

AGRICULTURE AND HORSES ARE IN BEDFORD'S DNA

Horses and agriculture share a fundamental importance to Bedford; they are both intertwined with the history of the town. Additionally, they are appreciated by many residents who are not farmers or horse owners for preserving open space, view sheds and the character of the town.

Throughout the 19th century, more than half of Bedford's land was cleared, much of it for farming and the pasturing of horses and cows. There are still remnants of livestock and dairy farms throughout the town. Since then most of the large farms have been broken up, but Bedford's commitment to equestrian uses, open space, view shed and rural character have always been maintained. As noted in the 2003 Comprehensive Plan:

Open space in Bedford is one of the key elements defining its character....As a rural community in close proximity to the NY metropolitan area, many residents came to live here because of its attractive and unique living environment. The preservation of this quality is a major goal of this plan. In every meeting, election, and survey, Bedford residents have shown a strong desire to maintain Bedford's rural character. Thus Bedford's open space areas include, but are not limited to:

Riding, biking or walking trails. Bedford has one of the largest equestrian trail systems in the northeast with over 100 miles of interconnected trails in Bedford and Pound Ridge open to members of the Bedford Riding Lanes Association.

Today there are fewer large properties and much less land devoted to pastures or farming. The tax burden and value of the remaining large properties if sold for development threaten existing large undeveloped parcels. If Bedford is to maintain its rural character, we need to plan for the future and develop a proactive strategy to protect remaining large properties. Horse farms and other agricultural uses can play a role in this strategy.

A specific discussion of the use of land for equine and agricultural pursuits is a new innovation for the Comprehensive Plan. In 2003, these topics were covered more generally in discussions about Land Use and Development, Open Space and Natural Environment as well as Community Appearance and Historic Preservation. Dedicating an entire section to the interests of horse farms and other agricultural uses reflects the current state of concern amongst these community members about the fate of the medium and larger sized land parcels necessary for their endeavors. The causes of a decline in both the number of equine properties being established and the amount of land devoted to producing food or other agricultural products clearly originate in Westchester-wide development pressure and its consequent property price increases.

The authors of this report generally support the conclusions and recommendations of the previous master plan where they relate to our topics. In particular, we endorse the earlier findings with respect to the management of wetlands, steep slopes and other environmentally sensitive areas. Bedford became a municipal leader in local wetland protection over fifty years ago with the establishment of Chapter 122 of the Town Code which provides legal protection for local wetlands and wetland buffers. One of every three properties in Bedford contain wetlands that are locally regulated. Bedford endeavors to protect its wetlands while encouraging agricultural land use. Since it is widely accepted that agricultural and equine uses of wetlands proper should be discouraged, the Town of Bedford Master Plan should encourage the enforcement of Chapter 122 as well as emphasize that wetland buffers, which in certain circumstances have appropriate agricultural uses, should be protected from any practices that can degrade water quality and wetland ecology.

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HORSE FARMS

Bedford's equine community ranges from Olympic caliber facilities, trainers and competitors to backyard barn family affairs with a focus on trail riding.

Horse barns and riders are part of Bedford's history and a major contributor to the town's character and preservation of view scape. The iconic Sunnyfield Farm is often pointed to as the essence of Bedford's character. The equestrian community is one of the things that differentiates Bedford from many surrounding communities, like Armonk or Chappaqua.

In addition, the equestrian community helps support the local economy in a variety of ways. Well known trainers in excellent facilities attract boarders from a 50+ mile radius. The BRLA trail system and local horse community attract people to move to Bedford and enhance property values. The equestrian community not only supports horse related retail, such as two tack stores and a feed store, but they use the local restaurants and general retail stores.

There are currently at least fifteen barns with ten or more stalls in Bedford. Ten of these properties have indoor rings, three of which are for the sole use of the owner of the property. There are currently no horses at Rochambeau Farm. One property houses Endeavor Therapeutic Horsemanship.

Founded in 2014, Endeavor Therapeutic Horsemanship offers equine assisted activities and therapies to individuals with special needs, at risk youth, residential facilities, veterans and active service members throughout Westchester. In addition, they have a partnership with the Bedford Central School District and Rippowam Cisqua to introduce elementary school children to horses and equine therapy.

Barn	Indoor Ring
1. CB Walker in Bedford Hills	Yes
2. CEO Stables in Bedford Hills	No
3. Coker Farm in Bedford	Yes
4. Courtyard Farm in Bedford Hills	Yes
5. Endeavor Therapeutic Horsemanship in Bedford Corners	No
6. Fisher Succabone Property in Bedford	Yes
7. Limelight Farm in Bedford	Yes
8. Mancini property in Bedford Hills	No
9. Rochambeau Farm in Bedford Hills	No
10. Simpson Property in Katonah	Yes
11. Shannon Farm in Bedford Village	Yes
12. Sunnyfield Farm in Bedford	Yes
13. Trelawney Farm in Bedford	Yes
14. Two Ponds Farm in Katonah	Yes
15. Windsor Farm in Bedford Hills	No

The Westchester Land Trust holds a Conservation Easement on parts of Coker Farm, CB Walker, Courtyard Farm, Shannon Farm and the Simpson property.

There has been a nationwide trend for equestrians to have their own private facility with an indoor ring. During the winter, the BRLA trails and outdoor rings are often not safe or rideable so indoor rings, whether with a small backyard barn or a larger barn, allow horses to be exercised and ridden year round.

Smaller barns (generally 2-4 stalls) can be found along BRLA trails, although there is no inventory of the actual number of barns. None of these barns currently has an indoor ring, but some have outdoor rings. Individual stalls are occasionally boarded to friends to help defray the costs of maintaining the barn. Horses require care throughout the day, and many backyard barn owners have children and/or full-time jobs, so there is often a need for part-time and full-time grooms.

Backyard barn owners have been supported by Bedford Loves Horses (BLH), an ad hoc group started in 2017. BLH has met with both the Town Supervisor and Director of Planning to discuss issues of concern to barn owners, and a good working relationship has developed. Working with the Town Supervisor, BLH was able to amend the zoning code to allow toilets, wash stalls and washing machines in backyard barns. Working with the Department of Public Works, BLH was able to obtain new signage on dirt roads that address safety concerns.

Some feel that Bedford does not always have the reputation of being a horse friendly community, that approvals can take too long, can be difficult to navigate and can be too costly, a process which sometimes results in losing these residents to adjacent communities that are perceived as friendlier to horse properties. A telephone survey conducted in 2017 by Bedford Loves Horses with 23 backyard barn owners and realtors specializing in horse properties documented this. Subsequently a petition supporting the horse community was signed by over 400 residents and presented to the Town Board in December 2017. This petition stated:

- Some of the Bedford zoning laws are overly restrictive with respect to equestrian property owners' legitimate needs such as having such necessary facilities as bathrooms and wash stalls in barns;*
- We are concerned that Bedford is losing equestrian properties to adjoining municipalities which are more "horse friendly", and as that happens, we are losing an important part of the historical character of our town;*
- Many young professionals and families are drawn to towns that enable them to have horses on their property and also commute to New York City for work, and we are concerned that many potential residents are choosing nearby communities that are more supportive of the needs of equestrian property owners.*

Some members feel that requirements for building indoor riding rings might create an impediment for larger properties that might be sold as horse farms to instead be subdivided for housing developments. On the other hand, there have not been many, or any, requests for indoor rings that have been turned down in the past ten years, and two indoor rings were permitted in the past ten years with only a three month wait.

Limitations on the ability to have grooms quarters is sometimes an impediment for young families to have a backyard barn.

Recommendation.

We recommend that the Bedford Comprehensive Plan, the Bedford Town Board and Planning Board proactively acknowledge the importance of the equine community to the town's character and economic vitality.

We recommend that the Town Supervisor and Director of Planning continue to work with Bedford Loves Horses to stay abreast of and help create solutions to issues related to the local horse community.

We recommend that the zoning code explicitly acknowledge that backyard barn owners with fewer than ten stalls may board stalls provided the number of horses remains within that allowed by the current code.

One member recommended that the zoning code include two separate sections for fencing: one specifically for pasture fencing and a second for all other fencing. It was noted that a 4' fence is too low for pasture fencing.

Some members recommend that a committee be formed to address issues relevant to the equine community that are not covered by the BRLA or BLH. Such a committee should include equine experts, realtors who can assess the economic value of equine properties and individuals knowledgeable about potential environmental impact of any suggested changes to the zoning code. Such a committee might investigate the following issues:

Best practices in other equine communities that may be encouraged in Bedford, e.g. use of sand paddocks to preserve grass pastures, etc.

The impact of chemicals used in barns that may be harmful to the environment.

Approaches to stream line, simplify and/or reduce the costs in the permitting process for equine properties. Such brain storming would not cover the current practice where town engineers review documents provided by homeowners' engineers.

Evaluate whether lessening restrictions on indoor rings would help preserve large properties from subdivision and development. There was discussion but no agreement on any changes to the coverage requirements in the zoning code.

BRLA

The BRLA mission is to preserve and protect Bedford's historic trail system. Officially founded in 1920, the BRLA maintains more than 100 linear miles of historic trails which connect and extend throughout Bedford, Mount Kisco, Katonah, Bedford Hills, Bedford Corners and Pound Ridge.

Members meandering the trails enjoy the beautiful flora and fauna that make the Bedford community unique. The trail system is one of the largest remaining networks of private trails. Today, the membership of walkers and hikers is growing more than ever as individuals and families seek healthy outdoor activities in nature. The BRLA maintains and clears the trails year-round to ensure that this shared resource is preserved for future generations. The Bedford Riding Lanes Association relies on the members, generous donors and a team of volunteers to be able to continue to serve the community. The BRLA is a nonprofit, 501(c)3 organization with just under 300 members currently.

The BRLA is a vital part of the local history we must preserve. The trails are a part of the unique, local charm and character of Bedford—and enhance the pastoral view shed. The trails attract landowners, riders and hikers. Access to the trails increases property values. The trails protect connected habitat and wildlife networks. Maintenance of the BRLA trails supports invasive plant management. The BRLA also fosters community with events throughout the year including Carols on the Green in December on the Bedford Village town green, Hunter Pace events and other community gatherings.

The development and subdivision of large land parcels and lots not only destroy habitat, but also threaten the trail system which is vital to Bedford's historic character and values.

The paving of dirt roads would puncture the trail system that uses many dirt roads as connection points and crossings in between trails. Examples of key dirt roads that are part of the BRLA trail system include Succabone Road, Broad Brook Road, Guard Hill Road, Beaver Dam Road, Maple Avenue, etc.

Recommendation.

When properties are sold and landowners go before the planning board, consider the protection of the BRLA trails in any decisions to subdivide or develop properties. We would like for the preservation of open land and the historic trail system to become as vital to protect as the local wetlands.

When local roads are developed, consider the BRLA trail system and horses/riders/hikers with respect to issues like paving, speed limits and other safety concerns. We do not support the paving of any dirt roads.

The BRLA and horse community request that when repairing dirt roads, equine-friendly footing be used instead of sharp stones.

AGRICULTURAL LAND USE

Bedford was officially recognized as part of the Westchester County Agricultural District in 2009. Ag Districts were created by the State of New York to encourage and support agricultural activities. Using regulatory measures, in partnership with County and municipal administrations, the State recommends agricultural taxation rates and certain zoning exemptions to insure the economic viability of farming enterprises. Bedford was one of just eight municipalities in Westchester designated as eligible to host an official District by the County Board of Legislators in consultation with the County Agriculture and Farmland Protection Board. At present twenty properties, on 32 parcels, representing a total of nearly 1,100 acres in Bedford are members of its Ag District. No new properties have been admitted since 2018. Bedford's selection is testament to its agricultural history, the value of our soils, the current state of farming in the town and, possibly most significantly, our untapped potential.

We write in the midst of a global pandemic that has revealed the vulnerabilities of a food system dependent upon remote production and processing. Produce is currently being grown in backyards all over Bedford. We also write surrounded by large lots of irreplaceable arable soils and undeveloped lands. Productive farmland offers quality of life benefits beyond just healthy, local food with a minimal carbon footprint. When farms are properly and organically managed, they provide ecosystem services like water quality support, erosion reduction, wetland buffer zones, carbon sequestration and forest management. They can play host to our abundant native wildlife. Economic rewards include employment opportunities, supporting local businesses and restaurants as well as drawing tourism. New York State has recognized Bedford as host to valuable farmland. We believe supporting its resurgence in our town would be beneficial to the residents.

Recommendation.

In the Open Space and Natural Environment chapter of the 2003 Comprehensive Plan, sections 4 - 6 discuss various preservation priorities. While farmland would not be eligible for tax monies collected by the Town of Bedford to preserve sites with recreational public access, we suggest the Town add the creation and protection of farmland to the list of Open Space Goals and Objectives and the Evaluation Criteria described in sections 4.4 and 4.5 respectively.

We also suggest recommending agricultural set-asides, ideally under organic management, as part of the permitting process for large scale, multi-unit developments.

As acknowledged in the previous master plan, the preservation of open space can only be achieved through community support and cooperative participation by many actors and entities. The Westchester Land Trust, located on Harris Road, is one critical partner for Bedford. Their preservation efforts are guided by criteria which include, "Farms ... to provide healthful locally grown food" They would support our recommendation that the Town create a Farmland Protection Committee. This group could develop strategies to keep existing and potential agricultural properties in Bedford intact and in production. Some members feel that a priority for the Committee would include researching funding opportunities to support farm property conservation through the lease or sale *at agricultural value* to local farmers. The Farmland Protection group could also help facilitate returning productive farming to publicly held, historic properties like John Jay Homestead. The County is currently forming a working group to establish Planting Westchester, an initiative with environmental goals that include addressing local food insecurity. A Farmland Protection Committee could also collaborate with this new entity.