

Agriculture IS Economic Development ~ Central NY Ag Council 2011

by Elizabeth A. Tomlin

Nearly 200 people, including many municipality officials, attended the 3rd Rural Issues: Community Leadership Conference presented by the Central New York Agricultural Council, at the Otesaga Resort Hotel in Cooperstown, NY, on April 6.

The focus of the conference was on utilizing agriculture as an "economic driving force" in rural communities, with Shanna Ratner of Yellow Wood Associates acting as Conference Keynote Speaker.

"In general, municipalities need to help farmers do whatever it takes to connect to the demand side of the market in ways that sustain them," said Ratner. "Municipal officials need to begin by viewing agricultural activity as a significant economic driver and then develop an understanding of different ways to connect farm products and services to consumers, including direct marketing, wholesale marketing, and value-added processing."

Ratner and Executive Director of Center for Agricultural Development and Entrepreneurship (CADE) Chris Harmon shared demonstrations of how municipalities are able to stimulate sustainable agricultural development through community planning and policy making.

"Among other things," Ratner explained, "municipalities can support local demand with their own buying power, provide resources for training — in areas like food safety or renewable energy — that will expand farmer access to markets, connect aging farmers with new farmers, and work with local employers to provide employment opportunities that are complementary to farm employment."

Workshops and breakout sessions provided attendees with more ideas to support agricultural economic development projects and sustainable development.

Local officials were able to fulfill requirements for Training of Municipal Planning and Zoning Officials with qualifying workshops. One such workshop, Balancing Rural Preservation & Smart Growth, was presented by the Founder of Community Planning & Environmental Associates, Nan Stolzenberg, and Pete Fleischer, Executive Director of Empire State Future Coalition.

Stolzenberg stressed the need for communities to have a Comprehensive Plan, adding, "it takes about 18 months to develop a new plan or to update an old one."

Elected officials in communities need to work closely with citizens to develop a plan of strategies, policies, and actions that would be implemented over a period of time to reach common goals concerning land use, agriculture, environmental resources, and enhance municipal infrastructure, while balancing rural preservation with Smart Growth concepts.

Citing the procedure as "Planning 101 for agriculture," Stolzenberg emphasized, "I can not stress enough that the farmer needs to be involved with the local government!"

Additional breakout sessions discussed trends and opportunities in agriculture, and the municipality's role in supporting agribusiness while saving the local government monies through innovative ideas, with Jeff Bouchard, Director of Fulton Co. Dept. of Solid Waste, and Paradigm Consulting Inc., Ron Santino and Greg Keller, and CCE Delaware Co. Paul Cerosaletti.

Municipal Guidance for Natural Gas Drilling featured speakers Michelle Kennedy, Esq., of Cooperstown, and Danielle Hautaniemi, County Planner & Director of Planning and Community Development, CCE Schuyler Co.

"Without land laws in place, you have no leverage," Kennedy stated. "This is an unsettled area of law."

Kennedy stressed the importance of drafting and implementing local laws concerning this controversial issue. Kennedy advises that town councils should be in communication with other towns concerning these laws. "There is a sense of urgency concerning this," she said. "Timing matters! Once your town starts to have the development of this business, it becomes more difficult to stop it."

Kennedy explained that there are several models of local zoning and planning laws to deal with mineral extraction and prohibition, stating that "local laws can be temporary."

Hautaniemi presented a power point presentation containing information of key issues with shale gas drilling, and



Linda Cross (left) of Cripplebush Creek Farm, Schoharie County, stops to chat with Carrie Enyart, also of Schoharie Co., at her Black Willow Pond Farm display during the break at the 2011 CNYAC conference.

Photos by Elizabeth A Tomlin



CNYAC members Zondra Hart (left) and Lynn Bass (right) have been invaluable with their help and advice to Gloria Waro (center) as she pursues a business in the agricultural community.

reminding municipalities of their responsibilities in their townships.

"We will be seeing more and more development of local energy," Hautaniemi said.

She advised municipalities to coordinate a task force to consider the pros and cons. "Respect all opinions, don't try to

be the first community who passes laws that will challenged. Take care in assembling data — and where the data comes from. Realize both opportunistic and negative sides."

Hautaniemi commented that forming a task force is not an easy thing to do, since most people who are elected officials are already working overtime. She suggested looking for responsible volunteers.

The final plenary and closing session featured guest speakers Executive Director of Hudson Valley Agribusiness Development Corp., Todd Erling; Jay Matteson, Jefferson Co. Ag. Dev. Corp., and Zondra Hart, Economic Dev. Specialist, Otsego Co. Dev. Corp.

Each speaker presented information on how their group had helped to bring municipalities and agriculture together to form successful, sustainable agricultural businesses, through education, evaluation, and economic development.

"We need to educate our municipal, state, and federal leaders," attested Erling. "Allow it to be sustainable, no matter what level of agriculture you're working at, you're still a business."

The Central New York Agricultural Council consists of agricultural professionals, county planners, and economic developers, who are dedicated to increasing sustainable agriculture and agribusiness. The council includes eight counties, including Chenango, Fulton, Herkimer, Madison, Montgomery, Oneida, Otsego and Schoharie.



Central NY Agricultural Council members who coordinated and presented the 2011 Central NY Ag Council's 3rd Rural Issues Community Leadership Conference at the Otesaga in Cooperstown were; (from left) front row: Denise Williams (representing Greg Eisenhut, Mohawk Valley Economic Development District); Jennifer Tavares, Commerce Chenango Co.; Marty Broccoli, CCE Oneida County; Becca Jablonski, CCE Madison Co.; Nicole Day, Center for Ag Development & Entrepreneurship; CNY Ag Council Chairman Lynn Bass, of Lynn Bass Associates for Economic Development; Ag Marketing Specialist Michele Strobeck, of Schoharie Co. Planning & Development; Melissa Potter, Montgomery Co. Agricultural Economic Development Coordinator; and Zondra Hart, Otsego Co. Economic Development. Back row: Bernie Armata, CCE Herkimer Co.; David Cox, CCE Schoharie Co.; Chris Harmon, Center for Ag Development & Entrepreneurship; and Doug Greene, Montgomery Co. Economic Development & Planning.