

BEDFORD FARMERS CLUB

MEETING OF MARCH 7, 2020 at Bedford Historical Hall

FARMING WITHOUT FARMS

Club President Mary Farley greeted the audience and thanked Lynn Ryan of the Bedford Historical Society, host and co-sponsor of the event; and acknowledged Lynn's dual role as Executive Director of the Historical Society and BFC member.

Sheila Crespi, Secretary, reported on the BFC meeting of October 16, 2019, held in the rain at the home of wine-maker and artist Ed Giobbi. The minutes were unanimously approved.

Mary Farley, deputizing for Treasurer Roger Vincent, reported on the BFC's solvency and passed around an envelope and sign-up sheet for collection of the annual dues of \$10 / year.

Ellen Best stepped in for Pam Sorkin to present Timely Tips. Ellen advocated for seeds, which are essential to healthy plant growth. What can be done to improve your plants? Open the seed packet and pick out the biggest, plumpest seeds. Buy local seeds so you know your source. Save seeds because each year their quality will improve. Most importantly, boost the richness of your soil by using seed inoculant. Inoculant adds powdery microbes on which plants are dependent. The simplest method is to add a pinch of inoculant to your seed packet, GENTLY SHAKE, and then plant. Ellen distributed free packets of inoculant, which were generously donated by Mill River Supply in Bedford Hills.

Club Historian John Stockbridge gave the Historian's report. Looking back at meetings from 1869, 1892, 1889, 1918 et al., the BFC pondered the issue of how to sustain farm life in Westchester, especially with challenges such as the increasing cost of land and the movement northward for cheaper pastures, the lure of better paying work with shorter hours in the City, and the arrival of "Hilltoppers," wealthy New Yorkers who wanted "gentleman farms". In 1892 the question was posed, "Could a taste for country life and its pursuits be imparted to children in our public schools?" One 1892 attendee offered, perhaps not facetiously, that, "The good looking girls on someone else's farm will have much to do with a farm lad's contentment."

Mary Farley introduced Robin Ashley of the Nominating Committee to present the slate of officers for 2020. Before Robin read the slate, Mary noted that some people might be surprised to find themselves on the list. The nominees were:

- Mary Farley President
- Robin Ashley Vice President
- Roger Vincent Treasurer
- Sheila Crespi Secretary
- John Stockbridge Historian
- Julie Henkin Hospitality
- Pamela Sorkin Timely Tips
- Gene & Sylvia Finger Logistics
- Jim Wood President Emeritus

The slate was approved by unanimous acclamation.

First-time attendees were warmly welcomed, and second-time attendees were unanimously approved for BFC membership – Deb Taft, Leslie Dock, Gregory Muenzen, Lee Apgar and Nancy Nygreen.

The meeting then moved to the topic of the day, “Farming Without Farms.” Mary Farley introduced the panelists:

- Allison Turcan – moderator and farmer hosted at DIG Farm
- Connor Sallaberry – farmer at Stoneberry Farm hosted by Amawalk Farm
- Deb Taft – farmer of Mobius Fields, hosted at various locations
- John Papa – landowner who is host to the container farm of Joe Alvarez and is also looking for other guest farming opportunities
- Leslie Dock – freelance farmer working at Happy Hill Farm, a private farm in Mt. Kisco

Kara Hartigan Whelan, Vice President of the Westchester Land Trust, was unable to attend. One of her programs at the WLT is to match farmers with host landowners.

The overarching themes were the challenges and benefits of being either a guest farmer or host, and what can be done to improve and expand those relationships. Some of the challenges paralleled those recorded in the historical minutes of the BFC, among them, the high cost of farmland, the financial returns of farming vs. other professions, the importance of supporting local farmers, and the sustainability and future of agriculture in Westchester. Other issues include the needs of guest farmers and the expectations of their hosts.

Mr. Sallaberry of Stoneberry Farm – who with his partner grows vegetables, fruits and flowers that are sold at area farmers markets – related that a change of direction at Amawalk Farm, his current host, makes it necessary for him to find a new host situation for next season; the costs might push him out of Westchester and farther upstate.

Ms. Taft has owned Mobius Fields for ten years, utilizing several host lands ~~several other host farms~~ ^{spending time on} in her career. This season she is expanding her operations to an additional location in Brewster where she can grow more flowers in an effort to boost her bottom line because, she said, flowers are much more lucrative than cucumbers.

Mr. Papa is a landowner looking to host a guest farmer, or farmers, on his 21-acre property. After a career in technology that began on Wall Street and then shifted to his local community, his goal now is to use technology and his land in a way that supports local farmers and allows them to survive. Mr. Papa asked, “Why would anybody want to pursue a job that doesn’t make any money and is really, really hard to do?”

Ms. Dock is in her third year at Happy Hill Farm in Mt. Kisco, where she farms a 16-raised-bed garden for her host family. The couple wanted to ensure that their five children were eating food from their own land, with the goal of creating sustainability and food sovereignty on their own

land. Ms. Dock grows an array of fruits, vegetables, flowers and herbs and will now be developing a “food forest” in a 150-yard area using permaculture techniques. Permaculture is a closed-loop system that utilizes all the resources of the land through a variety of techniques – such as composting and solar power – to ensure that no inputs from outside your land are needed and no outputs are created that have to leave your property. She’s helping to develop a similar permaculture project at Marsh Sanctuary in Mount Kisco as a model for visitors so that they might be inspired to create similar systems at their homes.

Ms. Turcan was matched with a host landowner through the WLT program, and operates DIG Farm on Dick Button’s property in North Salem, Ice Pond Farm. Since the farm is run as a non-profit, its goals also include connecting farmers with community, supporting local farmers and working toward food sovereignty. Ms. Turcan is also working with Ms. Dock to establish permaculture techniques at DIG Farm.

In addition to the financial challenges of farming in Westchester – or, as Ms. Taft put it, “I pay insurance, gas and rent at Westchester levels... and I grow vegetables for a living” – there is also the potential for landowners and farmers to have a disconnect between the expectations of the former and needs of the latter – the romantic vision vs. the reality of farming. Ms. Taft noted that in her first foray as a guest farmer, the host’s pool was very close to one section of the field and “If they’re out at their pool, they don’t want to listen to me grunting and sweating and being dirty!” She suggested that landowners visit guest farm operations to understand the reality and needs.

The fact that guest farmers do not control the land hinders their ability to invest in infrastructure that would benefit their operations and bottom line. A long-term lease would enable farmers to apply for grants to build the infrastructure they need to be more productive and more financially secure. Ms. Taft noted that not having a walk-in cooler for storage, for example, means that the entire harvest has to happen on Friday to go to market on Saturday. The result is hundreds of dollars of food being left in the field because she just can’t harvest it all in one day from dawn to dusk.

From a landowner’s perspective, Mr. Papa shared that the death of his wife in 2013 caused him to change the framework of his thinking and seek a new way to use his land for the benefit of his children and the community. He views local farmers as entrepreneurs who are constantly trying, failing and rebooting, and he wants to provide opportunities for them to do that and succeed. He credits the Westchester Land Trust and Kara Whelan for their input and support.

Joe Alvarez, who was in the audience, is currently pursuing a prototype project on Mr. Papa’s land by using a shipping container for hydroponic farming. Mr. Papa relates one young little customer asking, “If we can make this much lettuce and micro-greens in one shipping container, how many containers do we need to feed everyone in town?” Mr. Papa noted that food doesn’t have to come from California or another country, it can be local and be a way of connecting with community. He also noted the portability of container farms as an advantage, if landowners decide to sell their land or terminate their host arrangements with farmers.

Some Specific Benefits / Challenges of Farming Without Farms

- Nutrition: Local growing increases the nutrient density of food. When food travels, it becomes less healthy.
- Privacy: There's a tension between a landowner's need for privacy, and the guest farmer's need to use the land productively, and together they need to find the balance.
- Access to Land: It may be useful to have a separate access point for the farmer and equipment, supplies, etc.
- Water / Electrical Power Source / Fencing: These are all essential to the success of the guest farmer's operation.
- Infrastructure: For more successful agricultural operations, refrigeration and storage space would be huge benefits, as well as storage shed for equipment and greenhouses.
- Safety Issues for Children: With equipment, running extension cords for electricity, etc.
- Communication is essential between host landowners and guest farmers.
- Community, community, community!

There were many interesting questions and suggestions from the audience, which the panelists discussed with enthusiasm. Mr. Alvarez offered that innovative thinking and technology need to be applied to farm production, not just distribution. As an example, allowing farmers to use public school refrigerators as coolers during the summer when school is closed.

Ms. Taft noted that her intention is to grow food. However, to do that she has to subsidize the vegetables with more a lucrative crop such as flowers. She said, "There isn't anybody who's growing your food that you get at the farmer's market who's doing it is to get rich. We're doing it out of passion and love for our communities."

Respectfully submitted,
Sheila Crespi
Secretary