

2019 L-A Region Farmland Access & Food Economy Conference

Themes from small-group discussions, learning conversations, and post-event survey

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Background: The first L-A Region Farmland Access and Food Economy conference was held March 7th, 2019 at the Auburn Senior Community Center. One hundred people attended (there was a waiting list of 10 people) and 38 people completed the post-event survey. At the conference, following introductory remarks and facilitated storytelling, attendees broke into small groups to discuss challenges and opportunities as they pertain to the conference theme, followed by a series of focused “learning conversations” on more specific topics. This report summarizes themes from a post-event survey, as well as themes that emerged from the small-group discussions and learning conversations (based on transcriptions of notes taken at each table). The post-event survey was designed to gather feedback about attendees’ experience of the conference event itself, their preferences for future future food/farm-related programming, preferences to inform ongoing conversations about changes to Auburn’s Ag and Natural Resource Protection Zone, and preferences about food and agricultural development to support Auburn’s next (2020/2021-2039/2040) Comprehensive Plan.

Overall Summary, What We Heard:

About the Conference:

The highest number of respondents appreciated the diversity of attendees, both in terms of food sector affiliation (e.g. economic development, landowners/seekers, cooperative extension, elected officials, land trusts, etc.) and the intentional inclusion of New American voices and perspectives. They also appreciated the professional and personal networking, and relationship-building opportunities through intentional design (ie. one-on-one, and small group discussions).

About Future Programming on this Theme:

There was overall enthusiasm for holding future food/farm-related programming in LA, with suggestions focused on an annual conference with increased venue seating capacity and improved acoustics, and preferences for skill-building workshops (either expert-led or peer-to-peer) focused on topics such as financing, business management, food marketing, and food processing. There was also a desire for more community-building types of events for one-on-one relationship-building, such as potlucks.

About “What improvement(s) would you like to see in your home city/town related to food and/or farming in the next 5-10 years?”:

The 38 survey respondents hailed from 23 different towns, with Auburn and Lewiston the most represented, respectively. When asked the above question, the highest number of respondents were interested in direct economic development programs supporting farmers/farm seekers to increase both numbers of farmers and help sustain farm viability (ie. tax incentives, grants/loans, expanded market opportunities). The second highest responses were interested in improvements related to increasing local food access for all residents (including through expanding farm-to-institution relationships).

About Seeking Farmland in the LA Area:

Respondents were asked, “if you are seeking farmland in the LA area: Ideally how many acres of land are you hoping to own or lease in the next 5-10 years” and “what sorts of things are you looking for in the land you lease or buy?” Nine people responded to these questions and were looking for (on average) 20-25 acres with a mix of forest and ag land, with supporting infrastructure (e.g. residence, outbuildings) or, secondarily, the capacity and zoning flexibility to build this infrastructure.

About Farmland Access & Food Economy Challenges (Day of):

When selling land, there is a tension between the desire to maximize profit, and the desire to support (vs create a barrier) for the next potential owner and land steward to be a farmer (ie. such as young/beginning farmers and New Americans). Farming startups be capital- and risk-intensive, which can present significant barriers to new/beginning farmers not from generational farming families and do not inherit an establish business/brand and land. Both retiring farmers/landowners and farm seekers often need a team of support to navigate the various decisions and steps associated with start-up, including land access, capital/equipment access and acquisition, business/market planning, and production planning. These challenges are often accentuated when working across linguistic and cultural differences.

About Farmland Access & Food Economy Opportunities (Day of):

The existence of underutilized assets that can be leveraged to address the challenges previously identified were highlighted. These assets include undeveloped land (especially in Auburn), capital, relationships, institutions (especially for markets), and opportunities for smarter and more supportive local and state food/ag policies. These assets also include the human capital embodied in the Lewiston-Auburn’s changing demographics (rising trends of young and immigrant/refugee farmers), farm labor availability, and a strong network of technical support providers.

About Other Topics (Day of):

There were also eight small-group “learning conversations” on the following topics that were difficult to summarize, though the flip-chart recorded notes are transcribed in this report: Making Your Land Available for Farming, Strategies for Finding Land, Food & Farm Economic Development, Including Agritourism; Working with New American Farmers; Funding and Financing for Farms and Food Businesses; Land Trusts Supporting Farmland Protection & Access, Farming Cooperatively, and Food Processing: Challenges and Opportunities.

- End of Summary Observations -

Section 1: Post-event Evaluation Survey Tallies:

1.1 What were the most helpful aspects of the conference?

| <i>Theme</i> | <i>Frequency</i> |
|--------------|------------------|
|--------------|------------------|

| | |
|---|----|
| Diversity of conference attendees, esp. inclusion of New Americans | 14 |
| Networking opportunities | 11 |
| Time and space to share resources, information, and stories | 9 |
| Small group discussion format | 6 |
| Building solidarity across sectors and among shared interests | 3 |
| Emphasis on creative solutions to challenges raised in first discussion | 3 |
| Time and space for side conversations | 2 |
| Topic-focused discussions with experts | 2 |
| Opportunities to connect landowners/seekers | 1 |

1.2 What were the least helpful aspects of the conference?

| <i>Theme</i> | <i>Frequency</i> |
|---|------------------|
| Acoustics | 8 |
| Size/layout of space | 6 |
| Too many “learning conversation” topics | 3 |
| Introductory storytelling | 3 |
| Paired discussions | 1 |
| Layout of space - lack of room for breakout | 1 |
| Lack of political leaders | 1 |

1.3 What kinds of food- and farming-related programming (e.g. conferences, events) would you like to see more of in the future?

| <i>Theme</i> | <i>Frequency</i> |
|--|------------------|
| Skill-building workshops - financing/business mgt./marketing | 6 |
| Community-building/potluck events | 6 |
| Annual food-related conference | 5 |
| Farmer-to-farmer field days/tours | 4 |
| Skill-building workshops - food production | 4 |
| Food system planning/brainstorming/cooperative events | 4 |
| Skill-building workshops - food processing | 3 |
| Skill-building workshops - general | 3 |
| Regional (e.g. countywide) events/facilities/support | 3 |
| Landowners/seekers meet-up opportunities | 2 |
| Anti-racism events | 1 |

| | |
|---|---|
| SNAP enrollment info | 1 |
| Farmer/politician meeting on land-use/zoning | 1 |
| Cultural competency trainings for service providers | 1 |
| Food-focused job fair | 1 |

1.4 What improvement(s) would you like to see in your home city/town related to food and/or farming in the next 5-10 years?

| <i>Theme</i> | <i>Frequency</i> |
|--|------------------|
| Food economy - more local marketing opportunities (esp. farm-to-institution) | 7 |
| Food access - increase low-income access to local food | 5 |
| Zoning - more effective and sensible farmland protection | 5 |
| Food production - better access to farmland (incl. community gardens) | 4 |
| Food economy - more municipal financial support for farmers (esp. beginning) | 3 |
| Policy - fewer municipal restrictions on food production | 3 |
| Zoning - changes that promote cooperative growing | 2 |
| Food economy - stronger business/resource-sharing networks | 2 |
| More food-themed community-building opportunities | 2 |
| Food hub/aggregation capabilities | 2 |
| Food economy - more cooperatives, small businesses | 1 |
| Food economy - more local marketing opportunities - for meats especially | 1 |
| More support for New Mainers/farmers of color | 1 |

1.5 If you are seeking farmland in the LA area: Ideally how many acres of land are you hoping to own or lease in the next 5-10 years?*

Range: 5-50+ acres

Median: 20 acres

Average: 23 acres

1.6 If you are seeking farmland in the LA area: What sorts of things are you looking for in the land you lease or buy?*

| <i>Theme</i> | <i>Frequency</i> |
|------------------------------|------------------|
| Forest/ag-land mixture | 5 |
| Existing house | 4 |
| Existing outbuildings | 4 |
| Ability to build - residence | 3 |

| | |
|--|---|
| Capacity for animal production | 3 |
| Ag land (in general) | 2 |
| Long-term lease | 1 |
| Existing infrastructure (well, septic, etc.) | 1 |
| Ability to build - greenhouse | 1 |

***Questions 1.5 and 1.6 were completed by 9 respondents.**

Where are conference attendees from? (Based on 38 survey responses)

| <i>City/Town</i> | <i>Freq.</i> | <i>City/Town</i> | <i>Freq.</i> | <i>City/Town</i> | <i>Freq.</i> | <i>City/Town</i> | <i>Freq.</i> |
|------------------|--------------|-------------------|--------------|------------------|--------------|------------------|--------------|
| Auburn | 7 | Topsham | 1 | Lisbon | 1 | Cumberland | 1 |
| Lewiston | 6 | Phippsburg | 1 | Greene | 1 | Byfield, MA | 1 |
| Portland area | 4 | Old Orchard Beach | 1 | Gray | 1 | Buckfield | 1 |
| Sabattus | 2 | Monroe | 1 | Gardiner | 1 | Biddeford | 1 |
| Weare, NH | 1 | Minot | 1 | Exeter | 1 | Belfast | 1 |
| Turner | 1 | Livermore Falls | 1 | Dresden | 1 | | |

Section 2: Small-group Discussions:

2.1 Food System Challenges

| <i>Theme</i> | <i>Sub-theme</i> | <i>Freq.</i> |
|----------------------|--|--------------|
| Land/capital Access | Land costs/values (balancing landowner/new farmer needs) | 8 |
| Technical assistance | Need more business planning, marketing info/training | 7 |
| Mindsets/paradigms | Navigating cultural/language differences, confronting racism | 6 |
| Economic | Viability of farming/farm livelihoods | 5 |
| Structural | Restrictive municipal laws (e.g. zoning, food sovereignty) | 4 |
| Economic | Labor: balancing availability, fair wages, farm viability | 4 |
| Structural | Factors that drive food insecurity (e.g. transportation, cost) | 3 |
| Mindsets/paradigms | "Silo" effects across public, private, non-profit sectors | 3 |
| Land Access | More farm succession support for landowners needed | 2 |
| Mindsets/paradigms | Lack of collaboration between organic/conventional growers | 1 |
| Mindsets/paradigms | Myth of scarcity | 1 |
| Structural | Pressures from residential development | 1 |
| Ecosystem | Protection of natural resources | 1 |

| | | |
|----------------------|---|---|
| Geographic | Maine climate/short growing season | 1 |
| Technical assistance | Gaps in food processing/value added/licensing knowledge | 1 |
| Mindsets/paradigms | Institutional buyers accepting seasonal product | 1 |
| Infrastructure gaps | Unmet processing and storage needs | 1 |
| Technology | Lack of modern, scale-appropriate technology | 1 |

See Appendix 2 for full list of challenges and opportunities

2.2 Food System Opportunities

| <i>Theme</i> | <i>Sub-theme</i> | <i>Freq.</i> |
|-------------------------------|---|--------------|
| Land/capital Access | Availability of undeveloped land (esp. in Auburn) and capital | 10 |
| Structural | Lots of opportunities for better local/state food policies | 8 |
| Economic | New marketing opportunities (e.g. via internet, Maine branding, farm2school, agritourism) | 7 |
| Economic | Availability of skilled/experienced labor | 5 |
| Community | Positive demographic/cultural changes & food-related attitudes in community | 5 |
| System-wide | Potential for food processing/distribution | 4 |
| Technical assistance capacity | Increasing organization of supportive service providers | 4 |
| Economic | Proximity to markets | 2 |
| Organizational | Leadership capacity & positive energy | 2 |
| System-wide | Connections between people, economy, ecosystems | 1 |

See Appendix 1 for full list of challenges and opportunities

Section 3: Learning Conversations (*note: these are unedited, direct transcriptions)

3.1 Making Your Land Available for Farming

1. Compatible, clear, written goals → between landowner & potential farmers
2. Understand Expectations farmer & land-owner understand each other
3. Agreements need to include: use of equipment, water, electric, repairs, improvements
4. Duration of an agreement is related to mutual commitment (time, tenure)

3.2 Strategies for Finding Land

1. Narrow what you're looking for
 - a. How much land, both now and in future?

2. Consider business planning with day to day requirements
3. Farmland Considerations
 - a. Soil quality? Amendments?
 - b. Water quality and flow
 - c. Community considerations like farm stands?
4. Leasing before buying can be better starting out to iron out details and operations
 - a. sometimes working at another farm before starting your own is beneficial
5. Maine Farm Link:
 - a. Connects farm hands, farm seekers and farm owners.
 - b. Has made over 100 links since 2001

3.3 Food & Farm Economic Development, Including Agritourism

1. Direct market vs. captive markets = challenges & opportunities
2. Pressures on the businesses: change over time, farm profitability, and scale and types of operations change. So how do city planners anticipate all of those business challenges?
3. Planning your business to meet market opportunities
4. Development pressure looks different in different parts of Maine: so solutions and strategies look different too
5. Engage gleaners
6. Co-marketing promo incentives Tiffs grants partnerships
7. Looking and knowing all about soil as resource and limiting factor
8. 4 farmers (1 long time: 3 beginning, 1 year in), 3 town officials, 2 planners, 1 conserv. commission
9. 3 Agencies: AVCOG, DACF, Good Food Council

3.4 Food Processing: Challenges and Opportunities [no data found]

3.5 Working with New American Farmers

Participants: Bo at MOFGA (works with new farmers); Jim at NRCS; Kelly at Census; Ali (farmer); Issack (farmer); Muhidin at SBCA; Yussuf (farmer); Terri at NRCS (works with CC, SBCA, New Roots); Hussein (CC); Sydney (new farmer); Barnabe (farmer for three years)

1. Alex: Supports Cultivating Community farms and personal family farmland seeker employment
2. Issack: two statements (farmland and language barriers).
3. Hussein: 2005 (14 years) Not seeing changes. There is a gap. (7 kids) Seeking land, agrees with language barriers.
4. Yusef/Ali: looking for farmland to lease to own. The dream = farm with family, pass farming knowledge and be a good parent. 11 kids. He can take care of his own farm. Pass on his culture to his children. Financial and clear path = what he seeks and to feed family and market.
5. Ali: Grateful to God to be in L-A. Seek farmland for 3 to 4 lands with CC. Have learned much, grateful and will take knowledge back home if that is God's plan. Wants to learn

about how to be a part of larger farms. Network (small farms, collaborate to create network to sell and share state-wide and regionally). LEADERSHIP EMPOWERMENT.

6. Ali: Likes to grow and help others grow. Want to help leaders develop skills to better support others.
7. Nina: Works with farmers on both ends of the equation: farmers that want to sell/lease/ buy.
8. Mohammed: Service provided in the food system, ag background. Trying to create food jobs in the community.
9. Isino: Deep agricultural history. 4 years + of farming in Maine. Wants to connect heritage/ skills with ME opportunities, support other messages and wants access and independence. What way can we streamline entry to farming?
10. Hussein: Looking to make more land available locally - close to community is very important. Lots of history and community.
11. Goals:
 - a. Build relationships
 - b. Extra time and patience
 - c. Understanding history
 - d. Strong communication
 - e. Finding shared understanding

3.6 Farming Cooperatively [no data found]

3.7 Funding and Financing for Farms and Food Businesses

Barriers:

1. Applying complicated rules (contacts; interpretation)
2. Breaking down preconceived notions
3. Language and cultural barriers (dialects; written is not enough!)
4. Benefits eligibility

Ideas:

5. Learn from existing models and connect with existing success
6. Find mentor to learn from—focus on communication
7. Train the mentors—support learning on all sides; more cultural competency training
8. Build common understanding and use existing tools
9. Help people find good jobs → better situation at home → better equipped to find land
10. Strong markets:
 - a. Distributors/wholesale
 - b. Grocery stores
 - c. Store creation
 - d. Food hub
11. Finding money:
 - a. Recognize cultural barriers in lending (interest)
 - b. CEI?
 - c. Connecting farmers with loans
 - d. Business planning
 - e. Slow money
12. Finding property:

- a. Connect with tax office
- b. Federal opportunities–FedCap
- c. Support community leaders
- d. Get MFI to pay/hire interpreters

3.8 Land Trusts Supporting Farmland Protection & Access

1. ramifications--goals + objectives how make sure is your model matching that--what are values
2. think carefully about legal terms
3. future viability + flexibility/uncertainty
4. business leaning on LT land--they did not sign
5. flexibility/solid balance
6. amendments difficult
7. lease flexibility
8. democratic-lease + also govern organization-requires participation, can revise lease--over tie as we need to revise, comes w/ uncertainty
9. can have easement portion
10. legal ideas--broader conversation
11. challenges packard Littlefield Farm--CC environment
12. not values place--conversation
13. easier when [fee] owned
14. NE, CA @ forefront
15. negative attitude
16. realize benefit @ transfer
17. LT authority--enforcement--co-oping stewardship
18. reinvent farm 3 times
19. team [lead] search--[conversation]
20. MFT--stewardship
21. environmental studies, resident
22. land security + equity-LT model as resource--long term infrastructure
23. CC--owned+conserved farms
24. attorney--estate planning success
25. farmer-meat
26. seeking parcel-140+ farms
27. urgently need access--leadership+ support thinking creativity
28. [build] rights-piece removed to protect
29. conservation goals: trying to catch up keep up w/ these discussions
30. separate rights in a way helps, cost prohibitive farming
31. local agrarian commons- community LT to own farmland, lease farmers
32. address, national support [loca]
33. Wild Mt. Cooperative
 - a. To hold land in perpetuity no matter future of cooperative
 - b. Start small grow to state wide to address land access issue--build commons of land

- c. community LT--secure access ground lease--buildings only sold most affordable to make some accessible in future--cooperative
- d. succession plan

Appendix 1: Challenges and Opportunities (unedited)

Challenges:

- Conventional organic growers
 - Needs more collaboration
- Financing
 - Cost of land
 - Business planning
 - Myth of scarcity (and need to channel resources effectively)
- Balance of development
- Protection of landscape/natural resources
- Farmers making a living
 - Cost of food (subsidies, grants, etc..)
- Climate in Maine: season
 - All agriculture areas:aqua/ greenhouse/ etc.
- Education surrounding produce/ raw food preparation
- Resources/maintenance of product/ transportation issues: access/ food desert
- Culture shift
- Balance betw. Retail vs. wholesale
- Institutional buyers accepting seasonal product
- Malnutrition: access
- Subsidized programs: sustainable?
- Government control/ lack of awareness/ communication barriers/ "one size fits all"/ resource sharing (lack of)/ repeat efforts/efficiency/financial
- Accessibility/ affordability/ start-up costs/ land resources/ food safety
- Zoning changes expensive/ takes time
- Collaboration is a challenge - gathering energy
- Get ag. Organizations working w/ cities
- Regulatory - Food sovereignty ordinance still limits sales
- Building codes
- Finances - economics
- Staffing - finding people to do farming
- Technical assistance - Accessing this
- Market values of Farmland makes it hard to [buy][undecipherable]
- Retiring farmers getting value out of farm while allowing farmland to be affordable
- Education
- Lack of processing & storage
- learning how to market
- labor- how to pay, hard to live on
- lack of subsidies to local food
- land ownership, \$
- cost of production + distribution
- cost of living (health care) while farming + economic disparity
- grant \$ —> service providers
- establishing community across cultural barriers
- competition with corporate farms
- language barrier

- expectation + how to write BUSINESS PLAN
- Emotional and financial ties for aging ownership
- Access to large amounts, or any capital
- Tenure security vis a vis permanent investment/improvement
- Racism/fear of new Mainers
- White culture norms and systems of power associated with land access
- Biz financial planning and long range forecasting
- Modern, scale-appropriate technology
- Need forward facing & supportive policy/ordinances/plans
- Matching is a big challenge
 - Land owner to land buyer/farmer
- How do these young people come up w/ sufficient money?
- Having a plan for a scale that can support operations, farmer + farm labor. “Scaling”
- Market research- 1⁰ + 2nd [undecipherable]
- Licensing + training chemicals
- Nobody provide effort w/o capital gain-- coop or self-sufficient model
- New neighbors/cultural expectations + differences
- How do the people trust what we are trying to w/out the English capability

Opportunities

- Farmers available/ man + woman person power
- Auburn not fully developed; land available
- Population is here too
- Food processing= wash/pack/cut/serve
- Organizations of service providers and advocates + proff. Advisors
- Lots of capital for “right opportunities” people w/ business plan
- Empower people to address big changes like climate, food, water
- People willing to work
- Supportive service providers, public figures, and community members
- LA support of ag land policy
- Lots of leaders
- Younger demographics coming in
- Available farmland
- Internet marketing
- Community support - lots of help
- “Maine-Made” brand=quality→ grow, process etc.: all stages
- Many organizations for LARGE state with small population
 - Yay citizens of Maine!!
- Connecting land seekers to land owners
- Connecting to food systems of schools
 - parents driven by children’s concerns
 - educated youth
- LA area is close to areas with high tourism
 - money to spend on “Maine-Made” products
- Create culture of farming being desirable profession
- Opportunity to alter Auburn’s zoning to support more farming
- Prime farmland is limited in Europe to only farming competition for housing and ag on same good soils

- Give preference to farming over development in zoning
- Multicultural perspective on land access for farming, include community identity
- Town/city government openness to new farm businesses, less restrictions, start multicultural restaurants i.e. French, Somali
- Need support in distribution, like Native Maine
 - Business produce/local food distribution like 3 Rivers in NH COOPERATIVE DISTRIBUTION
- Expanding Agri-tourism- related endeavors (new revenue streams)
- Utilizing small-plot patches of land
 - (don't need huge parcels)
 - (small-scale diversified may be significant part of the future)
 - (as community gardens in addition to subsistence/homesteading)
- Capturing food system/ag movement momentum to craft regional/local policy
 - (use as economic development tool)
- Support of farming locally and sustainably
- Access to Quality food for community: schools and hospitals
- Local government access
- Investment in sustainable farming technology: causes a rise in environmental protection
 - Natural beauty/land
- Advocacy for rise in food-related policy: WIC/Harvest {Brics}/CSA/Farmers Markets
- Non-profit efforts
- Food hubs for distribution to larger systems/programming
- Land availability/culture shift/preservation/awareness/resources/tourism/hard workers development opportunities
- New administration
- Opportunity to create more land matching
- City supporting farmland
- Economic development
- Keeping farmland as farmland is important
- Model ordinances for Farm Friendly Communities
- Collaborate with landowners and organizations
- All the people in this room (passion and motivation)
- Auburn AG Zone
- Ag. Advisory Board in Auburn
- Direct Rental
- Food Processing
- Food Sovereignty Ordinance