

THE RHODE ISLAND COMPREHENSIVE PLANNING STANDARDS
GUIDANCE HANDBOOK SERIES

**GUIDANCE HANDBOOK #7:
PLANNING FOR AGRICULTURE**

Revised June 2018

The plan must include the identification of existing types and patterns of economic activities including, but not limited to, business, commercial, industrial, agricultural, and tourism.

The Rhode Island Comprehensive Planning and Land Use Regulation Act, RIGL subsection 45-22.2-6(b)(7)

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Rhode Island Comprehensive Planning Guidance Handbook Series is the result of over twenty-four months of cooperation and coordination among state agencies, local planners and other professionals interested in helping cities and towns craft better comprehensive plans. The guidance development process was overseen by the Comprehensive Planning Advisory Committee, a dedicated group of planning, land use, legal, and community professionals who worked diligently to develop content on the comprehensive planning process and to review topical content as it was developed. Without this group the manual would not have become reality.

Additionally, the topical content for the guidance handbook series was developed in conversation with numerous experts. These knowledgeable individuals are the reason that the manual is helpful, user-friendly, and thorough.

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INTRODUCTION

This handbook is meant to be an accompaniment to the Rhode Island Comprehensive Planning Standards Manual (“the Standards Manual”), providing additional information on the agriculture-related standards contained within the manual, as well as general guidance on planning for agriculture. The Rhode Island Comprehensive Planning Standards Manual and the other guidance handbooks in the series can be found online at <http://www.planning.ri.gov/publications/comprehensive-planning-materials.php>.

This manual is split into three sections. [Section 1 - General Information on Planning for Agriculture](#) provides general information, including the purpose of doing so, relevant documents to review and ways to connect agriculture and the other topical areas. [Section 2 - Fulfilling the Standards](#) provides information on satisfying the specific requirements presented in the Rhode Island Comprehensive Planning Standards Manual. [Section 3 - Craft a Better Plan](#) provides additional recommendations for addressing agriculture within a comprehensive plan that are not required for State approval but would strengthen the plan’s overall efficacy.

NOTES

In some cases, this guidebook presents “notes” that are relative to the content being discussed. Each note that occurs within the text will be tagged with a symbol to alert the reader to the note’s purpose, as shown below.

	This symbol is used to identify references to the Rhode Island General Laws (RIGL). Blue text within this note provides a link to the actual RIGL citation.
	This symbol alerts the reader to something that is required for State approval.
	This symbol alerts the reader to potential data sources.
	The text following this symbol provides additional suggestions to enhance comprehensive plans.
	This symbol alerts the reader to sample goals, policies and actions that would fulfill the requirements.
	This symbol indicates general information that is secondary to the main point of the text, but could be helpful to the municipality.
	This symbol alerts the reader to a cross-reference within the guidebook series. If a concept is mentioned in the text area and more information on the concept is available elsewhere in the guidebook series, this note will point the

This handbook includes standards for complying with the requirements of the Comprehensive Planning Act. A standard may: 1) reiterate a requirement found in the Act; 2) provide specifics to clarify a requirement of the Act; 3) describe processes that if followed will help ensure State approval; or 4) identify information that while not specifically required by the Act, has been identified as vital to supporting the intents of the Act. Those standards that describe processes or information not *required* by the Act are listed as recommendations.

SECTION 1. GENERAL INFORMATION ON PLANNING FOR AGRICULTURE

WHAT IS AGRICULTURE?

Agricultural operations in Rhode Island are diverse and varied. From plant and animal farming, to beekeeping, forestry, aquaculture, and turf farming, Rhode Island is rich in agricultural assets. The Rhode Island Agricultural Partnership has defined agriculture as:

the propagation, care, cultivation, raising, and harvesting of the products of truck farming, horticulture, turf, viticulture, viniculture, floriculture, forestry/ tree farming, sugar bush, stabling of five or more horses, dairy farming, aquaculture, or the raising of livestock, including for the production of fiber, furbearing animals, poultry, or bees.

[A Vision for Rhode Island Agriculture: Five-year Strategic Plan](#)

Throughout this document, the terms “agriculture” and “agricultural operations” are intended to include all of the uses described above, as well as the myriad of supporting uses that are essential to maintaining the state’s agricultural operations. The term “working landscape” refers to the ability of the land to simultaneously provide economic activity and preservation value in a sustainable manner. The term “agricultural products” is used to describe anything grown, raised or harvested for use or consumption, including animals, fruits and vegetables, seafood, fibers, turf, timber, honey, etc.

WHY INCLUDE AGRICULTURE?

A New Perspective

The comprehensive planning process allows cities and towns to look at agriculture and the pieces of the agricultural system in a new way as part of the working landscape. The comprehensive planning process allows communities to address the subject of agriculture and farming within the framework of achieving a shared vision for the future. The comprehensive plan provides a forum for the discussion of agriculture in light of the municipality’s economic development and conservation goals, and the issues related to agriculture can be considered by the entire community. Ideally, the comprehensive planning process would result in a consensus as to what types of agricultural operations, and accessory agricultural operations, are appropriate for the community.

Supporting the Agricultural System

Perhaps the most important, yet often overlooked aspect of agriculture is that it is an industry and a source of economic activity. Farms are only one piece of a larger system; a system that must be considered and planned for in its entirety to ensure its overall economic viability. Addressing agriculture in a comprehensive plan gives the opportunity to assess the economic impacts of the local agricultural system. The components of the agricultural system are typically defined as:

Production: The term production refers to the growing, raising and cultivating of agricultural products, such as plants and animals. Production can occur at a variety of scales, in a variety of locations, including on a farm, in a community garden, at an indoor facility, on a private house lot, in greenhouses, and on aquaculture facilities.

Processing: Processing is changing the form of a raw agricultural product. Turning strawberries into jam, wood into furniture and eggs into egg salad are all types of processing, as are slaughter houses, meat packers and composting facilities. Processing in Rhode Island is primarily on an artisanal scale and usually happens on a farm, at a local shop, such as a butcher shop or bakery, or in a community kitchen. To remain economically viable, most farms do some amount of processing on-site.

Distribution: The moving of products between and within a community is known as distribution. Products can be distributed from a farm to a retailer, from a farm to a purchaser, or from a purchaser to a retailer.

Purchasing: Purchasing refers to the acquisition of agricultural products from a producer with the intention to resell or make products available to the consumer. Local food purchasers include retail outlets, such as restaurants and grocery stores, and institutions, such as schools, governments and hospitals.

Marketing: The portion of the agricultural system known as marketing relates to the way farmers and other producers are able to promote their products. The most typical form of marketing is done with promotional materials, such as signs, brochures and websites, however a significant portion of a local producers marketing comes from attending farmer’s markets.

Retailing: Retailing is the process of getting the agricultural products to the consumer. Rhode Island has very high levels of direct to consumer sales, which enables people to connect directly with farming operations as part of the community. Typically, retailing occurs at:

- Farmers’ Markets: events where a number of farmer’s and other vendors get together at a set date and time to sell products to the community.
- Retail Stores: permanent businesses, such as grocery stores, convenience stores, specialty food stores and greenhouses, which sell local products.
- On-farm Farm Stands: permanent retail outlets located on a farm.
- Off-farm Farm Stands: permanent retail outlets not located on a farm.
- Temporary Farm Stands: small retail outlets that are set up temporarily, either on farm or elsewhere, for farmers and other producers to sell goods.
- Mobile Farm Stands: retail outlets located within a vehicle, which have the ability move from place to place to sell goods.

Agritourism: Agritourism is a term used to describe on-farm activities that cause people to make a special trip to the property. Agritourism can involve an activity, such as a pick-your-own program, a corn maze, cooking classes, or a petting zoo, but the term can also apply to on-farm bed and breakfasts or farm stays. For many farmers, agritourism is crucial for maintaining the economic viability of the farm.



The required content for related to agriculture stems from the Rhode Island Comprehensive Planning and Land Use Regulation Act, RIGL subsections [45-22.2-6\(b\)\(2\)](#), [45-22.2-6\(b\)\(7\)](#) and [45-22.2-6\(b\)\(12\)](#).

RELEVANT STATE GOALS AND POLICIES

Every comprehensive plan must be consistent with and embody the State’s goals and policies for agriculture as found in the State Guide Plan and the laws of the State. The goals and policies listed below represent the main themes of the State’s goals and policies for agriculture and are intended to provide focus as to which aspects of the State’s goals and policies are most important for local comprehensive planning.



See the Rhode Island Comprehensive Planning and Land Use Regulation Act, RIGL subsections [45-22.2-6\(b\)\(1\)](#) and [45-22.2-9\(d\)\(3\)](#).

From the State Guide Plan

Preserve the best farmland and active farms in the State for active agricultural use.

Land Use 2025: Rhode Island’s State Land Use Policies and Plan, Policy LUP19, page 2-10

Strengthen and support Rhode Island’s burgeoning food system businesses, which span agriculture, aquaculture and fishing, food processing/manufacturing, and sales.

Rhode Island Rising: A Plan for People, Places, and Prosperity, Goal 3, Policy 2, page 75

From the Rhode Island General Laws

The preservation and expansion of agriculture are goals of the state.

Notification to Farmers, RIGL section 2-23.1-1

The general assembly intends: (2) That policies and programs of the state will support and promote the Rhode Island agriculture and seafood industries as a vital component of the state’s economy and essential steward of our land and coastal waters;

The Rhode Island Local Agriculture and Seafood Act, RIGL section 2-25-3



See the Rhode Island Right to Farm Act, RIGL sections [2-23-2](#); the Rhode Island Agricultural and Seafood Act, RIGL subsections [2-25-2\(1\)](#), [2-25-2\(4\)](#) and [2-25-2\(7\)](#) and section [2-25-3](#); the Farmland Preservation Act, section [42-82-1](#); and Taxation of Farm, Forests and Open Space, subsections [44-27-1\(1\)](#) and [44-27-1\(2\)](#).

OTHER RELEVANT DOCUMENTS

Before beginning an assessment of existing conditions, needs and trends, and before developing new goals, policies and actions, communities should review other state and local plans and other documents that are relevant to planning for agriculture, including:

- The RI Department of Environmental Management’s “Rules and Regulations for Implementation of the Farm, Forest and Open Space Act,” available at <http://www.dem.ri.gov/pubs/regs/regs/agric/ffosimp.pdf>;
- The RI Department of Environmental Management’s “Rhode Island Green Industry” report, available at <http://www.dem.ri.gov/programs/bnatres/agricult/pdf/greenemp.pdf>; and
- The Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management’s “Community Guidance to Maintain Working Farms and Forests,” available at <http://www.dem.ri.gov/programs/bpoladm/suswshed/pdfs/farmfor.pdf>.

STAKEHOLDERS TO INCLUDE

In addition to the general public, when discussing how best to plan for agriculture, municipalities may benefit from involving:

- Local farmers or other agricultural business owners, such as farmer’s market managers or local food producers;
- Representatives from regional conservation districts;
- Statewide organizations with an interest in agriculture, such as the RI Agricultural Partnership, the RI Food Policy Council or the RI Farm Bureau;
- Community-based organizations with an interest in food access or agriculture;
- Local land trusts;
- Potential key consumers, such as schools, hospitals, etc.; and
- Representatives from the RI Department of Environmental Management’s Division of Agriculture.

TIPS ON STARTING THE CONVERSATION

One of the best ways to begin a discussion about local agriculture with community members is to highlight the many benefits that local agriculture brings to a community. Providing information to community members about the benefits of agriculture outlined below can help to create a shared understanding from which goals, policies and implementation techniques can be developed.

Increased Economic Opportunities: A 2012 study commissioned by the RI Department of Environmental Management estimates that Rhode Island’s agricultural sector has a total economic impact of \$268.2 million and employs 2,330 people. According to the US Census of Agriculture, the number of farms in the state grew by 42% between 2002 and 2007, which is 10 times higher than the national average rate of growth, with the largest growth in farms that are less than five acres in size. Further supporting and strengthening Rhode Island’s agricultural sector will only enhance the sector’s overall economic impact.

Reduced Food Miles Traveled: Most of the food that is purchased within Rhode Island is brought in from out-of-state. Improving the local agricultural system by encouraging more production-based farms, allowing food processing facilities and retail outlets in close proximity to farms and adopting local food purchasing policies will reduce the overall number of miles food travels before it ends up on a Rhode Island table. The benefits of reduced food miles include decreased air pollution, reduced oil consumption, and improved population health, with the added bonus of decreased cost of food.

Increased Access to Healthy Food: With a robust local food system and multiple points of sale, all Rhode Islanders will experience increased access to healthy foods. Additionally, Rhode Island’s food supply will be less vulnerable to emergencies that may occur in the industrial food system, such as a salmonella outbreak.

Increased Sense of Community: An important part of supporting local agriculture is allowing farmers’ markets and farm stands, and these specialized retail outlets bring together residents, families, artists and farmers in an unprecedented way. The state’s many farmers’ markets are well attended, especially by people who live in the neighborhoods in which the events are held.

Community Revitalization: Urban agriculture can be a form of community revitalization because it can turn empty lots or previously under-used spaces into community assets, increasing the value of surrounding homes and overall neighborhood desirability. Urban agriculture can also increase neighborhood safety and connectedness, as more people will be out on the street, walking to and from a farm or garden and will have more opportunity to interact with neighbors.

Additionally, starting the conversation may require recognition that Rhode Island’s agricultural sector is composed of farms and other agricultural operations in multiple scales and sizes. Rhode Island currently contains small- and large-scale farms that produce and process a large variety of agricultural products. Recognition of the diversity of farm operations that could be appropriate within a municipality may help to build consensus around agricultural goals.

MAKING CONNECTIONS THROUGHOUT THE PLAN

Though there are several specific topics that are required to be addressed within a comprehensive plan, it is important that municipalities not consider the topic areas in as segregated elements, but rather as pieces of a larger system. Everything within a community is connected in diverse and varied ways, all of which should be considered when crafting a comprehensive plan. The information provided below is intended to highlight a few of the ways that municipalities should think about the connected nature of the topic areas.

Relationship to Land Use

Agriculture, much more than for most other land uses, has a special connection to the land and is dependent on site specific conditions. Therefore, in considering the relationship of agriculture to land use, the most important factor is the suitability of the land for agricultural uses. Foremost in determining agricultural suitability is the soil. As discussed in Guidance Handbook #2 - Planning for Natural Resources, part of a comprehensive plan’s assessment of natural resources is the identification of important agricultural soils; this assessment must be part of the community’s decision-making in incorporating agriculture into its pattern of future land uses.

In addition to the suitability of the land for agriculture, the Land Use section should also consider the most suitable types of land use for areas adjoining or near agricultural activities. While farms add to the character and economy of a community, they are business operations that can have aspects that could be objectionable to nearby residences. Accordingly, the proximity and density of housing in relation to agricultural activities should be taken into account.

Relationship to Economic Development

The comprehensive plan must assess the role of agriculture as part of the municipality’s existing types and patterns of economic activity. Farms are to be considered for their contributions to the economic activity of the municipality and should be supported as an important component of the business community. The goals, policies, and implementation actions presented in the economic development section of the comprehensive plan should reflect the community’s agricultural goals. Additionally, the local food movement is increasing in importance and can may have a significant impact on economic development relative to food markets, restaurants, community supported agriculture, etc.

SECTION 2. FULFILLING THE STANDARDS

STANDARD 7.1

IDENTIFY VALUABLE AGRICULTURAL SOILS ON A MAP.

Valuable agricultural soils must be identified on a map. It is not necessary to map all soil types, only those that have been classified as “prime” or “soils of statewide importance” by the United States Department of Agriculture, Natural Resources Conservation Service, and the soils may be grouped by these categories on the map. Furthermore, you need not consider soils located in areas that are already developed. This standard may be fulfilled in a number of ways:

- You may include “prime” and “soils of statewide importance” as a layer on a natural resources map;
- You may include a specific soils map;
- You may create an “agriculture” map that shows all of the agricultural resources in the community, including soils, active farmlands, protected farmland, and other pieces of the agricultural system. We recommend this option for municipalities that have significant agricultural operations. This option could also serve to meet the next standard discussed below.

The purpose of identifying these soil types on a map is to assist the community in allocating future land uses and developing policies and strategies for the preservation of such areas.



Also see Guidance Handbook #2 - Planning for Natural Resources, Standard 2.1. Communities have the option of combining the mapping of valuable agricultural soils with the mapping of other natural resources.



DATA SOURCES

For more information on mapping for comprehensive plans, please visit www.planning.ri.gov/publications/comprehensive-planning-materials.php.

The following RIGIS data sets are recommended for this standard:

DATA SET NAME	DOWNLOAD LINK	ADDITIONAL NOTES
Soils	http://www.rigis.org/datasets/soils	This data set must be queried as follows: Query 'FARM_CLS'. Please note that this will display all agricultural soils, including those in developed areas. To display only the agriculturally valuable <i>undeveloped</i> soils, mask the developed soils by overlaying the developed areas as found in the Land Use - 2011 data set.

STANDARD 7.2 (RECOMMENDATION)

INCLUDE AN INVENTORY OF SIGNIFICANT AGRICULTURAL OPERATIONS BY IDENTIFYING:

- a. The locations and types of active agricultural operations; and
 - b. Farm lands that have been protected from development, even if currently idle.
-

This inventory is clearly connected to, but goes beyond, the identification of agricultural soils. For example, there are some types of agricultural lands and operations that do not depend on standard farmland soils that should also be inventoried, if applicable. These include lands on which livestock operations exist, lands for specialty crops such as apples, peaches, grapes, blueberries, or cranberries, holiday tree farms, nurseries, and lands where greenhouses or other agricultural buildings are located.

An inventory of significant agricultural operations may presented be in narrative, list, table, or map form. As noted in the preceding section, it is recommended that the inventory be presented as an “agriculture” map.



CRAFT A BETTER PLAN

Additionally, though not required, the inventory could include lands that host other aspects of the agricultural system, such as farmer’s markets and community kitchens.



DATA SOURCES

For more information on mapping for comprehensive plans, please visit www.planning.ri.gov/publications/comprehensive-planning-materials.php.

The following RIGIS data sets are recommended for this standard:

DATA SET NAME	DOWNLOAD LINK	ADDITIONAL NOTES
Conservation Lands: Municipal and NGO	http://www.rigis.org/datasets/local-conservation-areas	For protected farmland. This data set must be queried as follows: ‘PURP’ = Agricultural Land Preservation.
Conservation Lands: State of Rhode Island	http://www.rigis.org/datasets/state-conservation-areas	For protected farmland. This data set must be queried as follows: ‘PURP’ = Agricultural Land Preservation.
Land Use - 2011	http://www.rigis.org/datasets/land-use-and-land-cover-2011	n/a

DATA SET NAME	DOWNLOAD LINK	ADDITIONAL NOTES
RI Ecological Communities Classification	http://www.rigis.org/datasets/ecological-communities-classification-2011	For protected farmland and active farmland. For protected farmland, this data set must be queried as follows: 'ACQ_TYPE' = Agricultural Development Rights. For active farmland, this data set must be queried as follows: 'Class' = Agricultural, 'Community' = Croplands and Hawyfields/Pastures, 'Type' = Cropland, Hayfields, Nursery/ Christmas Trees; Orchard, Pasture, Turf, and Vineyard.

Additionally, communities may want to use the following data sources:

- Local tax assessor's data.
- Data from FarmFresh Rhode Island.
- Tax information from the Rhode Island Department of Revenue, which may help to determine which businesses are agricultural operations.
- Discussions with key stakeholders, such as active farmers and local or state agricultural organizations.

STANDARD 7.3 (RECOMMENDATION)

ASSESS THE ROLE OF AGRICULTURE AS PART OF THE MUNICIPALITY'S EXISTING TYPES AND PATTERNS OF ECONOMIC ACTIVITY BY DESCRIBING:

- a. The scale of the agricultural sector in the community, including supporting uses such as processing centers, distribution centers, etc.; and
 - b. The overall trend in the agricultural sector, for example expanding, contracting, diversifying, etc.
-

Building on the inventory of prime agricultural lands detailed above, the community should assess the overall economic impact of these components on the municipality.

The results of this assessment should be included with other economic development related information in the comprehensive plan. The level of detail will depend on the importance of agriculture to your community.



DATA SOURCES

To fulfill this standard, communities may want to use the following data sources:

- Economic data from the RI Department of Environmental Management's Division of Agriculture.
- Tax information from the Rhode Island Department of Revenue.
- Discussions with key stakeholders, such as active farmers and local or state agricultural organizations.

STANDARD 7.4 (RECOMMENDATION)

DISCUSS THE OPPORTUNITIES THAT EXIST WITHIN THE COMMUNITY TO FURTHER SUPPORT AGRICULTURE RELATIVE TO CAPACITY, ACCESS, AND PARTNERSHIPS.

Comprehensive plans have the ability to set policies that lessen the likelihood that farms will be lost to non-agricultural uses. Successful agricultural operations require many things, ranging from the right soil and climate to economically viable conditions. While comprehensive plans cannot directly alter soil conditions, control climate, or create markets, they can set policies that impact these important areas. In order to support agriculture, comprehensive plans should discuss the opportunities that exist within the community relative to three primary areas: capacity, access and partnerships.

Capacity: The primary factor for agricultural capacity is the amount and quality of land that is available for agricultural uses (all types). However, local zoning and other regulations can significantly affect the extent to which that capacity can be utilized. To determine the opportunities in capacity, communities should consider the following guiding questions:

- What are the municipality's strengths and weaknesses related to agriculture?
- Are there operations from each piece of the agricultural system within the municipality?
- Where are the various components of the agricultural system currently allowed?
- What local land use, zoning or other regulations are currently impacting the viability of agricultural operations?
- Do the community's land valuation practices and programs support local farms? Are the existing programs effective? If not, why?
- What types of housing are currently allowed on farm lands? Are those types appropriate to the use of farming?

Access: Access refers to the ability of the public to easily obtain local agricultural products. An assessment of existing levels of and challenges to public access could reveal opportunities within the community to enhance the availability of local agricultural products. To determine the opportunities in increasing access, communities should consider the following guiding questions:

- How easy is it for community members to obtain local agricultural products?
- To what extent does my community allow permanent or temporary on-farm and off-farm retail outlets?

Partnerships: Supporting local agriculture takes a lot of people who see its value and work diligently to ensure its success. Therefore, some opportunities for supporting local agriculture come in the form of strengthened partnerships. The municipality should have a basic understanding of who in the community is working in the agricultural system and how the city or town can partner with these organizations to further support the work. To determine the opportunities for increased partnerships, communities should consider the following guiding questions:

- Who is doing agricultural work in the community?
- Who is advocating for agriculture in the community?
- Are municipal purchasing policies supportive of local farm products?

STANDARD 7.5

INCLUDE GOALS THAT EMBODY THE STATE'S GOALS FOR AGRICULTURE AND POLICIES TO SUPPORT EACH GOAL.

Comprehensive plans must include one or more goals that further the State's aims of preserving farmland and active farms for agricultural use and expanding the state's agricultural sector, and policies to support each identified goal. The goals and policies that may be appropriate for a community's comprehensive plan will depend on the nature and desires of the community, especially the degree of existing development, however, the intent of the State is clearly identified in both its laws and plans – the state desires to maintain and expand its agricultural sector.

To determine the goals and policies that may be appropriate for your municipality, consider the following guiding questions:

- What should be the future role of agriculture in the community?
- Why is it important to the community that the existing agricultural operations be sustained?
- Does the community hope to grow its agricultural sector?
- What direction can be given to local decision makers when considering matters related to farmlands?



For more information on the difference between goals, policies and implementation actions, see Guidance Handbook #1 - The Comprehensive Plan 101.



SAMPLE GOALS

- Our community will have a vibrant agricultural sector that includes both farms and other agricultural-support uses.
- Agriculture will be a vital and vibrant component of the municipality's economic activity.
- Agriculture will remain an important use in historically farmed areas.



SAMPLE POLICIES

- Support the purchase of development rights on prime agricultural lands.
- Support and promote the Farm, Forest, and Open Space program.
- Support urban agricultural initiatives.
- Work with community partners to promote local agricultural products.
- Partner with existing community organizations to increase access to local agricultural products.
- Work with the local community land trust to target prime agricultural lands for preservation.

STANDARD 7.6

Include implementation actions within the Implementation Program that addresses:

THE EXPANSION AND STABILIZATION OF AGRICULTURE AS PART OF THE ECONOMIC BASE

(Recommend using a. through d. to fulfill this standard)

a. Preserve the best farmland for agricultural use.

Once valuable farmlands have been inventoried, communities must implement actions that seek to preserve and prioritize these lands for agricultural use. To properly address this topic, communities should consider the following guiding questions when developing policies and implementation actions:

- Do the future land uses targeted for farmlands and agricultural soils help to preserve these lands for agricultural use?
- Is there a local land trust that could be better supported to assist in the preservation of prime agricultural lands?
- Does municipal zoning aid in or detract from the preservation of farmlands?



SAMPLE ACTIONS

- Establish a program for purchasing or transferring the development rights of prime agricultural lands.
- Work with local conservation organizations and/or land trusts to prioritize the acquisition of prime agricultural lands.
- Amend the zoning ordinance to include an agricultural zoning district that can be applied to preserved agricultural lands.

b. Keep active farms in agricultural use and promote the active use of idle agricultural land.

Active farms must be thought of as businesses; no farm can survive for long unless it makes a profit for the farmer. Municipalities must adopt implement actions that are proactive in helping to maintain the economic viability of agricultural operations that exist both within their boundaries and throughout the state. To do this, municipalities need to view farms as multi-use operations with unique needs and requirements and plan appropriately. When developing implementation actions, communities should consider the following guiding questions:

- Are the various components of the agricultural system allowed in areas where agricultural operations are happening currently or are targeted to happen in the future?
- Are there any local regulations currently impacting the viability of agricultural operations, such as requirements related to parking, loading, composting, retail sales, signage, etc?
- What direction can be given to local decision makers when considering matters related to active farms?



The Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management has published a report entitled, “Community Guidance to Maintain Working Farms and Forests,” which describes different ways in which municipalities can adopt performance standards for agriculture.



SAMPLE ACTIONS

- Review the regulations of zoning districts in which agriculture is a permitted use for restrictions on related agricultural uses, such as allowance of farm stands, processing and distribution, signage requirements, parking standards, loading and unloading requirements, and determine whether any changes can be made to better support agricultural operations.
- Review and revise zoning requirements to allow processing where it is likely to happen, such as on a farm that lies within a residential zone or at a butcher shop in a commercial zone.
- Adopt a system of performance standards for agricultural zones, such as those recommended in RI DEM’s Community Guidance for Working Farms.

c. Expand the agricultural sector.

The Rhode Island General Laws make it clear that one goal of the state is the expansion of the agricultural sector and municipalities must include implementation actions that support this goal. There are many ways in which municipalities can support the expansion of agricultural activities, including designating specific lands as agricultural land use on the Future Land Use Map. To determine the implementation actions that may be appropriate, communities should consider the following guiding questions:

- Are there areas of the community into which expansion of the agricultural sector would be beneficial?
- Are there areas or districts of the community that should be targeted for the development of innovative agricultural operations, such as urban agriculture, hydroponic operations or indoor aquaculture facilities?
- Are there ways in which the municipality could partner with active farms and/or community groups to better support agricultural uses?



SAMPLE ACTIONS

- Revise land development and subdivision regulations to allow agriculture as a permitted use within the dedicated open space of conservation subdivisions.
- Revise the zoning ordinance to allow multi-family housing and/or multiple residential buildings on farm lands to house farm workers.
- Establish a program by which vacant, publicly owned lands can be converted to active agricultural uses.
- Revise land development and subdivision regulations to allow agriculture as a permitted use within the dedicated open space of conservation subdivisions.

d. Capitalize on existing agricultural opportunities.

After assessing the opportunities that exist to further support the agricultural system, implementation actions can be developed that build on those opportunities. Communities must determine the course of action that best suits their context and needs, and include implementation actions that would capitalize on existing opportunities. To determine implementation actions that can help to capitalize on the community's agricultural opportunities, consider the following guiding questions:

- Are there any opportunities to expand the components of the agricultural system within the municipality?
- What opportunities exist for enhancing public access to local agricultural products?
- How can the people and organizations currently doing agricultural work be better supported?



SAMPLE ACTIONS

- Implement a municipal food-waste composting program.
- Review and revise local purchasing requirements to require the purchase of local foods when possible.
- Review local event permitting procedures and requirements, such as fees, parking regulations and signage restrictions, to determine if alterations can be made to better support temporary retail outlets, such as farmers' markets.

SECTION 3. CRAFT A BETTER PLAN

RECOMMENDATION 7.7

IDENTIFY THE AREAS OF THE MUNICIPALITY WHERE AGRICULTURAL OPERATIONS WOULD BE BENEFICIAL AS A FUTURE LAND USE

As the community considers the future role of agriculture, it should also consider how agriculture will relate to the other land uses envisioned for the municipality. The cornerstone of any comprehensive plan is its Future Land Use Map. However, in many comprehensive plans, future agricultural uses are not designated as separate, distinct uses on the Future Land Use Maps, but are included on the map as allowed uses within the community's low-density residential areas. The connection between agricultural operations and residential development is inevitable in Rhode Island. The qualities of the land that often make for good farms also make for easy residential development. Furthermore, farmers often depend on their land being zoned residential in order to allow them sufficient value to secure loans.

To appropriately address agriculture within a comprehensive plan, communities should determine in which areas of the municipality the components of the agricultural system would be beneficial as a future land use. These areas could include parcels that are currently in active agricultural use. To determine the areas in which agricultural uses would be most beneficial, municipalities should consider the following guiding questions:

- Are there undeveloped parts of town in which prime farmland soils are prevalent? If so, how are these areas currently being used? Are they appropriate for agricultural operations? How are they being protected?
- What factors are contributing to the loss of farmland? Factors to consider include local regulations, economic conditions, land value, taxation and land use patterns.
- How is investment in infrastructure, such as water lines, contributing to development in areas suitable for agriculture?
- Has proximity of new homes or other incompatible uses affected existing farm operations?
- Are there large tracts of agricultural land that have been or may be sold for development in the foreseeable future? If so, what impact would this have on the community?

Once the appropriate areas are determined, communities could support the development of agricultural uses by:

- Designating agriculture as a category on the Future Land Use Map;
- Including an agricultural overlay on the Future Land Use Map; or
- Including agriculture as a permitted use in one or more land use categories and describe the reasons why agricultural use cannot be mapped as a future land use or with an overlay. (As an example, this option may be appropriate for urban municipalities in which it is impossible to determine where urban agricultural uses may be located in the future.)

Communities that are seeking to support the other components of the agricultural system, such as processing, distribution and retailing, may also wish to discuss where these components would be appropriate within the Land Use chapter or Economic Development section of the comprehensive plan.

RECOMMENDATION 7.8

Include implementation actions within the Implementation Program that address:

MITIGATING CONFLICTS BETWEEN AGRICULTURAL AND NON-AGRICULTURAL USES.

Supporting local agricultural operations means being forward thinking in land use planning and the development of municipal regulations, so that future conflicts between agricultural and non-agricultural uses are mitigated. One important way to mitigate conflict is by assessing the community regulations that affect agricultural operations and considering ways to improve these regulations for the benefit of all. When determining how to mitigate conflicts between agricultural and non-agricultural uses, consider the following guiding questions:

- What standards are currently in place for the operation of agricultural activities?
- Should the municipality adopt a system of performance standards to ensure minimal impact of agricultural uses on surrounding properties?



SAMPLE ACTIONS

- Adopt a system of performance standards for agricultural zones, such as those recommended in RI DEM's Community Guidance for Working Farms.