

PORTSMOUTH COMPREHENSIVE COMMUNITY PLAN

ELEMENT 6 – AGRICULTURE

6.1 AGRICULTURE VISION

AGRICULTURE WILL REMAIN A VITAL AND VIBRANT COMPONENT OF PORTSMOUTH’S WAY OF LIFE, LAND USE AND ECONOMIC ACTIVITY.

Farms are one piece of a larger system; a system that must be considered and planned for in its entirety to ensure its overall economic viability. This section addresses planning for Portsmouth’s agricultural¹ resources, operations and communitywide management under the following categories:

- Relationship to land use
- Preservation of rural character, open space and scenic views
- Economic benefit

6.1.1 BASIS FOR PLANNING

This section will be an inventory of significant agricultural operations presented in narrative, table and map form. This inventory is 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 must 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

¹ Throughout this element of the Comprehensive Plan and pursuant to Portsmouth Zoning Ordinance – Article II, the terms “agriculture” or “agricultural operations” are intended to mean:

Any commercial enterprise which has as its primary purpose farming, cultivation of crops, husbandry, horticulture, viticulture, viniculture, floriculture, forestry, ranching, stabling of horses, dairy farming, or aquaculture, or the raising of livestock, including for the production of fiber, furbearing animals, poultry, or bees, along with the necessary accessory uses for packing treating, or storing the farm product, provided that the operation of any such accessory use shall be secondary to that of the principal agricultural activity...The mixed-use of farms and farmlands for other forms of enterprise including, but not limited to, the display of antique farm equipment, retail sales, tours, classes, petting, feeding and viewing of animals, hay rides, crop mazes, festivals and other special events are hereby recognized as a valuable and viable means of contributing to the preservation of agriculture.

other agricultural buildings are located. Off-farm agricultural product processing facilities and distribution sites as well as agricultural product retailing sites will also be mapped.

Three or more maps showing the location agriculture-related features will accompany this element:

- A map showing soils designated as “prime” and “soils of statewide importance” overlaid by parcels actively being farmed (though perhaps currently idle). The map will also show areas where these soil types have been lost to development.
- A map showing soils designated as “prime” and “soils of statewide importance” overlaid by parcels protected from development by conservation easement or intent as well as parcels owned by either the town, state or the federal government.
- A map and accompanying table showing the location and type of active agricultural operations in Portsmouth as well as off-farm processing facilities, distribution sites and product retailing sites.

6.2 ASSESSMENT OF AGRICULTURE

6.2.1 RELATIONSHIP TO LAND USE

Agriculture, more than for most other land uses, has a special connection to the land and is dependent on site conditions, particularly soil conditions. An essential part of Portsmouth’s planning for incorporating agriculture into its pattern of land uses is the location of these soils suitable for agriculture. The USDA - Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) has identified those soils in Rhode Island that have a combination of physical and chemical features that make them best suited for farming. These "Important Farmlands" are subdivided into: 1) "Prime Farmlands" which are the best soils for agricultural use, and 2) "Additional Farmlands of Statewide Importance" which are other soils that are less well suited for intensive farming but are still valuable for many farm enterprises. With regard to these soils and existing land uses, the maps accompanying this element tell an important story. To be noted:

- Just under 75% of the land area of Portsmouth on Aquidneck Island is covered with soils that are of “statewide importance” or are “prime” soils for agricultural use.
- 50.1% of the above land area with soils suitable for agricultural uses has been lost to other types of land uses, 25.7% is being actively farmed.
- Of the best soils for agricultural use, “prime” soils in Portsmouth on Aquidneck Island, 53.3% have been lost to other types of uses, 29.0% are in active farm use.

Given development pressures evident here in town, it is quite likely that land currently being farmed will give way to other uses in the decades ahead. For Portsmouth to realize its vision of agriculture “*remaining a vital and vibrant component of Portsmouth’s way of life, land use and economic activity,*” to the greatest extent possible and with the tools available to the municipality for regulating such things, attention will have to be paid towards making sure that development pressure does not consume “prime” soils best suited for intensive agriculture and that land uses for other than agriculture and farm enterprises not needing “prime” soils be directed towards “soils of statewide importance” or other areas of town with non-agricultural soils.

In addition to the suitability of the land for agriculture, consideration must be made to the most suitable types of land use for areas adjoining or near agricultural activities. While our farms add to the character and economy of Portsmouth, they are business operations that can have aspects that may be objectionable to nearby residences. Accordingly, the proximity and density of other uses as well as the provision of buffers and other land use techniques in relation to agricultural activities are important considerations.

6.2.2 RURAL CHARACTER, OPEN SPACE AND SCENIC VIEWS

Agriculture as a land use or as a business activity is only part of how Portsmouth thinks about its farms. The phrase “working landscape” is an apt description here. Our farms certainly provide important economic activity such as jobs, farm products and tax revenue, but perhaps of equal or greater importance are the intangibles of highly valued open space, scenic vistas and the pleasing mix of rural and suburban landscapes that our farms provide. Despite the decrease in the number of farms and amount of farmland lost to other types of development over past decades, farmland preservation remains one of the top priorities of the citizens of Portsmouth. This is manifested in our farm property tax assessment program adopted in 1990. The program assesses qualified farmland at its current use value rather than its “highest and best use” value and assigns a reduced property tax rate thereby giving farmers a property tax savings that can be used to offset operational costs.

6.2.3 ECONOMIC BENEFIT

Farming and agricultural activity provides additional benefits to the Town. Cost of community services studies routinely demonstrate that farms demand far less in services that they pay for in taxes, even at the reduced rates made available by the farm tax exemption program and because of their very existence, the value of surrounding properties is consistently higher than in more urban communities.

6.3 GOALS, POLICIES AND IMPLEMENTATION

GOAL AG - 1

Achieve a balance of land uses that accommodate non-agricultural development pressure all the while preserving the remaining parcels of land containing prime farmland soils for intensive agricultural uses.

Policy AG - 1.1

Continue to work with land trusts, non-profits and other appropriate partners to target prime agricultural lands for preservation.

Action AG - 1.1a – Compile and continuously update a database of parcels with prime soils or soils of statewide importance cross-referenced with farmland activity and protected status.

Action AG - 1.1b – Provide an annual report to the Planning Board and the Conservation Commission on any land use changes affecting parcels containing prime agricultural soils in Portsmouth.

Action AG - 1.1c – Update a Cost of Community Services Study for Portsmouth to better inform land use decision-makers.

GOAL AG - 2

Reach a point where a framework of programs, policies and initiatives that support and strengthen the agriculture sector as an essential component of Portsmouth's economic activity have been established and been proven to be effective.

Policy AG - 2.1

Advance regulations, programs and initiatives that increase the economic viability of agriculture in Portsmouth.

Action AG - 2.1a – Continue to endorse the State of Rhode Island's Farm, Forest, and Open Space Program (RIGL 44-27).

Action AG - 2.1b – Continue to implement the local Town Farm Tax Assessment Program.

Action AG - 2.1c – Continue to work with the Rhode Island Coastal Resources Management Council to facilitate approvals for aquaculture permits in Portsmouth waters.

Action AG - 2.1d – Study Portsmouth's agricultural system for opportunities for the Town to support better linkage between local farm product producers and local consumers.

Action AG - 2.1e – Continue to support the Portsmouth Water and Fire District's water rates and availability policy applicable to farmers enrolled in the local Farm Tax Assessment Program.

Action AG - 2.1f – Encourage the Agricultural Advisory Committee and the Economic Development Committee to increase collaborative activity on issues of mutual interest.

Action AG - 2.1g – Review the Portsmouth Zoning Ordinance and Subdivision Regulations as well as the State Right to Farm Act (RIGL 2-23-4) for ways to increase the mutual compatibility of agricultural and residential land uses within the framework of the law.

Action AG - 2.1h – Investigate the adoption of a program of performance standards for agricultural operations, such as those recommended in RIDEM’s Community Guidance to Maintain Working Farms and Forests, October 2012.

Action AG - 2.1i – Review state law regulating Farmland Residential Compounds (RIGL 45-23-49.1) for applicability in Portsmouth.

Action AG - 2.1j – Review the livestock provisions of the Portsmouth Zoning Ordinance for relevance to current agricultural practices.

Action AG – 2.1k – Undertake an economic impact study to assess the role agriculture plays in the overall economic activity of Portsmouth.

Action AG – 2.1l – Reinstate the Restricted Account in the General Fund to receive a portion of the Real Estate Conveyance Tax dedicated to the acquisition, development and protection of the natural, agricultural and recreational resources of the Town of Portsmouth.

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