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## A Farm-Friendly Town

By MARK WINNE

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Sometimes you have to explore a place's past to understand what makes it tick. In the case of Suffield, you can't just go back to the town's founding in 1670. You have to go back 20,000 years.

That's when the glaciers began to recede from New England. The retreating ice pulverized, ground and plastered down everything in its path. The melting torrents of water left behind the glacial Lake Hitchcock that drained down to what is now the Connecticut River. At the lake's deepest point, where Suffield now sits, Hitchcock's waters deposited a cap of silt over the glacial till, leaving behind some of the most fertile soils east of the Mississippi River.

Now, people in Suffield don't typically wander about in a philosophical daze asking themselves, "Why are we here?" But if they did, they would probably have a better answer than most of us. They are where they are because of the actions of geological time and the soil that these events left behind. This is why Indians settled the area, and why it later became so attractive to white settlers.

And it is why, even today, residents are making an extraordinary effort to preserve this lush bottomland for farming.

In too many communities, poor planning, little or no conservation, and unbridled development chew up prime farmland. They, in effect, treat their precious soils like dirt. That's not the case in Suffield. Go to the home page of the town's website and you'll find the town slogan: "Suffield - Our Roots Run Deep," an implicit acknowledgement that healthy growth needs good soil.

Elaine Sarsynski, Suffield's first selectwoman, grew up on a farm in Hadley, Mass., where she learned to appreciate the intrinsic value of agriculture. Though it is bordered by Bradley Airport to the south and the Six Flags amusement park to the north, Suffield is a beautiful place in which to live, a fact that has not gone unnoticed by developers who are eyeing the town's verdant fields for subdivisions.

But Sarsynski understands the challenges to both farmers and her community, which is why she is leading the way in making Suffield one of the most "farm-friendly" towns in the state. "People are on the bandwagon in this community to preserve farmland, and I think the farmers know that the town is behind them," Sarsynski said.

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Suffield is about as farm-friendly as any town in Connecticut. Davetta Curtiss' farm, for instance, sits square in the flight path of Bradley's Runway 6. Her 75 cows have grown so accustomed to noise that they hardly flinch when a 737 roars overhead. As if this kind of invasiveness wasn't enough, her farm is neatly divided by Route 75.

On a recent night, one of her cows calved and had to be moved from one side of the farm to the other. She called a Suffield police cruiser to park with its lights flashing in the middle of Route 75 while she escorted the large Holstein across the busy highway. But in spite of the nuisances and the big-ticket offers from land buyers, Curtiss wants to keep farming. So she is working closely with the town, which in turn is negotiating with the Connecticut Department of Agriculture and the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service to buy her development rights, which would preserve the farm in perpetuity.

Purchasing agricultural easements is not new in Suffield. Seven of the town's farms, totaling 1,200 acres, are already in the state's farmland protection program. Two more farms were approved for protection this past September and, according to Suffield's town planner, Phil Chester, the town hopes to continue to use its own funds as well as state and federal money to double the number of protected farms.

Today, 3,000 of the town's 27,000 acres are still agricultural. But this is down drastically from 9,000 acres in 1965. To reach their goal, Chester and his team of concerned citizens must have as many tools as they can get. Fortunately, Suffield has assembled an impressive arsenal, including agricultural buffer zones that require developers to place a 50 to 100 foot wide strip of land between existing farmland and new developments. Both the town's zoning plan and the mission statement of the planner's office affirm the town's commitment to its farms. The town also sponsored a workshop that informed farmers and other large landowners about their preservation options. And to ice the cake, the town developed and promotes a farmers market every Saturday from June to October.

But Suffield's most potent weapon is its army of volunteers. "What's unusual about Suffield," says Phil Chester, "is the amount of staff and volunteer time devoted to farmland." Ray Wilcox, a 25-year resident, is one of those volunteers who puts in time almost every day for farmland preservation. As chairman of the open space subcommittee of the heritage committee, Wilcox is in the planner's office checking maps, cruising the town's back roads to rate the suitability of farms for preservation and talking to farmers. According to Wilcox, "If we work actively with the farmer to preserve land, the town wins, taxpayers win, wildlife wins and the farmer wins."

Ask Donna Dunai, who, along with her sister Kathleen, is a third-generation owner of Dunai Farm on North Stone Street. They produce fruits and vegetables, bedding plants and Christmas wreathes cut from their own trees on about a quarter of their 58-acre farm. The rest of the land is leased to a turf and tobacco grower. Together the two sisters decided to sell their development rights to the town and the state. "I don't ever want to see this place covered with houses," said Donna, "and now this view is preserved for us and future generations." It took two years to complete the deal, but they were impressed with Suffield's commitment to farmland preservation and felt that the work of the state agriculture department was "spectacular."

Although people like Sarsynski, Chester, Daviss, Wilcox and Dunai may not contemplate the importance of glaciers to their daily lives, they have chosen to honor the cataclysmic forces of nature by preserving what took tens of thousands of years to create. They know implicitly that good soil comes first. Everything else will have to wait its turn.

*Mark Winne is a Food and Society Policy Fellow, a position funded in part by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, and a member of the Place board of contributors. He can be reached by email at win5m@aol.com.*



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