

PRIORITIZING FARMLAND AND SCENIC VIEWS IN THE
TOWN OF CANANDAIGUA



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December 2006

Introduction

In February 2004, the Town of Canandaigua released a report titled "Farmland and Open Space Conservation Program." The report was an action that was recommended by the Town's Comprehensive Plan, as an integral part of implementing the "Plan." In addition, the report was designed not only to provide Town officials and its residents with a detailed inventory of farmland and open space resources within the Town's boundaries but also to provide strategies to be used to achieve "meaningful open space conservation even while growth and development occur."

The goals of the Comprehensive Plan:

- Maintain Canandaigua's rural character by preserving farmland and supporting efforts to enhance the economic prospects of agriculture.
- Conserve significant open space throughout the town and create a network of open lands to provide wildlife habitat and potential trail corridors.

While the "2004 Report" provided a detailed inventory of the Town's "Lands of Conservation Interest," it did not prioritize and rank the farmland and open spaces by the soil's fertility, the land's environmental sensitivity, the parcel's scenic views and ridgelines, and the threat from detrimental development.

In early 2006, Canandaigua's Town Board created an "Environmental Conservation Commission" and charged it with the task of identifying those farmland and open space parcels in the Town with the greatest conservation value. In effect, the Board saw that the need to protect open space and set aside land for conservation was far greater than the funds currently held by the Town. Because of this, Town officials believed that its conservation efforts must be focused on protecting the most important parcels of land.

Instead of relying on a random or "shot gun" approach to land acquisition, The Conservation Commission decided that a ranking of the sites inventoried by the "Farmland and Open Space Program" would give town officials the ability to preserve those parcels that would provide the greatest benefit to the community.

Since the "2004 Report" provided an inventory of the most desirable conservation lands, the Commission decided to prioritize the parcels highlighted in that report. However, as the evaluation proceeded, some Commission members uncovered farms and scenic views with outstanding conservation features that were not identified in the 2004 Report. Some of these "discovered parcels" were among the Commission's top scorers. Thus, while the parcels evaluated in this report are among the "best candidates" for conservation, the Commission would be willing to evaluate others if officials and residents would like to suggest them.

The Method Used to Prioritize Farmland and Open Space Parcels

Farmland.

Any ranking of farmland and open space for its conservation potential is bound to be controversial, especially given the beautiful farms and scenic views in the Town of Canandaigua which are highly valued by both residents and visitors for their natural/unspoiled state. In addition, the simple process of visiting a parcel and then discussing its general attributes could lead to stalemate because of wide differences in purely subjective judgments. Faced with this problem, members of the Commission sought a method that would provide a single objective value for each parcel evaluated. The process involved establishing the attributes of an ideal parcel and then comparing the selected parcels to that ideal.

Given the unique scenic beauty, prime agricultural soils and outstanding water quality in the Canandaigua area, finding "ideal" parcels was not too difficult. For example, the perfect benchmarks for evaluating parcels include: the Finger Lakes Land Trust's 225-acre Great Hill (South Hill) Preserve with its steep hill side, gullies, wildlife, plant species and western views, and the "Scenic Turnout" on County Road #12 in South Bristol with its spectacular view of Canandaigua Lake and Bare Hill. Both parcels are "World Class."

To evaluate the farmland inventoried by the "Farmland and Open Space Program," the Commission considered six factors: Landscape (size of parcel, natural vegetation, and proximity to protected lands); Agricultural (prime soils, closeness to viable farms); Environment (steep slopes/wetlands/springs and stream corridors); Ridgelines and Scenic Views (type of vista and visibility from Canandaigua Lake); Legal Protection (type of legal protection, and location in or outside regulatory boundaries); and Development Potential (development of areas near protected lands decreases its conservation value).^{*} Each component received a score and the total score for an ideal parcel totaled 100 points. (See Appendix A for a description of the "*Conservation Scorecard*.")

Since any objective (numerical) measure is likely to be imperfect, Commission members decided to include a subjective element (Extraordinary Factors) that was designed to include attributes that were deemed to be special and deserving of recognition and that were not included in the six objective factors described in the prior paragraph. Moreover, a parcel may score a zero in one or more of the above factors such as lack of prime soils, the absence of streams flowing into the lake or the lack of a ridgeline but still may be

^{*} The "Conservation Scorecard" that was adopted by the Town of Canandaigua's Environmental Commission was adapted from a scorecard developed by the Manomet Center for Conservation Sciences. The scorecard was developed specifically to provide land trusts, open space committees, conservation commissions and regional planners with an objective, science-based tool for prioritizing land acquisition. Given the uniqueness of the landscape in the Western Finger lakes, the Town of Canandaigua's Environmental Commission modified the Manomet scorecard to suit the Town's characteristics.

very valuable from a conservation standpoint. The assignment of points through the "Extraordinary Factor" was designed to account for this shortfall.

Using the inventory of farmlands highlighted in the "Town's 2004 Program," Commission members were assigned parcels that were to be evaluated and subsequently discussed at its regular monthly meetings. Each member was expected to visit the parcel; consult tax maps to determine the size of the parcel and its zoning designation; and look at the extent of environmentally sensitive lands as well as steep slopes and view sheds. After these visits, members reviewed the scores given to each parcel. Needless to say, initial rankings by the individuals differed. Many times, one Commission member saw a feature that another member overlooked. Discussion, compromise and a collegial atmosphere led to a consensus score for each parcel. These were scores that each member could "live with" and represented the Commission's "best judgment" about the conservation value of the parcel.

Scenic Views.

The evaluation of scenic views was similar to that used for farmlands. To evaluate and prioritize those parcels in the Town of Canandaigua with the greatest scenic and environmental value, the Commission considered four broad factors: Landscape (size of parcel, natural vegetation, and proximity to protected lands); Ridgelines and Scenic Views (extent and visual range of the parcel's vista, accessibility of the parcel, and obstructed or unobstructed view); Legal Protection (type of legal protection, and location in or outside regulatory boundary); and Development Potential (could the parcel's scenic view be threatened by construction of buildings in the immediate vicinity?). Commission members visited each parcel, recorded their impressions, discussed their individual scores and reached a "consensus score" for each parcel. This process was time consuming and was carried out over a two-month period. (See Appendix B for a discussion of the "Scenic Views Scorecard.").

Some Words of Caution

While not a perfect process, and only one of many possible ways of prioritizing the conservation value of land, Commission members believe that the scores are an honest attempt to evaluate the lands inventoried by the Town in its 2004 "Report on Farmlands and Open Space." In addition, the members believe that other methods would not yield results that are significantly different from those arrived at by our evaluations.

Since Commission members are unpaid volunteers and a representative cross-section of the Town's residents, and since the members have "no axe to grind," that would favor one parcel over another, the members believe that the scores listed in this report, would be close to what other residents of the community would arrive at if they used the methodology outlined above or if they visited and evaluated the parcels identified by the "Environmental Conservation Commission."