

Erie County Agricultural and Farmland Protection Plan

Farmer Focus Group Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats (SWOT) Analysis

To initiate the process of updating Erie County's Agricultural and Farmland Protection Plan, a first set of farmer focus groups were held throughout Erie County. At these meetings, attendees shared their thoughts and insights about the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats facing agriculture in the County. A total of five meetings were held, including in the Town of Clarence, the Town of North Collins, the Village of Holland, the City of Buffalo, and virtually. Meetings were well attended with 78 members of the community attending. The North Collins meeting was the most well attended with a total of 38 attendees.

Information gathered from these focus groups was utilized to develop a list of agricultural issues, needs, and opportunities for the Erie County Agricultural and Farmland Protection Board (AFPB) to review. Once the AFPB reviews this information, they will identify which items require further investigation. The strategies and actions that will be identified later in the planning process will directly address the issues, needs, and opportunities that were generated through public input identified here and through other community engagement exercises. The complete SWOT chart can be found below along with a summary of the SWOT analyses.

SWOT Summary for Clarence, North Collins, Holland, and Virtual Farmer Focus Group Meetings

Strengths

Based on SWOT analysis responses, farmers believe that the County's agricultural sector thrives due to a combination of factors. Its strategic location, offering access to large customer bases and nearby markets, provides a strong foundation for economic growth. The region's climate, including diverse microclimates, supports a wide range of crops, with an abundance of food processing facilities that help to add value to local produce. Support from dedicated agencies, such as Cornell Cooperative Extension of Erie County and the Erie County Soil and Water Conservation District, bolster the County's farming legacy, while high-quality soils and water, established transportation routes, and a diversity in farm sizes creates a fertile environment for both established and emerging farmers. This supportive ecosystem is complemented by the emergence of a new generation of young farmers and innovative partnerships, which enhance market opportunities and sustainability.

Weaknesses

Based on SWOT analysis responses, farmers believe that the agricultural environment faces several challenges that hinder its growth and sustainability. Poorly maintained road ditches and unsupportive local zoning creates logistical and operational issues for farmers, while the high cost of land makes it difficult for new farmers to enter the industry. The County also suffers from a lack of public agricultural education, leading to limited understanding of local farming's importance and value. Furthermore, road safety for farm vehicles, damage from pests and invasive species like deer and the emerald ash borer, as well as restrictive state regulations add additional hurdles. These weaknesses are compounded by high taxes, a shortage of produce auctions and meat processing facilities, and a lack of local government support for smaller farms and Right to Farm Laws.

Opportunities

Based on SWOT analysis responses, farmers believe that Erie County's agricultural environment has numerous opportunities to strengthen its industry and community. Replicating successful land preservation programs like the Clarence Greenprint at both county and local levels can help protect farmland and promote sustainable

agriculture. Expanding farmer networking and investing in cooperative distribution systems would foster collaboration and strengthen local food systems. By supporting students interested in agriculture with scholarships and encouraging agricultural curriculum in schools, the County can build a skilled workforce and inspire the next generation of farmers. Additionally, the growth of direct marketing, homesteading, and Community Supported Agriculture (CSAs) presents new market opportunities, while partnerships with local colleges to establish agricultural programs and the development of incubator farms offer pathways for innovation and inclusion.

Threats

Based on SWOT analysis responses, farmers believe that Erie County's agricultural environment faces several significant threats that could impact its long-term viability. Farm consolidation and the loss of land to renewable energy developments reduce the available farmland, while sprawling development patterns, and the increase in non-farming neighbors create additional pressures on agricultural practices. The aging farmer population and inheritance issues also pose a risk, potentially leading to a decline in farming traditions and the loss of family farms. Furthermore, a lack of farmland protection funding, unpredictable weather patterns due to climate change, and land purchases by foreign countries can further destabilize the agricultural landscape. These threats are compounded by local law enforcement harassment, unsupportive politicians, increasing commodity prices, and competition from other states, all of which could limit the success of Erie County's agricultural sector.

SWOT Summary for Buffalo Urban Farmer Focus Group Meeting

Strengths

Based on SWOT analysis responses, urban growers in Erie County find strengths in the region's vibrant agricultural environment. Celebratory events like Urban Farm Day foster community and bring attention to urban agriculture, while access to quality water and County-supplied compost kits and rain barrels support sustainable practices. Active organizations and agencies, such as Cornell Cooperative Extension of Erie County and the Greater Buffalo Urban Growers, provide valuable resources and guidance to urban growers. The area's agricultural legacy, with dedicated and multi-generational growers, enriches the local culture and ensures a steady flow of knowledge. Additionally, the diversity of products grown, the presence of the greenhouse industry, and the abundance of available vacant land create ample opportunities for urban farming and innovation. Finally, institutional research resources and the prevalence of honor stands, also known as roadside stands, for direct-to-consumer sales further strengthen the urban agricultural ecosystem.

Weaknesses

Based on SWOT analysis responses, urban growers in Erie County face significant weaknesses that hinder the growth of urban agriculture. A major issue is the lack of a clear definition of what constitutes a "farm," leading to inconsistencies in regulations and support. Urban farms are excluded from the NYS Agricultural District program, limiting their access to benefits and protections available to traditional farms. The City of Buffalo's lack of laws protecting urban agriculture and restrictions on hooved animals constrain urban growers' operations. Additionally, barriers to land and water access, with land being expensive or held vacant for potential future development, create hurdles for urban farmers. There's also a lack of support from policymakers and City officials, coupled with limited exposure of children to farming, which hampers community awareness and engagement. Moreover, food apartheid and the absence of corner stores selling fresh produce contribute to limited access to healthy, locally-grown food in urban areas.

Opportunities

Based on SWOT analysis responses, urban growers in Erie County recognize several key opportunities to strengthen the region's agricultural environment. Changing institutional procurement policies to reward local growers and those focusing on regenerative farming could boost local agriculture and encourage sustainable practices. Workforce training and connecting farms with schools would help cultivate a new generation of urban farmers, fostering education and community involvement. Creating an urban NYS Agricultural District and establishing an Office of Urban Agriculture in the City of Buffalo could formalize support for urban growers and streamline local regulations. Additionally, facilitating water access, promoting backyard gardening, and developing equipment-sharing programs among farms would lower barriers to entry and support the growth of urban agriculture. Lastly, linking local growers with larger processors in the County can enhance distribution networks and market opportunities for urban farmers.

Threats

Based on SWOT analysis responses, urban growers in Erie County face a range of threats that challenge the sustainability of the region's agricultural environment. Climate change, with increased winds and volatile spring seasons, exacerbates the risk of invasive species, potentially damaging farm equipment and reducing yields. Farm consolidation and the loss of open green space due to increased impervious surfaces threaten the economic viability of small-scale urban farming. Additionally, the lack of public education on how food is grown and what urban farms contribute to the community hampers support for urban agriculture. Funding limitations, workforce availability, and government subsidization of low-cost processed foods also undermine the success of urban farming. The cost inflation of fresh produce and the risk of groundwater contamination from industrial history further complicate the landscape. Finally, solar developments that convert agricultural land into renewable energy sites contribute to the loss of valuable farmland, posing a significant threat to the long-term viability of urban agriculture in Erie County.

Farmer Focus Group SWOT Analysis Chart – Clarence, North Collins, and Holland

Strengths • What assets/resources do we have? • What do we do well?	Weaknesses • What challenges do farmers face? • What resources/talent/knowledge do we lack?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Events that celebrate agriculture – Urban Farm Day • Access to quality water • Active organizations and agencies (i.e. CCE & GBUG) • County supplied compost kits and rain barrels • Agricultural legacy – dedicated and multi-generational growers • Institutional research resources • Greenhouse industry • Diversity of products grown • Access to supplies stores and support services • A lot of available vacant land • Abundance of “Honor Stands” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of definitive definition of what a “farm” means • Lack of local laws protecting urban agriculture • Urban farms aren’t eligible to be included in Ag districts • Not exposing kids to farming when they are young • Lack of support and desire from the city to support urban agriculture • Land and water access barriers – land is expensive or held vacant in hopes of future development • Lack of support and knowledge from policymakers • Soil testing is not allowed in the City until after you purchase the property • Food apartheid • Hooved animals are not permitted in the City • Lack of corner stores selling fresh produce
Threats • How are weaknesses hampering agriculture? • What competition is agriculture facing? • What causes our weaknesses?	Opportunities • How can we leverage our strengths? • How can we address our weaknesses? • What new trends can we capitalize on?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Invasive species • Economic viability of farming • Farm consolidation • Climate change – increased winds, volatile spring season, spread of invasive species • Lack of public education – how food is grown and what urban farms actually do • Increase in impervious surfaces and the loss of open green space • Lack of funding for urban ag operations • Workforce availability and burnout • Government subsidization of cheap and processed foods • Inflation of fresh produce • Groundwater contamination from industrial history • Solar developments – loss of ag land 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Changing institutional procurement policies – reward local growers and growers who focus on regenerative farming and climate change initiatives • Workforce training • Connecting farms with schools • Create an urban Ag district • Establish an Office of Urban Agriculture in City Hall • Develop guidelines for smart citing solar energy arrays to mitigate loss of ag land • Subsidize locally grown food • Promote backyard gardening • Make water access and connection processes easier • Develop programs for equipment sharing between farms • Link local growers with larger processors in the county
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reduction in consumer beef consumption • Large Co-Ops that limit individual farm’s ability to market • Market competition with other states 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Incentivize institutional procurement of local products • Emulate the national AgrAbility program • Popularity of CSAs • Develop incubator farms and support for immigrant/refugee farming

Farmer Focus Group SWOT Analysis Chart – Buffalo