

SAVING AMERICA'S WORKING LANDS

A National Conference Hosted by American Farmland Trust

DALLAS, TEXAS | APRIL 23-25, 2025

Session: Combatting Conversion: Three Case Studies

SPEAKERS



Lisa Specca

Planner

Specca Farms

As a licensed Professional Planner in the State of New Jersey, Ms. Specca has provided expert professional planning services to municipal planning and zoning boards, state and county governments, non-profit organizations, regional planning agencies, and the NJ courts. She served for nine years on the State Agriculture Development Committee, which administers the NJ Farmland Preservation Program. Her practice specializes in rural and environmental planning, farmland and open space preservation plans, natural resource inventories, and transfer of development rights. Ms. Specca brings a unique perspective to the challenges facing rural communities as she is not only a professional planner but also a farmer. She is a partner in Specca Farms: a 4th generation family farming operation which has transitioned to 100% direct marketing of fruits and vegetables grown on their 125-acre preserved farm. Additionally, she was elected to her Township's Governing Body and served for nine years on her local Planning Board. She is currently serving as Vice President of the NJ State Board of Agriculture. Ms. Specca has served as an expert planning witness for municipalities facing solar energy litigation and has been a frequent speaker on solar energy issues and farmland preservation at meetings, conferences, and workshops across the state. She is an Eisenhower Fellow for Agriculture and an alumnus of the NJ Agricultural Leadership Development Program.



Shanna Atherton-Bauer

Division Director

California Department of Conservation

Shanna is the Director for the Division of Land Resource Protection at the California Department of Conservation. She oversees the state's agricultural land conservation programs as well as programs that support regional efforts to meet the state's natural and working lands goals. She has over 10 years of professional experience in the environmental planning, sustainable agriculture, and land conservation fields.



Billy Van Pelt

BSLA, MBA, PLA, ASLA

University of Kentucky Department of Landscape Architecture

Billy grew up on his paternal grandparents' cattle and tobacco farm in Woodford County, Kentucky. He served AFT for a decade, working two years as a consultant and eight years as a member of the staff. Until November 2024, he served as AFT's National Director of Strategic Initiatives and Senior Advisor. Throughout his professional career, he has worked as a proven, respected, diplomatic, and strategic leader in many sectors - private, public, non-profit, academic, and community. In these roles, he catalyzed and leveraged strategic opportunities to build collaborative initiatives that advance farm and ranch land protection, smart growth, regenerative agriculture, renewable energy, quality of life and higher education. He earned a Bachelor of Arts in business administration

from Transylvania University, where he served as the Chair of the Board of Regents; a Bachelor of Science in landscape architecture from the University of Kentucky, and a Master of Business Administration from Midway University, where he served on the Board of Trustees. As a landscape architect, Billy worked in both the private and public sectors, including over a decade as the director of the purchase of development rights program in Lexington-Fayette County, Kentucky, where he conserved over 28,000 acres. He is dedicated to community service and has served on the Boards of Directors of LexArts, God's Pantry Food Bank, Bluegrass Tomorrow and the Southern Kentucky Performing Arts Center. He currently serves on the Lexington-Frankfort Scenic Corridor, Inc. Board of Directors Executive Committee. Billy is a member of the American Society of Landscape Architects and the Thoroughbred Club of America. He and his spouse, Todd Cheever, MD live in Lexington, Kentucky.



Facilitator

Julia Freedgood

Senior Fellow and Senior Program Advisor

American Farmland Trust

Julia is a prominent national expert in farmland protection, land tenure and access, agricultural viability, and food system planning. As Senior Fellow and Senior Program Advisor at American Farmland Trust, she focuses on the planning and policy framework required to support the livelihoods of farmers and ranchers, and to advance equitable and just regional food systems to increase food security and combat climate change. Currently writing a book on this subject, she also is involved in other research, extension, and community engagement projects at AFT. Julia is the author or co-author of many articles and reports, recent ones include “Cultivating the Next Generation: Resources and Policies to Help Beginning Farmers Succeed in Agriculture,” “Farms Under Threat: The State of the States,” “Fail to Include, Plan to Exclude: Reflections on Local Governments’ Readiness for Building Equitable Community Food Systems,” and “Growing Local: A Community Guide to Planning for Agriculture and Food Systems.” She has many professional affiliations. Among them, she is a long-time member of the American Planning Association, a founding member of North American Food Systems Network, and

serves on the Advisory Board and Editorial Committee of the Journal of Agriculture Food Systems and Community Development. She has served on USDA's Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development Program Grant Review Board and USDA-Secretary Vilsack's Land Tenure Advisory Committee. She holds a M.A. in Urban and Environmental Planning and Policy from Tufts University.