

## **Stakeholder Input**

### *Current Issues*

Millstone residents and stakeholders cite numerous issues facing the Township's agricultural and farmland community. In addition to climate change contributing to excess rainwater and extreme weather, encroaching warehouse development threatens existing farmland. New regulations on the Federal and State levels are presenting more challenges at the local level and farmers are in need of additional labor hands. Another particular challenge is the delicate balance of crop protection and wildlife management in accordance with the NJ Division of Fish and Wildlife. Concerns have been raised regarding deer, beaver, geese, groundhogs, coyotes, foxes and hawks, among others. Also noteworthy is the impact of Lyme disease on livestock. Other issues raised by members of the agricultural and farmland community include a pattern of "honor systems" not being honored, the restrictions against event space on farms, as well as restrictions on greenhouse sizes.

### *Recent Trends Experienced*

Millstone's agricultural and farming community is experiencing a number of recent trends indicating that the Township has the opportunity to diversify its agricultural industry. Farmers are now aiming for ethnic diversity of crops rather than wholesale monocultures. Previously, Asian crops were successful but changes within the farming community have shifted away from these crops and appear to be replace them with specialty crops, such as leafy greens, okra, and Mexican produce. Additionally, as the age of the average farmer age increases, less family members are likely to continue operation of the farms. However, the Township is also witnessing a pattern of emerging farmers interested in specialty crops such as leafy greens, okra, ethnic produce as well as returning to grain crops. Farmers are also recognizing the benefits of providing value-added products, such as jams, sauces, smoothies and honey.

As consumers increasingly desire to "buy local" and know the sources of their food, many farmers are participating in farmers markets and "buy local" campaigns as a form of direct marketing. Vegetables and herbs are also being purchased directly by restaurants and schools in farm-to-table programs. Interest in greenhouse and high tunnel produce operations has been on the rise in recent years as a means to extend the growing season.

In nurseries, one trend is moving toward above-ground growing in air-pots, which are easy to move and can be planted year-round. The Township is also noticing an increase in "backyard operations" such as the keeping of chickens, sheep, and bees. Additionally, "Pick your own" agritourism and community supported agriculture (CSA) has been gaining popularity in recent years.

### *Other Opportunities and Conditions*

- Rutgers has been working on new breeds of crops that can withstand varying environmental conditions and other stress factors.
- The Township continues to have strong support of Farmers Against Hunger.
- The Township supports allowing interest in micro distilleries and farm brewery operations.
- Millstone holds 14.4 percent of Monmouth County's farmland, the second highest in the County (second to Upper Freehold).

- The Food Safety and Modernization Systems Act (FSMA) establishes minimum requirements for food safety that all produce growers must adhere to. This is separate from GAPS (Good Agricultural Practices) which is a voluntary food safety certification. FSMA and the voluntary GAPS have effects on outlets/grocery which impacts vegetables/fruit production.
- The Township offers 5-year leases to farmers.

## Recommendations

Based on stakeholder input and data analysis, the following recommendations will assist the Township moving forward with farmland preservation:

### *Current Issues*

- As interest in greenhouse operations continue to grow, the Township may benefit from increasing the permitted size of greenhouses from 30 feet by 150 feet to 50 feet by 250 feet. However, greenhouses are currently regulated by the state. Pursuant to NJAC 5:23-3.2(d), "a temporary green house, used exclusively for the storage of live plants, shall be exempt from the permit requirements of the Uniform Construction Code" provided it meets the following criteria:
  - There is no permanent anchoring system or foundation
  - There is no storage, temporary or otherwise, of solvents, fertilizers, gases or other chemical or flammable materials
  - The structure is no wider than 31 feet, there is an unobstructed path of no greater length than 150 feet, and the covering is a material no greater than six mills in thickness.
- The Township should also coordinate with other organizations (i.e. County Parks, State Wildlife Management and landowners) to develop innovative crop protection methods to control wildlife.

### *Recent Trends Experienced*

- Continue promoting Jersey Fresh, Jersey Equine, and Grown in Monmouth.
- Explore the potential for creating an incentive program for generational farmers as a way to encourage the continued operation of long-standing farms. The SADC created the Farm Link Program to serve as a resource and referral center for farmers and landowners. The Township continues to support participation in this program.
- Facilitate farmers markets as an opportunity for residents to "buy local" and get to know their farmers.
- The Farm Bureau aims to promote hemp production in green houses rather than crops. The Township may benefit from exploring hemp production.

### *Other Opportunities and Conditions*

- Consider partnering with Rutgers University to educate farmers and bring awareness to emerging innovative farming techniques such as drought- and disease-resistant crops.
- Continue and expand participation in Farmers Against Hunger.

- Consider amending the Land Use and Development ordinance to permit micro distilleries and small-scale farm brewery operations as a means to diversify the Township's agricultural industry and promote economic development.
- Coordinate with relevant agencies to prepare informational material on the Food Safety and Modernization Systems Act and to assist farmers with GAPS certification.
- Consider expanding the 5-year lease program to include additional options to lease (ie. 10-year, 15-year) as a means to promote long-term economic development.

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