

Most people refer to Maine as rural. Winslow, as a microcosm of Maine, is generally considered rural. But what exactly do we mean by “rural?” Portland is not rural; neither is the downtown central Maine area on either side of the Waterville-Winslow Bridge. Yet, the bulk of Maine outside of Portland is rural, just as the balance of Winslow is rural, right?

According to Webster’s Dictionary, “rural” means “Of the country, or country life.” Of course, Webster also defines “countryside” as “A rural area or its inhabitants.” Roget’s Thesaurus tells us that synonyms for the adjective “country” are “arcadian, bucolic, campestral, pastoral, provincial, rural, [and] rustic.” All emotionally-charged words, but again, what does it mean?

The W.K. Kellogg Foundation conducted a rigorous study in 2001, with in-depth interviews of hundreds of rural, suburban, and urban residents across the United States. Researchers attempted to determine perceptions of rural America. They found that, “Agriculture plays the predominant role in respondents’ perceptions of rural America...the overwhelming majority of people in our study – both rural and non-rural – believe agriculture is the dominant industry of rural America.” Respondents’ notions of rural America are dominated by agricultural images, but not just any agriculture – small family farm agriculture: “The three most common images of rural America...were farms and crops (32 percent), pastures (21 percent), and animals (12 percent).” Winslow has all three:



**Farms and Crops**



**Pastures**

Photo courtesy Frank Stankevitz



**Animals**

Driving along the two-lane roads in the eastern two-thirds of Winslow, seeing the farms and forests, definitely conjures up the thought “rural.” Despite creeping sprawl, viable agriculture remains in many parts of Winslow.

Winslow currently has 678 acres of farmland in the Farm and Open Space Current Use Tax Program. This is a tax program that allows property owners a reduction in their assessed

property value. The land must be used for farming, agriculture, horticulture and can include woodland and wasteland. Additionally, the tract must contribute at least \$2,000 gross income from farming activities, each year. Most of the farms in this program are small. Of the 24 parcels in the program, there is only 1 over 100 acres in size. In 2002 (most recent USDA Census of Agriculture data), the average farm size in Kennebec County was 150 acres.

In 1995, there were 1,100 acres of farmland in the Farm and Open Space Current Use Tax Program. In the last decade, Winslow has lost over 400 acres of farmland, equating to a loss of approximately 40%. Though Winslow has lost farms recently, some existing produce is still locally accessible:

### Community Supported Agriculture (CSA)

*WinterGreen Herbs and Vegetables*

Garland Road

### Farmstand

*B&F Vegetables*

Bassett Road

*Eagle View Gardens and Haunted Trail*

Garland Road

*Johnny's Selected Seeds*

Benton Avenue

### Pick-Your-Own Apples

*Windy Hill Orchard*

South Reynolds Road

Many Winslow farmers sell their produce and products in the Fairfield and Waterville Farmer's Markets. There is no farmer's market in Winslow, but the Fairfield and Waterville markets are easily accessible to Winslow residents.

Forestland is also a major contributor to Winslow's sense of "rural." There are 117 parcels, totaling 6,460 acres in the Tree Growth Current Use Tax Program. This is a similar program to the Farm and Open Space, in that a landowner with at least 10 acres of forestland used for commercial harvesting can obtain a reduced property tax assessment. In 1995,

approximately 6,977 acres were in the Tree Growth Current Use Tax Program. Though this presents a greater loss in total acreage (517 acres) than farmland over the last decade, the percentage loss is less than 10%.

To qualify for the Tree Growth Program, forestland must be commercially harvested. In the decade 1996-2006, 6,638 acres of timber was harvested. Of this total harvested amount, only 33 acres was clearcut. The harvesting statistics cover all of Winslow, not just those parcels in the Tree Growth Program.

### **Analysis and Key Issues**

Winslow contains approximately 21,500 taxable acres. In 1995, 38% of that land was registered under either the Farm and Open Space or Tree Growth Current Use Tax Program. Today, approximately 7,185 acres are in these programs, equaling 33% of Winslow's taxable land. Though the numbers are decreasing, 1/3 of all town taxable land is still a sizable proportion.

The Rural Sociological Society recently (spring 2008) published a study entitled "Farming in the Urban Shadow: Supporting Agriculture at the Rural-Urban Interface." The Rural-Urban Interface is that region undergoing suburbanization and sprawl, where agriculture occurs at a smaller scale, with more diversified products, as opposed to the massive commodity-driven farms in large farming counties. Basically, the Rural-Urban Interface is East-West Winslow. The authors document that in 2002, 55% of all farm sales in the United States were from farms located at the Rural-Urban Interface, even though Rural-Urban Interface farms account for only 40% of all farmland. Farming in places like Winslow is more profitable than traditional large-scale farming. Among the reasons cited for this profitability, are 1) more organic farming which fetches a premium price, 2) more roadside stands where farmers receive a premium over wholesale, and 3) easy access to farmer's markets and local restaurants and stores where farmer's receive a premium over wholesale. Interestingly, local policies can influence all three of the reasons given.

Organic farming not only affords a farmer more profit, but it also preserves town resources. Best Management Practices, such as maintaining riparian buffers and diversifying cover crops, in conjunction with organic farming, produce very little pollution and sediment runoff in the community. The town can encourage organic and sustainable farming with informational brochures to local farmers, as well as reduced regulatory oversight. The Planning Board can encourage roadside stands by lessening the development review burden for farmers who wish to add a farmstand. Finally, municipal officials can support local farmer's markets and restaurants. All catering for municipal meetings should be done with a local business. The

Winslow school system could also purchase from local farms, providing a sustainable stream of income for farmers. Access to premium markets may be the only method for small local Winslow farmers to maintain a profit and continue farming.

The Rural Sociological Society authors also documented various Rural-Urban Interface farming practices around the nation. After assessing if and how some of these programs were successful, one conclusion was, “that solid land-use policies and agricultural economic development efforts will not necessarily result in [agricultural] growth, but can create conditions for agriculture to persist while possibly opening up space for future entrepreneurial development.” Agriculture need not expand, so long as it does not die. Winslow officials should make every effort to preserve the conditions under which farming can succeed, and hopefully the American entrepreneurial spirit will find a way to do so.

The US Department of Agriculture manages some programs that provide assistance to local farmers in maintaining their land. Four farmers in Winslow are currently participating in these programs. Three of the landowners have Certified Nutrient Management Plans including livestock waste projects. In this program, the USDA officials assist farmers in designing manure pits where livestock waste is properly stored for future spreading. Without a manure pit, open stacking of livestock waste results in heavy nutrient runoff that pollutes the regions waterways. One farmer in Winslow participates in the Grassland Reserve Program, which provides financial incentives to landowners for preserving native grasslands and wildlife habitat, as opposed to mowing the entire property.

Currently, one of the more disturbing aspects of agriculture and forestry in Winslow is that it is being increasingly forced “out of view,” relegated to back lots with a tiny sliver of land providing access to the public road. There are numerous individual homes along the rural eastern roads, many in small 2 acre lots, with single driveways onto the road. Seeing four or five of these homes stretched back-to-back along the road is visually frustrating, because the preference is for the pastoral image of agriculture that was just passed.

In addition to the image of rural life being disrupted, critical farmland is being lost. There are three types of agriculturally significant soils recognized by the US Department of Agriculture: Prime Farmland, Farmland of Statewide Importance, and Soils of Local Significance. The categories are listed in order of decreasing import. Prime Farmland Soils according to the USDA, have the best combination of physical and chemical characteristics for producing food, feed, forage, fiber, and oilseed crops. Prime Farmland Soils have the soil properties, growing season, and moisture supply needed to produce sustained high yields of crops in an economic manner if they are treated and managed according to acceptable farming methods. Farmlands of Statewide Importance have similar characteristics to Prime Farmlands, but not in great enough quantities to be labeled Prime Farmland. Finally, Soils of Local

Significance are those that can be distinguished from other soils by having some beneficial farming characteristics, though not enough to warrant the state or prime label. As the USDA description of Prime Farmland above implies, less effort is required to produce high yields when farming occurs on agriculturally significant soils.

At the end of this chapter is a map of agriculturally significant soils laid on top of an aerial view of Winslow. As the map demonstrates, much agriculturally significant soil lies in the west, near the Kennebec and Sebasticook Rivers, in traditional floodplain and water-prone areas. Unfortunately, this area is also where people have traditionally lived, and development occurs on top of agriculturally significant soils in many parts of town. Nonetheless, not all important soils are developed, and this map can be used on a smaller scale, during the development review process.

There are currently no local organized efforts to preserve rural eastern Winslow. There are organizations such as Maine Farmland Trust and the Small Woodland Owners Association of Maine, which operate statewide. However, there are no Winslow-specific operations, such as the Pattee's Pond Association (focus is water quality), solely interested in agriculture and/or forestland preservation and sustainability.

### **Policies**

- The town should safeguard lands identified as prime farmland or capable of supporting commercial forestry.
- The town should promote the use of Best Management Practices for timber harvesting and agricultural production.
- The town should support farming and forestry and encourage their economic viability.

### **Strategies**

- ✓ The Winslow Planning Board should consult with the Maine Forest Service District Forester when proposing land use regulations pertaining to forest management practices.

The Winslow Planning Board should invite the Maine Forest Service District Forester to a future meeting to discuss regulating forest management. The Code Enforcement Officer can provide the forester with a copy of Winslow's current regulations, and ask the forester to review and comment. At the

Planning Board meeting, the forester can make recommendations for modification of Winslow's ordinances. The forester should attend a Planning Board meeting, with recommendations, in 2009.

- ✓ The Planning Board should consult with the Kennebec County Soil and Water Conservation District staff when developing any land use regulations pertaining to agricultural management practices.

The Winslow Planning Board should invite Kennebec County Soil and Water Conservation District staff to a future meeting to discuss regulating agriculture. The Code Enforcement Officer can provide the staff with a copy of Winslow's current regulations, and ask the staff to review and comment. At the Planning Board meeting, the Soil & Water Conservation District staff can make recommendations for modification of Winslow's ordinances. The staff should attend a Planning Board meeting, with recommendations, in 2009.

- ✓ The Planning Board should propose amendments to land use ordinances to require commercial and subdivision developments in critical rural areas to maintain areas with prime farm soils as open space to the greatest extent practicable.

The Planning Board should recommend modifications to existing zoning language to prevent development, save for agriculture, on Prime Farmland Soils. Proposed development on Farmland of Statewide Importance and Soils of Local Significance should be designed to preserve the agriculturally significant soils to the greatest possible extent. Proposed modifications of zoning language should be presented to the Town Council by 2010.

- ✓ The Planning Board should limit non-residential development in critical rural areas to natural resource-based businesses and services, nature tourism/outdoor recreation businesses, farmer's markets, and home occupations.

The Planning Board should propose modifications to existing zoning language to prevent non-residential development in critical rural areas, with a few exceptions, noted above. Development that detracts from the rural sense of place should be strongly discouraged. Proposed modifications of the ordinance language should be presented to the Town Council by 2010.

- ✓ The town should encourage owners of productive farm and forest land to enroll in the current use taxation programs.

The Code Enforcement Officer should compare all properties utilizing the current use taxation programs to all properties operating a productive farm or successful commercial forest harvest. If there are any properties in the latter group that are also not in the first group, the Code Enforcement Officer should meet with the landowners to discuss the current use taxation programs. The comparison and meetings should take place by 2011.

- ✓ The Planning Board should permit activities that support productive agriculture and forestry operations, such as road-side stands, greenhouses, and pick-your-own operations.

The Planning Board should propose modifications to existing ordinance language to permit accessory uses to agriculture and forestry. Proposed ordinance language changes should be presented to the Town Council by 2010.

- ✓ The town should include agriculture and commercial forestry operations in local or regional economic development plans.

The Town Manager, Town Council, and Planning Board should become familiar with the Agriculturally Significant Soils map, as well as a general understanding of the value of farming and forestry to Winslow. Future economic development discussions, at any level, should include recognition of the importance of farming and forestry, such as inter-municipal farmland and forestry preservation programs.

- ✓ The Town should actively work towards preservation of farms.

The Planning Board should invite Maine Farmland Trust to attend a meeting, discussing the programs of the Trust and how the municipality and Maine Farmland Trust can work collaboratively. A specific subject of the meeting should be the potential of acquiring farm easements on private property. The meeting should take place in 2009.

- ✓ The Town should actively work towards preservation of forestry operations.

The Planning Board should invite the Small Woodland Owners Association of Maine to attend a meeting, discussing the programs of the Association and how the municipality and the Association can work collaboratively. A specific subject of the meeting should be structuring open space easements to allow for the continuation of sustainable forestry operations. The Planning Board should also request that the Association bring materials on sustainable forestry that municipal officials can share with local landowners. The meeting should take place in 2009.