondents (53.70%) indicated the desire to generate all or a portion of their income through farming. About a third (37.04%) indicated they would continue to produce primarily for personal use.

Respondents identified several challenges encountered when trying to access land to meet their farming or gardening needs. Themes from survey responses include the following:

- 01 Land with existing water access is difficult to find.
- 02 Urban zoning codes and regulations make certain types of production (honeybees, poultry) difficult or impossible.
- 03 Language accessibility to education on how to grow crops and raise livestock in the climate of Oneida County is lacking outside of English.

Figure 5: Other identities



Respondents also indicated they needed more support in finding and evaluating land, business, and financial support, access to capital to purchase land and infrastructure, and hands-on production experience and training. The need for more support was reflected in the responses to two questions about how and when respondents would like to access land. A quarter of responses to these questions indicated uncertainty with “unsure” or “I do not know yet.”

| Table 2: Community Listening Sessions | | | |
|---------------------------------------|---------------------------------|-------|----------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Date | Location | City | Language(s) Offered |
| November 30, 2022 | Utica Public Library | Utica | English |
| December 12, 2022 | Utica Public Library | Utica | English |
| February 8, 2023 | The Center | Utica | English, Arabic, Hindu, Rohingya, Spanish, Ukrainian, Burmese, Karen |
| March 20, 2023 | Mohawk Valley Community College | Rome | English, Spanish |

To gather more information, four Community Listening Sessions were held in the cities of Utica and Rome in the fall of 2022 and winter of 2023 (see Table 2). These sessions were community spaces designed for current and aspiring urban farmers and gardeners to exchange ideas and questions, and explore challenges related to urban agriculture and accessing land. In total, 71 people attended the listening sessions and were offered gift cards for their participation.

All *Community Listening Sessions* were designed as informal conversations to hear participants' responses to the following questions:

- **Why do you farm? What do you like about farming?**
- **What would it take for you to gain access to land? What challenges are you facing in finding and accessing land to farm or garden?**
- **What do you wish people in power at the city or county (policymakers) knew about gardening and farming and the kinds of supports that would be helpful to you?**
- **How would your farming or gardening plans change if you had access to more land? Would you grow different products? Would you need access to new markets? Where would you like to sell your products?**
- **Are there other resources, education, or support that would be helpful?**

Given the diverse demographics of Oneida County, as well as the different hosting institutions of the listening sessions (e.g., The [Refugee] Center in Utica or Mohawk Valley Community College in Rome), the responses to these prompts varied; however, the conversations mirrored much of what was shared in the Urban Farmer and Gardener Survey. Specifically, the New American and refugee community members that attended the listening session in Utica on February 8, 2023, mentioned challenges related to immigration, adjusting to a new climate and growing season, language accessibility of programs and educational resources, safety and lack of community in rural spaces, and limited familiarity with methods of land acquisition in the United States. In contrast, attendees to other listening sessions identified challenges related to understanding zoning laws and scaling up their urban agriculture practice.

Many of the challenges identified in the *Urban Farmer and Gardener Survey* and *Community Listening Sessions* require further resources and community networks to address – such as technical training, small business workshops, zoning adjustment, and public and private institutional collaboration, among others. Farmers, gardeners, and service providers present at the listening sessions also identified the need and opportunity for collaboration between rural and urban farmers to overcome some of these challenges.

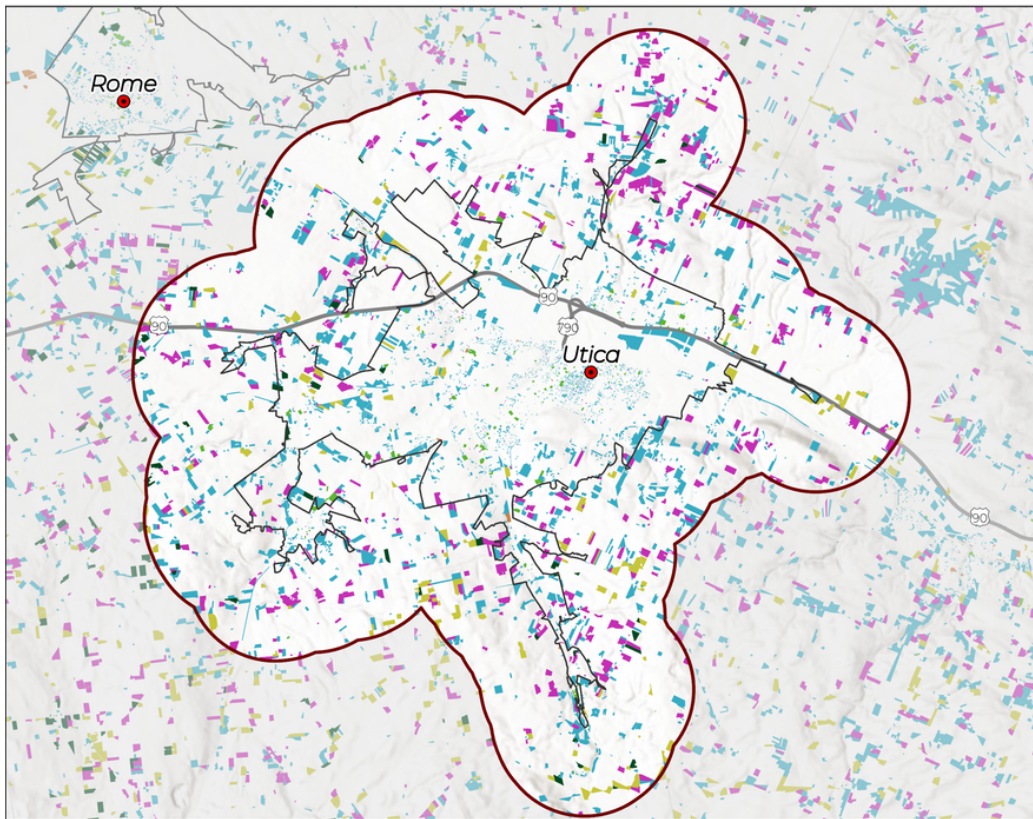
Inventory of Potential Available Farmland

To support the needs of the urban farmers and gardeners in the communities of Utica and Rome identified in the first phase of this project, the next objective of the project was to understand what land is available in the area for farming and gardening. This was accomplished through two methods. The first was to create maps using GIS data of tax parcels with potential for urban agriculture. **For this map, it was determined a parcel had potential for urban farming or gardening if it was zoned active agriculture, abandoned or vacant agricultural land, vacant land, public park, community service space (like a church or library), or was a residential lot with potential open space.** These maps were derived from tax parcel data provided by an advisory group member from the Oneida County Planning Department. The dark red line indicates a 2-mile radius around the city, which was chosen based on responses to the Oneida County Farmer and Gardener Survey, which indicated that respondents wanted to access land within a short walking or driving distance of their homes, primarily. This data was then used to support outreach for the second method – a survey of landowners.

The Oneida County Landowner Survey was created to understand the characteristics of land available to farm or garden and to determine if landowners in the region are interested in making that land available to urban-based farmers and gardeners. The survey was created as a partnership between American Farmland Trust and Tug Hill Tomorrow Land Trust, with input from project partners and the advisory group, particularly the Oneida County Planning Department. It was made available in four languages: English, Karen, Burmese, and Spanish, based on feedback from the advisory group and the interest from these communities in the Urban Farmer and Gardener Survey.

Working with TONE Translation at The Center in Utica, translated surveys were made available online via Survey Monkey and in print. The online platform does not support Karen, therefore the survey in Karen was only available in print. The Oneida County Landowner Survey was sent via mail to a list of landowners created using tax parcel data provided by the Oneida County Planning Department. Parcels included in the mailing were within a ten-mile radius of the cities of Utica and Rome, over a quarter acre in size, and had a property class code of “agricultural,” “vacant land,” or “residential.”

PARCELS WITH POTENTIAL FOR URBAN AGRICULTURE IN UTICA

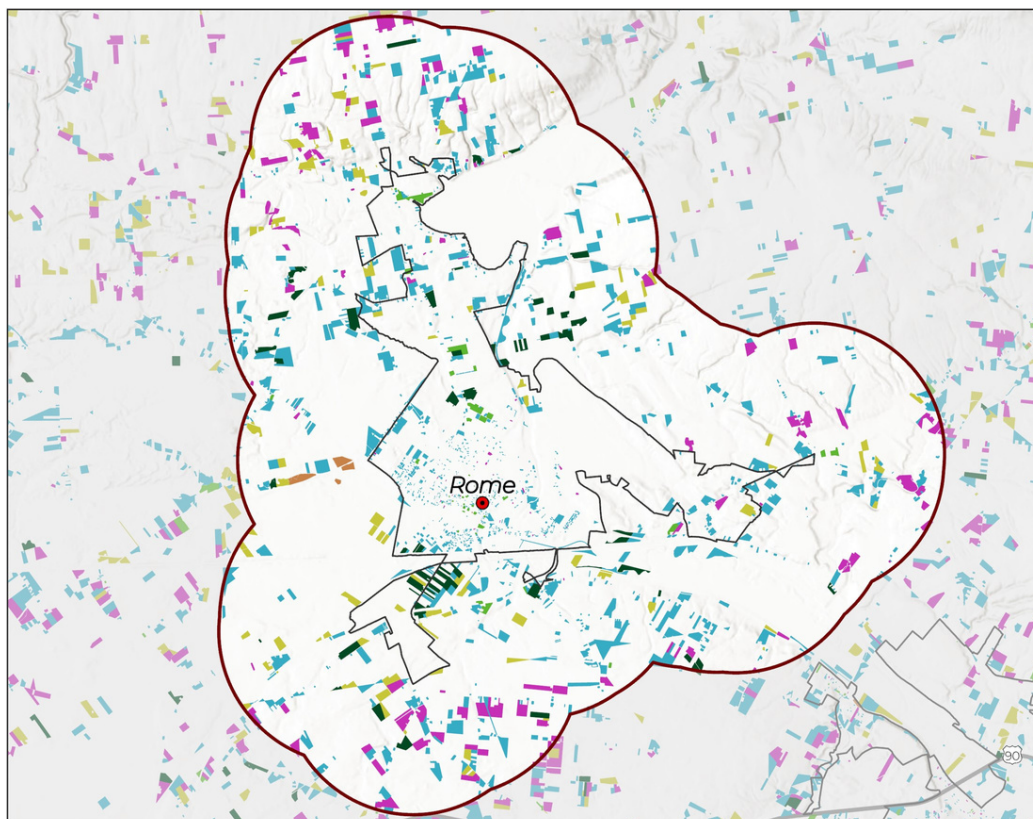


Parcel land use

- Active Agriculture
- Abandoned or vacant agricultural land
- Other vacant lands
- Public parks
- Community services
- Residential with potential open space
- Urban Areas

**Only includes parcels less than 25 acres*

PARCELS WITH POTENTIAL FOR URBAN AGRICULTURE IN ROME



Parcel land use

- Active Agriculture
- Abandoned or vacant agricultural land
- Other vacant lands
- Public parks
- Community services
- Residential with potential open space
- Urban Areas

**Only includes parcels less than 25 acres*

American Farmland Trust makes no warranties as to the suitability of the data found here for any particular purpose or user. The spatial data presented here may be used as an informative inventory of agricultural land use, land quality, and specific types of conservation. Spatial patterns may be exaggerated in order to effectively display data at the required map scale. Data and information may NOT be used for any commercial purpose. For more information or suggestions regarding the data used to create this map, please contact AFT's Farmland Information Center www.farmlandinfo.org or (800) 370-4879

In addition to the mailing, project partners and advisory group members conducted outreach electronically to their networks about the survey. The survey received 41 responses (Table 3). Responses were primarily received in English, with three responses in Karen.

Demographic information was requested in this survey as well, though not required. The 34 respondents who did provide answers to the demographic questions provided insight into who the landowners in Oneida County are for future outreach. Over 85% of the survey respondents identified as white or Caucasian (Figure 6). The gender of the respondents was split 44% male and 56% female (Figure 7), and respondents were primarily over the age of 65 (Figure 8).

| Language | Landowner |
|---------------------------|-----------|
| English | 38 |
| Karen | 3 |
| Total Participants | 41 |

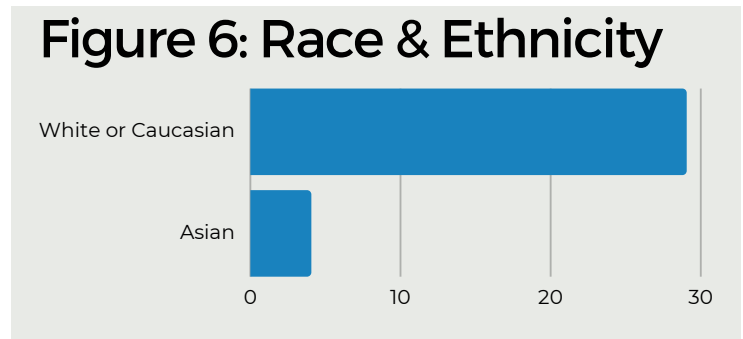


Figure 7

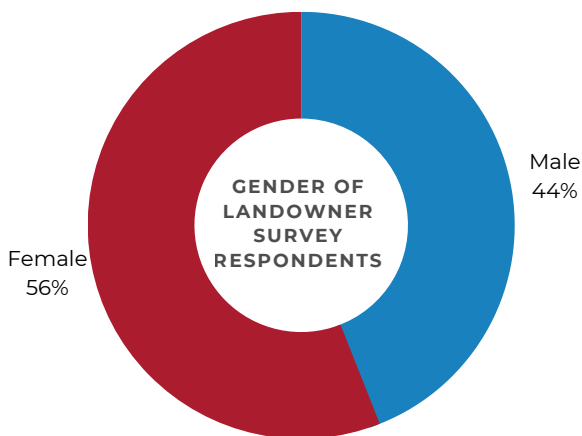
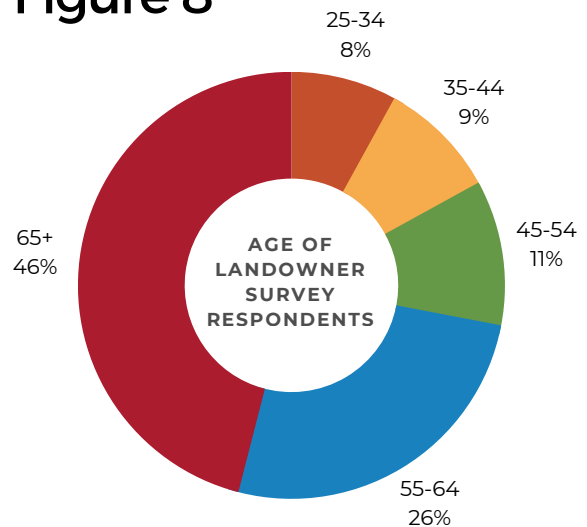


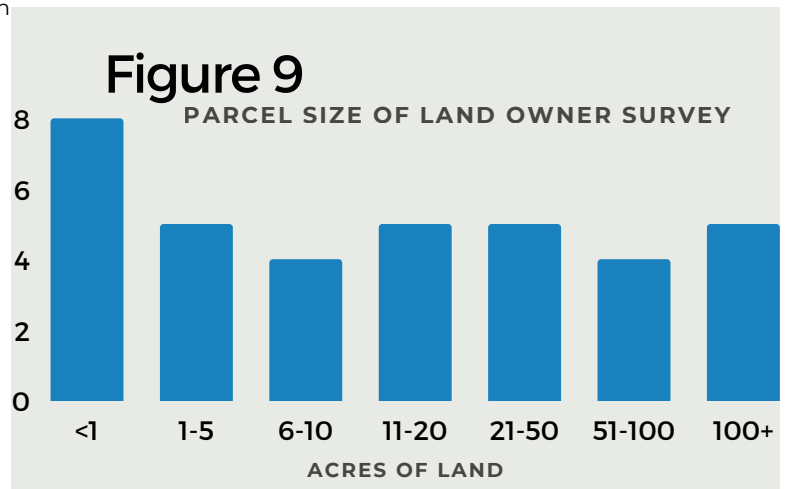
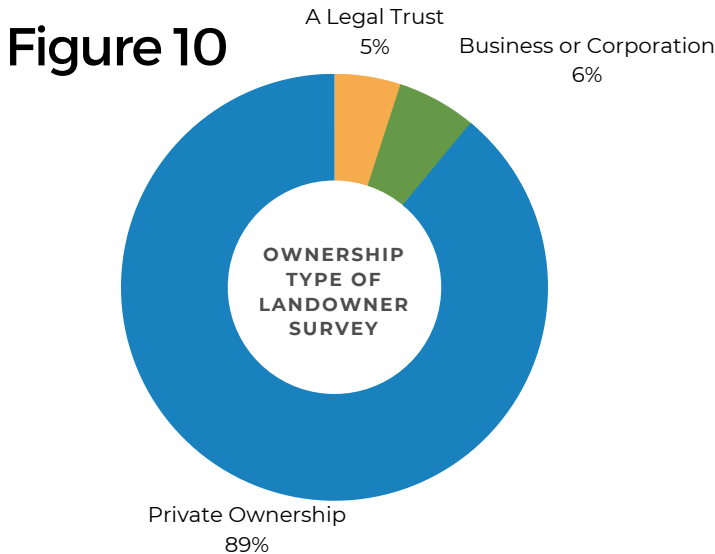
Figure 8



The first series of questions in the survey were designed to gather details about the landowner’s property and its current use. The landowners that responded owned properties of various sizes (Figure 8), with most (88.89%) being held in private ownership (Figure 9). Over half (55.55%) of properties are within a 10-mile radius of Utica. In terms of use, 83.33% of the respondents’ properties are currently used for farming or gardening purposes or have previously been used for these purposes. Only two of the survey respondents own land protected by a conservation easement.

The next series of questions were created to gauge a landowner’s interest in making

their land available to a farmer or gardener. Landowners were asked if they would be interested in leasing, selling, or offering an alternative tenure arrangement on a portion or all of their land. Sixteen of the 41 respondents indicated an interest in making their land available. All 16 were interested in leasing their land, while only seven considered selling it. Twelve landowners would consider alternative arrangements such as cooperative tenure or business partnership. When asked how many acres they would make available via the lease, sale, or other arrangement, most landowners responded that they would make ten acres or less available. In exchange for use of the land, respondents reported that they would prefer cash payment for the lease or sale of the property.



Still, they would also consider payment to reduce their overall tax burden, qualifying for the New York State Agricultural Assessment or payment in the form of goods or services. When the landowners were asked if there were any preferences or restrictions for the use of the property, one common theme that came up in the responses was the preference for “organic practices,” or no pesticides or herbicide use. Landowners were also asked if they would be comfortable leasing their land to a farmer who did not speak English as their first language (e.g., New American or refugee farmers). Eleven landowners indicated they were comfortable or would be willing to explore this option with support from service providers like the Center and Cornell Cooperative Extension. Finally, eleven landowners were interested in connecting to farmers seeking land, and nine were looking to make a connection as soon as possible.

According to the 2017 USDA Census of Agriculture, one-third of New York’s farmers are over 65, and they own or operate nearly two million acres of farmland. This land is at risk of being lost forever unless it changes hands to a new generation of farmers. The census also shows that 99% of farmers in New York identified as white or Caucasian. While many of the landowners that completed the survey are not farming the land themselves (non-operators), 47% were over the age of 65, indicating an

opportunity for continued work on this project. There is a clear need to educate landowners on transition plans for their property as well as work to be done to match the landowners to a new and diverse group of farmers or gardeners who can steward the land in the short- and long-term, protecting those properties from future development and ensuring a resilient food system for urban and rural communities into the future.

POLICY ASSESSMENT & RECOMMENDATIONS

As part of the third phase of this project, American Farmland Trust collaborated with the Pace University Haub School of Law's Land Use Law Clinic faculty and students to research existing laws and policies at the state, county, and municipal levels in Utica and Rome. From this research, faculty and students created an "Urban Agriculture Friendly Assessment Tool" to compile a checklist of crucial steps municipalities can undertake to promote resilient urban food systems and markets for producers, while reducing barriers to resources and land access for urban farmers. [2] AFT policy staff then used this assessment to analyze the many laws, policies, regulations in place to determine near-term steps that the municipalities of Utica and Rome, as well as the state of New York, can take to promote urban agriculture. Below are policy recommendations to support and promote urban agriculture at the state, county, and city levels for Rome and Utica to benefit New York's farmers and food system.

New York State

As population density in urban areas increases across the state of New York, it is important to support urban agriculture to secure a solid economic future for agriculture. In 1964, New York State enacted its "Home Rule Law," which allows cities, towns, and villages to enact and enforce local laws specific to their needs if they do not conflict with state laws or constitutional provisions. [3] This framework promotes decentralized governance, empowering local governments to address community issues, set zoning regulations, and govern various aspects of public life. Because of this dynamic, there are supports for urban agriculture that New York State can initiate while also leaving ample opportunity for the cities of Utica and Rome to develop local laws and policies that will ultimately support urban agriculture and land access for their respective constituents.

In February 2023, the New York State Legislature introduced bill [S2415](#) to create the office of Urban Agriculture within the New York State Department of Agriculture and Markets (NYSDAM). The purpose of this office, "to assist with and promote various forms of urban farming," would be one of many positive steps to support the growth of urban agriculture.

New York State also has many other programs and policies that currently support or have the potential to support urban farmers at the local level, including the following:

- The [Farm Workforce Retention Credit](#) provides a tax credit of \$1,200 to farm employers per farmer or grower working at least 500 hours per year.
- The [Farm Donations to Food Pantries Credit](#) provides a farm with a credit of 25% of the market value of donated food up to \$5,000.
- The [NYS Brownfield Opportunity Area \(BOA\) Program](#) provides resources for revitalization efforts of brownfields. The program does not include urban food production projects. **We recommend allowing this program to include urban agriculture projects for increased opportunity for growing food in urban areas, including Utica and Rome.**
- The Urban Farms and Community Gardens competitive grant program, funded through the New York State budget and administered by the Department of Agriculture and Markets (NYSDAM), provides grant funds for growing spaces, infrastructure, and capacity building for urban farms, school gardens, and community gardens. Projects must focus on food production, food safety, and food distribution while creating a long-lasting community impact.

Oneida County

Oneida County and the Mohawk Valley demonstrate a commitment to local food initiatives through the [Mohawk Valley Food Action Network](#) and its [Food Action Plan](#). This collaborative effort seeks to increase access to healthy foods, encourage food-related business opportunities, and foster a more diverse local food and transportation system.

The Oneida County Food Coalition also works at the county level and plays a vital role in combating regional food insecurity. Through its network of food pantries and community-based organizations, the coalition efficiently distributes locally grown products and addresses hunger within the county. In May 2023, the Food Coalition outlined its strategic plan that involves advocacy efforts at all levels of government. [4] **Elected officials and decision-makers should engage in dialogue with the Food Coalition to explore collaborative pathways that promote access to locally grown produce and sustainable farming practices, further enhancing food security within the region.** By harnessing the strengths of these existing assets, Oneida County can foster a more resilient food system and increase opportunities for urban farmers.

The Oneida-Herkimer Solid Waste Authority also offers support through its county-wide composting, recycling, and waste management programs. Urban farmers can benefit from this composting program, purchasing compost by the bag or truckload.

Finally, Cornell Cooperative Extension of Oneida County (CCE Oneida) provides valuable county-wide technical assistance to farmers and growers and educational materials for the community. **CCE Oneida is a significant asset in supporting urban agriculture initiatives within Oneida County; however, survey respondents indicated a need for technical assistance for farmers in languages other than English, and this is a challenge that should be addressed by service providers to fully support urban agriculture in Oneida County.**

Capitalizing on these assets and leveraging state policies and programs, Oneida County's elected officials can pave the way for a flourishing and inclusive urban agriculture ecosystem that enhances food security, sustainability, and economic development for the entire community.

Leveraging Utica's Assets

Utica, New York, possesses a strong foundation of existing infrastructure and assets that support urban agriculture initiatives. The Utica [Master Plan](#) incorporates urban agriculture strategies within its implementation plans for housing and neighborhood development, downtown development, parks, recreation, arts and culture, and historic preservation. This includes fostering urban agriculture in neighborhoods, collaborating with local groups to identify vacant land for agricultural use, and promoting relationships between growers and restaurants for locally sourced produce.

A pivotal asset is the Utica/Oneida [Food Policy Council](#), established in 2011 with funding from a United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Hunger-Free Communities Grant, which unites over 20 local organizations to champion food-related initiatives. It is unclear whether this group is still active. Still, **we recommend Utica city officials seek sustainable funding for this group and work closely with them on the recommended next steps below.**

Educational resources, such as the Urban Farm Learning Lab operated by Cornell Cooperative Extension of Oneida County, contribute to empowering urban farmers through workshops and training opportunities. Additionally, demonstration gardens like the Edible Forest Garden at White Lion Farms exemplify best practices for urban edible planting. The Utica Community Garden Program allows personal agriculture on public land, and initiatives like the One World Garden, led by the Mohawk Valley Resource Center for Refugees and sustained by Rust2Green, enhance community spaces.

The public library's Garden Tool Collection program further supports urban agriculture efforts, while diverse food retail options, including the Utica Farmer's Market, the

Oneida County Public Market, and the Bargain Grocery, promote access to fresh and affordable food for Utica residents. By leveraging these existing assets, Utica is poised to develop a resilient and inclusive urban agriculture landscape that addresses food security and fosters sustainable growth throughout the city.

Leveraging Rome's Assets

Rome, New York, possesses a solid foundation of strengths and assets that will serve as a strong base for the future development of urban agriculture programs. With guidelines allowing apiaries and aquaponics systems in rear yards, the city supports responsible beekeeping and sustainable fisheries. The absence of size limits on gardens, the allowance of up to 8 hens in backyards, and the freedom to set up farm stands without building permits provide a base for successful urban agriculture initiatives.

The city's [2018 Comprehensive Plan Sustainability Index](#) underscores the importance of agriculture to Rome's "identity and economy," including agriculture as one of six priority areas for urban development. The Plan includes provisions for both agribusiness and home gardening. The city of Rome can leverage this commitment to land use for agriculture to create a thriving urban agriculture ecosystem.



Policy Recommendations for Rome and Utica

01 Update Zoning to Permit and Integrate Sustainable Agriculture

Rome

Currently, Rome’s zoning permits many agricultural activities with clear guidelines and specifications, especially for beekeeping, poultry, and fenced gardens (See Strategy 2.2 in the Rome Urban Agriculture Assessment, Appendix). **We recommend the city of Rome make information regarding the location of each zone, permitted agricultural activities, and precise specifications available and easily understandable to the broader public.** This information could be disseminated in partnership with CCE Oneida County and other organizations working within the region. Additionally, because Rome has clearly designated agricultural districts, **we recommend the city make these areas Urban Agriculture Incentive Zones (UAIZs) to incentivize agricultural activities within the city, as described in best practices on p. 17.**



Photo credit: Josh Baldo

Utica

We recommend that the city of Utica revise its zoning codes to allow for sustainable and climate-resilient urban agriculture activities within its Land Conservation Districts. Currently, these districts prohibit personal and urban agriculture uses. **We also recommend that the city of Utica uses the Urban Agriculture Incentive Zone (UAIZ) structure to revise its zoning code.** In 2021, the City of Utica’s Department of Urban and Economic Development completed a draft of the [2021 Code Green Zoning Update](#), funded by New York State Energy Resource and Development Authority (NYSERDA) through a “Cleaner Greener Communities Implementation Grant” in the amount of \$168,750. This comprehensive zoning update proposes opportunities for urban agriculture, such as beekeeping and poultry husbandry, and could serve as a structural guide for Utica’s development of UAIZs. **We recommend that the City of Utica works with the Department of Urban and Economic Development to adopt some of the updates proposed through this project to develop UAIZs.**

Zoning for Sustainable Urban Agriculture Best Practices

1. Across the country, states such as [California](#), [Louisiana](#), and [Missouri](#) are adopting Urban Agriculture Incentive Zones (UAIzs) to establish, demarcate, and incentivize production on urban agriculture sites. Once deemed UAIzs, property owners can receive tax reductions for leasing that land to urban farmers, and urban farmers are allowed contracts for the use of vacant or blighted land. In defining agricultural use in UAIzs, the policies include soil-based farming, aquaculture, hydroponics, aquaponics, horticulture, livestock, poultry, and beekeeping.
2. Another example of a zoning code that supports urban agriculture through the designation of open space is from [Boston, MA \(§ 33-8\)](#). Boston has enacted an ordinance that creates community garden open space subdistricts. To read more about the designation of land use law that supports urban agriculture, see [“Seeding the City: Land Use Policies to Promote Urban Agriculture.”](#)
3. [The 2021 Code Green Zoning Update Project \(Utica\)](#) details recommended updates to Utica’s Zoning Code, “intended to promote the health, safety and general welfare of the public and to be a guide for the orderly development of the City.” This proposed update to Utica’s zoning code can serve as a structural example in Utica’s development of UAIzs.
4. [Climate Smart Community Grants](#) are available to villages, towns, municipalities, and counties in the state of New York and provide a 50/50 match of funding for climate change mitigation, adaptation, and planning and assessment projects. Both Rome and Utica can consider applying for a project to update their zoning and develop UAIzs to support urban agriculture.



02 **Make City Property Available for Urban Agriculture and Community Gardens**

To promote urban agriculture, residents first need to know where there is access to land and space for growing food. Though Rome has designated areas for urban agriculture activities and allows agriculture in residential zones, we recommend both Rome and Utica make city-owned land publicly available to residents who do not own property suitable for agriculture. To determine areas where the city could build out these community garden plots, we recommend officials in Rome and Utica work in collaboration with partners such as CCE Oneida County, the Greater Mohawk Valley Land Bank (GMVLB), and the Tug Hill Tomorrow Land Trust to identify open, vacant land for agricultural conversion or use. While the GMVLB focuses on removing blight and redeveloping properties, exploring partnerships with the Tug Hill Tomorrow Land Trust could lead to opportunities to protect open space for agricultural purposes in Rome and Utica. We recommend that both cities work with partners to develop a Natural Resource Inventory (NRI) with a map of existing resources (soil quality, water access, etc.) as a tool to determine areas suitable for urban agriculture. During this NRI process, detailed soil testing is essential due to the potential for the presence of soil contaminants from Rome' and Utica's industrial history. The NRI should note if parcels are suitable for ground-soil based urban agriculture, animal husbandry, and/or above-ground agriculture, such as raised beds, shipping containers, and hydroponic systems.

City Property for Community Gardens Best Practices

1. Identify land available for agriculture through a comprehensive [Natural Resource Inventory \(NRI\)](#) of suitable land for agricultural use. An NRI is a tool that can be used for mapping out various resources, such as soil types or existing water infrastructure, to identify areas that each respective city could designate for agricultural use. Rome's [2018 Comprehensive Plan Sustainability Index](#) also cites an NRI system as a piece of its recommended agricultural policy strategy.
2. Cornell University's [Healthy Soils, Health Communities](#) initiative provides information and resources for soil testing, including a [Guide to Soil Testing and Interpreting Results](#). Soil testing can be conducted at the [Cornell Soil Health Laboratory](#).
3. An example of a city-level policy that could also support the identification of land suitable from agriculture can be found in Washington D.C.'s [B677](#), passed in 2015. This bill requires the mayor to compile a list of vacant lots in the city to use as urban gardens through donation or negotiated agreement.
4. [Evanston, IL](#) is an example of utilizing city-owned land for urban agriculture. Evanston rents 220 plots per year to city residents through a lottery system. It is recommended that the cities of Utica and Rome consider a similar system of identifying and making land for growing available to residents, benefiting those who are interested in farming but may not have access to land or space for growing food.

03 Increase Access to Water Sources

Rome and Utica’s city codes and planning documents do not address improving water or utility access for growers or tax incentives; however, the [Oneida-Herkimer Solid Waste Authority](#) once provided rain barrels to residents at 50% of their retail cost as part of an Earth Day celebration. The Solid Waste Authority could consider making these rain barrels available more regularly to residents. Additionally, the city of Rome’s comprehensive plan includes a strategy to allow vegetable gardens in all yards to enhance local food production efforts and conserve water on-site (see [Article XI](#)). We recommend the cities of Rome and Utica explore the best practices below and develop a plan to increase access to water for urban growers and farmers that will meet the needs of community members. There may also be state funding available to launch infrastructure projects related to water access for urban agriculture.

Water Access Best Practices

1. The [NYS Urban Farms and Community Gardens Grant](#) program was first enacted through the state budget in FY2023, provides \$1 million in funding for urban farming grants across New York state, and is administered through the New York State Department of Agriculture and Markets (NYSDAM). Organizations serving Rome and Utica can consider applying for funding through this grant to secure funding for water infrastructure projects that are crucial to urban farmers. Projects must focus on food production, food safety, and food distribution, while creating a long-lasting community impact. NYSDAM is interested in equitably funding projects across New York state and encourages organizations in non-traditional and peri-urban areas to apply.
2. New York City’s [hydrant water permit system](#) for qualifying community gardens includes an amended application, no fees, and a reduced pressure zone device supplied by the Department of Environmental Protection.
3. Tucson, Arizona’s [Rainwater Harvesting Rebate Program](#) grants customers up to \$2,000 for installing a rainwater harvesting system. Participants must attend a Rainwater Harvesting Rebate Program Workshop to qualify for the rebate and submit original itemized receipts of materials and labor with the application. A similar program could be created in Utica in collaboration with CCE Oneida and offered in participants' preferred languages.
4. San Francisco, California’s [Community Garden Irrigation Meter Grant Program](#) provides funding of up to \$12,000 from the SF Public Utilities Commission (SFPUC) for the installation of a new dedicated irrigation water service for community garden or urban agriculture purposes. The SFPUC performs the installation, and an additional \$1,300 rebate is available for installing a backflow prevention device.
5. Santa Fe, New Mexico issued a [city-wide ordinance](#) requiring rain catchment systems on all new building projects, which can be used for urban agriculture purposes.

04 Establish an Agriculture Liaison Role in City Government

One of the foundational steps towards enhancing urban agriculture opportunities in Rome and Utica is the creation of a designated food policy position within the existing city government, with a longer-term goal of eventually convening a food policy council to address issues of food access, nutrition, establishment of markets, community gardens, and other related topics. Establishing a liaison role within the city government would build necessary capacity to drive collaboration opportunities for urban agriculture activities, education, and initiatives. This dedicated individual would foster communication and cooperation among the many community organizations, non-profits, local farmers, and city departments who are already working on urban agriculture projects, identifying, and facilitating partnerships that align with city priorities and regulations.

Urban Agriculture Liaison Best Practices

1. A Food Policy Liaison or Food Policy Council could draw inspiration from or collaborate with the [Mohawk Valley Food Action Network](#), which developed the [Mohawk Valley Food Action Plan](#) in 2010. This plan aimed to achieve three key objectives: (1) increase access to healthy foods, (2) advocate for economic development that supports food system business opportunities, and (3) promote a more diverse local food and transportation system. By leveraging the success of the existing plan, both Rome's and Utica's liaisons could tailor their strategies to suit the cities' unique needs and resources.
2. A Food Policy Liaison or Food Policy Council could also bring together environmental advocates for climate-friendly agricultural development. By supporting and promoting these initiatives, Rome and Utica can create a robust network of environmentally conscious urban farmers who contribute to both food security and environmental sustainability. [Utica Greens](#), CCE's [Urban Farm Learning Lab](#), [Rust2Green](#), and the Mohawk Valley Food Action Network are all programs and organizations that offer services and education focused on climate-friendly agriculture.
3. The City of [Seattle's Office of Economic Development](#) has a Food Business Advocate who works to connect local food producers with institutional buyers, such as restaurants, hospitals, and schools. The liaison also provides technical assistance and support to help producers meet the needs of institutional buyers. This could serve as an example for Rome and Utica of what a liaison role could look like and the role they could play within each respective city.

Rome

Rome permits farmers markets on private property and requires annual approval of temporary use permits. The permit requires a management plan for the farmers market and determines its timeframe of operation (see Sec. 80-12.4(a)). **We recommend that elected officials amend the city code to allow longer term permits for farmers markets, creating a consistent local market for urban producers and access to local food for consumers.** To increase the visibility of and participation in Rome's Chestnut Street Farmers Market, which runs from 3:30 pm-6:30pm on Wednesdays from May – to September, we recommend that the city provide funding and public facilities for an additional weekend market day or expanded hours and facilities for a winter indoor market. **Additionally, we recommend that city officials work with the Rome Farmers Market to accept Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits at the market to increase residents' access to local foods.** As a weekly market that operates three hours per day for over three months of the year and hosts more than two agricultural producers, the Rome Farmers Market already meets the eligibility requirements for the Farmers Market Nutrition Program (FMNP) and should encourage farmers that sell at the market to participate in the program. Building on these food access efforts, elected officials and market managers can work with the Farmers Market Federation of New York to participate in SNAP at the Rome Chestnut Street Farmers Market. With a strong foundation for a local urban agriculture economy Rome can expand farmers market hours, incentivize Rome-based urban agriculture producers, and increase market accessibility through SNAP.

Utica

The Oneida County Public Market and the Utica Farmers market both take place in Utica and accept FMNP and SNAP. Currently, Utica requires producers to obtain permits to sell at the Utica Farmers Market, charging vendors an annual fee of \$100 for one space, \$175 for two spaces, and \$250 for three spaces to participate. [5] At the Oneida County Public Market in Utica, permit fees vary based on the type of space and number of markets a farmer attends. **We recommend the city offer incentives to farmers growing food within the Utica city limits.** Examples of incentives could be lowering the annual fees to attend markets, providing the equipment for market set-ups, or the option for smaller growers to aggregate products to sell under one market space. By offering additional incentives for Utica-based growers, the city can incentivize urban growers to participate in farmers markets, providing consistent markets for farmers and increasing access to fresh, locally grown produce for city residents.



Photo credit: Josh Baldo

Farmers' Markets Accessibly Resources

1. [New York State Department of Agriculture and Markets](#) (NYSDAM) offers resources and guidance for establishing, expanding, and improving farmers markets. The NYSDAM website also hosts FMNP registration information in English and Spanish.
2. [USDA's Farmers Market Promotion Program](#) offers grants to develop, coordinate, expand, and support farmers markets. The cities of Rome and Utica could apply for funding from this program to expand access and capacity of their farmers markets for both producers and consumers.
3. [Farmers Market Federation of New York](#) and [Snap to Market](#) provide resources for registering for and accepting SNAP and FMNP benefits at farmers markets in New York state.
4. The [North Mankato, Minnesota Farmers Market](#) is one example of a farmers market that charges no fees for vendors. The vendor application also provides producers with resources about accepting SNAP/FMNP benefits, a useful best practice for increasing food access at a farmers market.
5. A [Minnesota Study](#) provides an example of best practices and outcomes for a market aggregation pilot program. They found minimal but existent benefits for producers in piloting this aggregation program, and Rome and Utica can build on these findings.
6. [Attracting SNAP Customers to Your Farmers Market | Food and Nutrition Service](#) is a USDA resource that can guide Utica in growing its marketing efforts and increasing SNAP usage at their farmers markets.
7. The [Kingston, New York Farmers Market](#) is a year-round market, with an outdoor market in the spring, summer, and fall and an indoor market in the winter; both markets accept SNAP and FMNP benefits. The [Oneida County Public Market](#) in Utica is also year-round and accepts SNAP and FMNP benefits. The city of Rome can look to both these examples to expand market dates and food access to the benefit of both urban-based producers and consumers.



06 **Expand Institutional Local Food Purchasing**

In 2023, CCE Oneida County was awarded a New York State Farm to School Grant of nearly \$100,000 to help Utica School District purchase food from local producers. In the future, CCE Oneida County can work with the [Rome City School District](#) to apply for additional funding through the New York State Farm to School Grant Program to support schools in Rome in building school garden initiatives and purchasing food from local farmers. School officials in both Rome and Utica can also consider applying to the [New York Farm to School Institute](#), an initiative of [Farm to Institution New York State](#) and American Farmland Trust. Participating schools secure a \$5,000 stipend to support agricultural activities within the school, receive a full year of coaching from a farm to school professional and have access to a network of schools participating in farm to school across the state, as well as educational resources to further agricultural education and local procurement in the cafeteria, classroom, and community.

Schools can also serve as spaces for expanded market access for smaller producers. Previous attendees of the New York Farm to School Institute have used grant funds to work with local producers to host community harvest festivals or to distribute regular farm shares or mutual aid produce boxes to combat food insecurity.

Expand Institutional Local Food Purchasing Resources

1. [New York Farm to School Institute](#) provides training and education for successful farm to school programs.
2. [New York State Farm to School Grant](#) provides financial assistance for farm to school programs.
3. [Buffalo City School District](#) has worked closely with CCE's Harvest NY Program and other community partners to develop a model farm to school program. They have engaged Black, Indigenous, and Farmers of Color to develop culturally relevant and locally sourced menus to serve in their cafeterias across the city. Both Rome and Utica have an opportunity to engage a diversity of producers within and around their cities to develop culturally relevant local meals, introducing students not only to their local food system but also to farmers who represent them culturally, racially, and linguistically.

07 Evaluate and Implement Anti-Gentrification Measures

As urban agriculture initiatives gain popularity, there may be concerns about gentrification and displacement of existing communities. The establishment of urban agriculture sites can increase property value, rent, and taxes, threatening to displace existing residents. Equitable implementation of urban agriculture projects should include planning and provisions that make and keep these sites accessible to all community residents. Elected officials should assess the potential impact of new urban agriculture developments and consider implementing anti-gentrification laws or a development plan that safeguards vulnerable populations. Measures such as affordable housing provisions that include edible garden space, community land trusts, and zoning regulations can help mitigate the adverse effects of gentrification, ensuring that the benefits of urban agriculture are inclusive and accessible to all residents.

Anti-Gentrification Resources

1. [Just Green Enough](#) is an urban development strategy that focuses explicitly on social justice and environmental goals defined by local communities.
2. In 1984, Burlington, VT, established its own community land trust, now known as the [Champlain Housing Trust](#). Establishing community land trusts that are governed by community residents and public representatives to protect and conserve land for various uses and keep housing prices affordable can offer protection from gentrification.
3. Anti-gentrification policies can also specifically include urban agriculture. For example, [HB 560](#) in Hawaii, passed in 2003, authorizes the Hawaii Community Development Authority to provide incentives for the development of housing projects that incorporate urban agriculture or garden design.



Conclusion

Urban agriculture has emerged as a sustainable solution to address food security, boost local economies, and improve community well-being.[5]

Over two years, this project set out to better understand the needs of urban farmers and gardeners in Oneida County, the land available for those farmers to accomplish their goals, and the policies and programs in place to support urban farming and gardening in Rome and Utica (Oneida County), New York.

There are a tremendous number of farmers and gardeners based in urban areas who want to grow food to feed their families and communities, and to generate income for their households. Urban-based farmers and gardeners in Oneida County feel rooted in place and want to establish or expand operations on urban and rural land close to home, but need information, support, and financial resources to do so.

There is also a land base in Oneida County for farming and gardening that fits the needs of urban-based farmers and gardeners – small acreage within a short walking or driving distance of Rome and Utica – with landowners willing to make land available. There is work to be done, however, to educate and support farmland owners in making their land available to new and beginning urban farmers, and to clarify how urban land can and cannot be used for farming and gardening under current zoning laws.

When looking at state and local policy, Rome, Utica, and Oneida County are working from a strong foundation to support urban agriculture. By considering and implementing the recommendations proposed here, New York can create an inclusive environment that fosters the growth of urban agriculture, benefiting both urban dwellers and the entire state. These policies and programs must be grounded in the needs of those current and aspiring urban farms and gardeners and must utilize realistic data about the land available for farming and gardening in the areas immediately surrounding Rome and Utica and Rome.

Utilizing the information collected through this project, policy makers, farmers, gardeners, service providers and advocates in Oneida County can work towards a resilient regional food system that prioritizes both urban and rural producers and land to build and feed communities while strengthening local economies.



SOURCES

- [1] New York Times, "[How Refugees are Transforming a Dying Rust Belt Town](#)" June 3, 2022.
- [2] Pace Land Use Law Clinic, "Utica Urban Agriculture Assessment," May 2023.
- [3] Division of Local Government Services, "[Adopting Local Laws in New York State](#)" 2023.
- [4] [Oneida County Food Coalition](#)
- [5] US Department of Agriculture, "[Urban Agriculture](#)," USDA National Agriculture Library, 2023.

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[Getty Images](#), [Getty Images Signature](#), [Pexels](#)*

OTHER DOCUMENTS

- Full assessment tool
- Utica assessment
- Rome assessment
- Maps

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| Policy Recommendations | Rome | Utica | Partners |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Update to Sustainable Agriculture Friendly Zoning | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide accessible, clear information on agricultural activities permitted by zoning ordinances (See Strategy 2.2). Partner with CCE Oneida County to disseminate this info. Designate Urban Agriculture Incentive Zones (UAIzs) to encourage farming. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Revise zoning for sustainable urban agriculture in Land Conservation Districts. Use the proposed 2021 Code Green Zoning Update, funded by NYSERDA, as guide to establish UAIz Collaborate with the Department of Urban and Economic Development to adopt these updates and establish UAIzs. | CCE Oneida County (Rome) Department of Urban and Economic Development (Utica) |
| City Property Available for Urban Agriculture and Community Gardens | Promote urban agriculture by providing city land to residents; collaborate with CCE Oneida County, GMVLB, and Tug Hill Tomorrow Land Trust to identify vacant land; GMVLB for redevelopment, Tug Hill for open space; conduct soil tests for suitability. | | CCE Oneida County GMBLB Tug Hill Tomorrow Land Trust |
| Increase Access to Water Sources | No water/utility provisions for growers. Oneida-Herkimer Solid Waste Authority should offer regular discounted rain barrels. Rome allows vegetable gardens in all yards. Suggestion: explore best practices, develop plan for water access. State funding may be available. | | Oneida-Herkimer Solid Waste Authority |
| Establish a City Government Agriculture Liaison Role | Establish food policy position, expand to council, address access, nutrition, markets, gardens. Facilitate collaboration among organizations, farmers, departments. Align partnerships with city priorities, regulations. | | N/A |
| Expand Farmers Market Accessibility | Create more consistent local markets and food access by amend the city code for longer term permits for farmers markets. Provide city funding and public facilities for an additional weekend market and winter indoor market for the Chestnut Street Farmers Market for additional day or winter indoor market. | Utica charges vendors an annual fee. We suggest incentivizing farmers to join markets by reducing fees, providing equipment, and allowing smaller growers to sell together. This ensures stable markets and enhances residents' access to fresh produce. | Chestnut Street Farmers Market (Rome) City of Utica City of Rome |
| | Farmers Markets in Rome, Utica, and Oneida County accept SNAP and participate in the FMNP | | Farmer Market Federation Farmers Market Nutrition Program |
| Expand Institutional Local Food Purchasing | CCE Oneida County received a \$100k grant for Utica School District to buy local food. They can work to secure more funding for gardens and farmer purchases for Rome City School District. Both districts can join NY Farm to School Institute for \$5k, coaching, and resources. Schools can help small producers with community events and farm shares to fight food insecurity. | | Farm to Institution New York State (FINYS) |
| Evaluate and Implement Anti-Gentrification Measures | Consider gentrification and displacement in urban agriculture. Implement anti-gentrification laws, affordable housing provisions and zoning regulations to maintain accessibility and inclusivity for all. | | |

Policy Recommendations

Resources and Best Practice Examples

Update to Sustainable Agriculture Friendly Zoning

- Urban Agriculture Incentive Zones California, Louisiana, and Missouri
- Boston MA & Seeding the City Land Use Policies to Promote Urban Agriculture
- The 2021 Code Green Zoning Update Project
- (Utica)
- Climate Smart Community Grants

City Property Available for Urban Agriculture and Community Gardens

- Rome's 2018 Comprehensive Plan Sustainability Index
- Cornell University's Healthy Soils & Healthy Communities includes Guide to Soil Testing & Interpreting Results and test through Cornell Soil Health Laboratory
- Washington, D.C.'s B677 vacant lots for urban gardens through donations or negotiated agreement
- Evanston, Illinois city-owned land for urban agriculture

Increase Access to Water Sources

- NYS Urban Farms and Community Gardens Grant
- New York City's hydrant water permit system
- Tucson, Arizona's Rainwater Harvesting Rebate Program
- Community Garden Irrigation Meter Grant Program
- Santa Fe, New Mexico's city-wide ordinance

Establish a City Government Agriculture Liaison Role

- Mohawk Valley Food Action Network developm Mohawk Valley Food Action Plan
- Utica Greens, Urban Farm Learning Lab, Rust2Green and Mohawk Valley Food Action Network
- Seattle's Office of Economic Development

Expand Farmers Market Accessibility

- New York State Department of Agriculture and Markets
- USDA's Farmers Market Promotion Program
- Farmers Market Federation of NY and Snap to Market
- North Mankato, Minnesota Farmer's Market
- Minnesota Study
- Attracting SNAP Customers to Your Farmer's Market
- Kingston, NY Farmer's Market & Oneida County Public Market

Expand Institutional Local Food Purchasing

- New York Farm to School Institute
- New York State Farm to School Grant
- Buffalo City School District

Evaluate and Implement Anti-Gentrification Measures

- Just Green Enough
- Champlain Housing Trust
- HB 560 Hawaii