Mattituck-Laurel Civic Association

Minutes of Meeting Of

October 28, 2019

**FARMING ON THE NORTH FORK – PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE**

The meeting began at 6:32. Charlie led the Pledge of Alligiance and introduced our first speaker, **Martin Sidor**.

Mr. Sidor spoke about how his family first farmed on the North Fork in 1908 with a few acres. Over the next 40 years, they acquired parcels until the farm had the acreage that it has today. Back then, everything was done by hand and with horse-drawn tools. In the late 50s and 60s things became more mechanized and tractors were used instead of horses. In the 70s, irrigation was used for the first time and the production was increased. Tools to cut the potatoes were installed. It used to be that almost all of the crop was sent to Puerto Rico in 50 pound burlap bags put into containers to go on a ship. Today, potatoes and chips are sold through local retailers.

The Polish community was close and they took care of each other. The Sidor farm had a crew of local workers that became part of the family is some ways, but never needed to bring in seasonal workers because the friends and neighbors would help out when needed. Martin started running the farm in the late 90s and he found the challenge of getting the crop in and sold before the weather turned bad exciting. He still enjoys that challenge today.

The next speaker was **Marisa Sannino**, whose family has a small vineyard in Cutchogue. Wine was originally created as a means to prolong the life of the grapes for more than a couple of months. It has become an integral part of the culture around the world used at dinners and gatherings of all kinds. It’s a blessing to grow grapes on the North Fork. Just 40 minutes from here, it couldn’t happen. The soil, air quality, proximity to water, and contour of the land, all affect the grapes. Regions like Chianti or Champagne are recognized for the type of wine they produce and that’s a result of the soil and other conditions in those areas. The North Fork is now recognized as a wine producing region. Grape vines do not get regrown, they live as long as they are properly maintained. There are vineyard that are 150 years old. Marisa explained that 1 acre is used for a processing and selling facility while the remaining 27 acres of the family’s vineyard are for the vines. The processing operation, though small, is capable of handling grapes from 100 acres. Marisa and her siblings are second generation wine producers and enjoy being on the North Fork.

**Dan Heston** is the Director of Agricultural Programs at the Peconic Land Trust. He runs the Farmers of the Future program. The program involves buying and protecting farmland, training future farmers, and developing tools to be used in farming. They have a property in Southold that they use for this training. The facility allows small farmers to get started without having to buy their own land and equipment. The Trust works with the town to preserve farmland.

**Kim Krupski** talked about farming and financing. Fluctuations in land values have made it harder for farmers to find sources for loans. Many young people come into her office looking for loans to produce something that isn’t already produced in this area. However, lenders are only interested in tried-and-true production, so anyone wanting to grow a new crop will find it difficult to get funding. New farmers have to learn all aspects of the business before they go out on their own. If they haven’t grown up on a farm, they need training. The average age of a farmer in America is 64 years old. There is a shortage of people who have the scope of knowledge needed to run a farm. Farming on the North Fork is changing and it’s not easy to adapt, but it can be done.

**Prudence Wickham** discussed the future of farming on the North Fork. She is the 11th generation of farmers. Her experience included going to Delaware often, where the family had another farm and this gave her the opportunity to see other types of farming and how people needed to adapt to the local situations. The North Fork was once the world’s largest producer of broccoli and cauliflower. Then World War II came and the markets were gone. The farmers here never recovered after the war. They started growing potatoes to ship to Argentina and other countries below the equator.

Today, they farm products for events. They farm products that go directly to events, or the events are held at the farm. This includes tiny favors for weddings and larger container items for corporate events. Products are cut, cleaned, and arranged before shipping. They also train about 60 doves to fly over wedding and then return home. You can’t box the future of farming. A business plan that you put in place now will not last another 20 years. Things change too fast. It’s important to remember that farming is a business and you have to grow what will pay the bills – which are exceptionally huge on Long Island. Competition is also a factor. Minimum wage in Pennsylvania is about half of what farm workers get on the North Fork. The future of farming is all about adapting to changing conditions. If you can’t pay the bills, the land will disappear.

The panel was then asked: **Why is farming important to Southold Town?**

Answers:

It provides a good tax base for the schools.

There are scenic views provided by farms.

It’s nice to know the people who actually grow the food we eat.

It keeps the people who want to produce food in the community.

Farms keep the value up on your houses.

Farms are the center of the community. After 9/11 people congregated on the farms because they needed a unifying structure. Churches and farms provide that.

Seeing the working landscapes is good for the local economy and it’s good farmland so we should continue to use it as it should be used.

**Does salt water affect farmers?**

Well the salt in the air isn’t really a factor but we have to be careful not to irrigate too much and preserve the aquifers. Salt water intrusion would be devastating.

**Young people today don’t know about the tools and the history of farming. Can we get a museum of sorts to show the kids what farming is about?**

The Wickham farm is on the National Historic Register and we’re making one of our barns a place where kids can come to see what goes into farming. Other than that, there isn’t much.

**How do we encourage young people to take up farming as a career?**

The Peconic Land Trust is intending to go to Mattituck high school later this year to discuss setting up a program to let students know what’s involved in farming and the jobs that exist in the farming industry.

**People who might be interested in farming as a career have options other than Long Island where things cost less. How do we keep them here?**

People stay here because of the community, the people and the school systems. The county has grant programs that will help farmers get started. You’ll have to understand that the market is local and that you will have to be creative about what you farm and how to market it. It isn’t easy, but there is information and people who will help. The markets are wonderful. The cost side is where you will need to be creative. You have to be a person who wakes up in the morning and starts wondering about how to make things better.

**Does shopping at a farm stand help the local farmer, or does the stuff get trucked in from somewhere else?**

Sometimes. In Southold Town, farmers are selling stuff that they grow here. 80% has to come from the North Fork. But if the crop gets wiped out by weather or some other reason, farmers might be forced to bring product from nearby places in order to make ends meet.

**I saw tomatoes grown out of bags of potting soil. Does the way things are grown matter?**

That’s why it’s important to get to know the farmers. Some people don’t care about how it’s done while others do. Some people don’t care how the food is grown while others do care. If you care, the only way to know what’s being done is to talk to the farmer. They would love to talk to you and tell you how things are done.

These concerns weren’t an issue 40 years ago, but things have changed and I think the town has tried to find a happy medium when dealing with these complex issues.

**I imagine that traffic is a good thing for farmers while the rest of us are unhappy about traffic. People come because you have what they want. How do you feel about the traffic?**

Traffic is necessary for farmers to make a living. It’s challenging – especially when people do things that are stupid or scary. But it’s a small price to pay when you look at what you can accomplish with the farmland. It’s been determined that the average wedding that is done here creates about $100,000 for the local economy and that’s important for everybody, not just farmers. Traffic has a negative impact on all of us, but the benefits outweigh the negatives. It is also the responsibility of the farmer to accommodate traffic in a way that doesn’t make the situation worse.

**What are some of the more interesting types of farms that have popped up?**

Container farms are one example. Peconic Land Trust encourages new farmers to do what nobody else is doing. We have a guy who does game birds – pheasant, quail, etc.

Another that just does bulbs. There are lots of different operations.

**How do you feel about preserving the open space of the farms? How important is that to you?**

There are several types of open space. This panel believes that keeping the open views is very important to everybody. A place to prepare and sell wine is needed. Otherwise the other acreage of the vineyard has no purpose. Likewise, barns are used to house equipment and other things and are a necessary part of any farm. It’s challenging, but these things can be resolved to keep the views. We need the farms.

**Irrigation seems to use great quantities of water. Is there any risk to our aquifers?**

The average rainfall on the North Fork is 40 inches per year and the usage (by everybody) is about 18 inches, so quantity is not an issue. However, quality is a concern. People have to be aware of the possibility of salt intrusion into the aquifers. Watering with salt water would kill everything. The traditional method of watering throws water into the air which picks up particles of salt, especially after a strong wind which carries salt from the surrounding surface water, and this could be detrimental to crops. There is a strong push now to use drip irrigation. This uses less water and send more of it directly to the plants. This is especially appropriate with vegetable production, but not so much with sod farms or potato farms. Drip is relatively new. Traditionally, overhead watering would be moved every few hours, once 1” to 1 ½” of water went into the ground. A potato is 70% water and needs that much water per week. Now we have a wheel system which makes it easier to move the water as needed. The aquifers have never been depleted. We do a better job of watering now and there is no threat to the aquifers. The county DEC now has meters on wells to measure how much water is being used. We don’t know what will come of that.

**How did it work out for farmers who had to learn Spanish in order to work with the field labor?**

The farms out here have always had immigrant help and that help has always become a part of the community. All of the labor is here legally. They work all season long and then go back to Guatemala or wherever and use the money to buy equipment and work the farms there. They are hard workers and know how to farm. It’s a big benefit, both for them and for us. Farms provide roots for people. These workers have a skill set that’s hard to find and they’re a good addition to the area. The history here is full of examples of workers who became part of the community. Farmers aren’t going too far if they don’t have help.

**Do you as farmers feel supported by the community and town officials?**

A lot of people are supportive and concerned about what we do, and a lot of people are disconnected from it. It’s not like a town on the south fork where farmers could face jail time if they don’t get their crops out on time. For the most part, people who patronize farm stands are pretty supportive.

**Audience comments:** What we’ve preserved here on the North Fork is impressive and hasn’t happened elsewhere – like Delaware, which has been completely paved. The town, the farmers and the community have all done a great job. You should be in touch with the local historical society to partner with future events and causes.

I’ve taken part of the annual Foodie Tour. It would be great if a few farmers could get together to create a Farm Tour similar to that. It would be very educational and promote local support as well.

**How much of the food produced year is sold locally?**

That’s tricky because large supermarkets have to provide products year-round and products grow seasonally. So if you’re supplying those types of stores, you have to have a farm here and a farm in Florida to cover all the seasons. That’s a different type of growing than the farms do here. We’re basically too small to supply wholesale or a chain store. If any food grown on the North Fork is in chain stores, it would have to be a very minimal amount. Farm stands would carry most of it, but I can’t offer any percentages because I don’t know what that would be.

As an example, asparagus have a short season here and supermarkets have a year-round price for asparagus, which is high. But when the local crop is being sold on farm stands, supermarkets cut their prices to undercut the farm stands. They’re not restrained by seasonal growth. So we should have our own farmer’s market here and a lot of people would buy there.

**How are you handling the deer situation?**

You know, we’ve put up deer fencing, that was very expensive, and everybody hates it. Deer are a huge problem. It’s a community problem. Farmers are very aware of how important the community is to our success. And at our meeting in January we will be discussing sustainability and how it’s impacted by the community. The deer will be part of that discussion, but it’s really a problem that has to be solved by the town.

**Audience Comment:** If we think we have traffic now, if farms get replaced by houses, it will get so much worse.

Charlie then talked briefly about our next meeting – The History of Mattituck and the pros and cons of having a Historic Corridor in Mattituck; the upcoming vote for Citizen of the Year; and the Holiday party on December 11th. The panel was thanked. They did a wonderful job.

Respectfully Submitted,

Charles Gueli