

SAVING THE WORKING FARM: A STUDY IN PRESERVATION

By Douglas A. Muir

It's no secret that New England farms have been under relentless financial pressure. Steadily increasing costs have made it difficult for the farmer to make a profit, while the growing value of the farmland itself has created a strong temptation to develop it for other purposes. Although statistics vary, there seems to be a consensus that anywhere from 2,000 to 5,000 acres of Massachusetts farmland are lost to development every year.

Fortunately, New Englanders have a strong interest in our farming heritage, as well as a growing awareness of the value of locally-grown products. As a result, along with the broader land conservation movement, there has been a growing commitment to take the necessary steps to preserve our remaining local agriculture.

O'Neil Farm, a 140-acre dairy farm located near the Duxbury-Kingston town line, has been in continuous agricultural use since the early 1700's. During that time only a few families have owned it, including the O'Neil family, who have been farming the land for over 100 years.

In spite of the financial challenges facing the operator of a dairy farm in affluent, coastal Duxbury, Carl O'Neil was determined to continue dairy farming and operate O'Neil farm as a viable, self-sustaining business. Several years ago Carl approached the Wildlands Trust of Southeastern Massachusetts, a regional conservation organization that works to protect open space in southeastern Massachusetts, to share his vision to protect the farm from development and make it economically sustainable.

The project team mustered by Carl and the Wildlands Trust initially worked to better understand the objectives. Carl wanted to continue to farm the land and make it self-sustaining, but family members did not share Carl's interest in continuing the farm and funds would be needed for a buyout. The Wildlands Trust was willing to spearhead the fundraising for the project, but the Trust could only do that if the farmland would be preserved as open space in perpetuity. The Town of Duxbury would commit significant financial support, provided the farm would be open to the public. The state would make funding available from its Agricultural Preservation Restriction program, provided the land would be kept in active agriculture. How could all these objectives be realized at the same time?

After considerable discussion the outlines of a project evolved which would satisfy the various groups involved:

- A total of \$4.3 million would need to be raised, of which \$3.3 million would be used to purchase the interests of Carl and other family members.
- A tax-exempt nonprofit corporation would be created to own the farm property, develop and operate educational activities at the farm, create walking trails for visitors, and raise funds for the farm's needs.

- Carl would enter into a long-term lease with this new corporation and continue to operate the farm as a tenant.
- One million dollars would be set aside as an endowment to be used, as necessary, to improve the farm and increase its economic viability.
- Of the \$4.3 million to be raised, \$2 million would be public funding from the Town of Duxbury's Community Preservation Act Fund and the Commonwealth's Agricultural Preservation Restriction program. The Wildlands Trust, through private donors, would raise the balance.
- Carl and the board of directors of the new nonprofit corporation would seek assistance from the Commonwealth's Farm Viability Enhancement Program to develop a business plan for the farm and explore the possibility of producing "value-added" products such as farmstead cheese and ice cream. This innovative program, operated by the Massachusetts Department of Agricultural Resources, makes consultants available to the farmer to provide technical assistance and help the farmer develop a business plan. The program also makes cash grants to farmers for their capital needs, such as construction or improvement of farm buildings.

Not all of the strategies and techniques employed at O'Neil Farm will fit all situations, of course, but there are some generalizations we can make:

- First, it's crucial to identify realistic farming objectives. What types of agriculture took place on the property historically? What are the soils like? Will the current agriculture be viable on the property in the future, and what additional resources will be necessary to insure that will happen?
- Second, who is the farmer now and who will the next farmer be? Is there a "farm family" which is likely to continue the farm into the next generation, or will it be necessary to find a new farmer to do so?
- Third, is there community interest in seeing the farm continue? In the O'Neil Farm context, a strong community interest translated into public and private financial support as well as significant volunteer help for trail clearing and staffing farm events. But other farmers have found different ways to tap local support and interest, such as growing "pick your own" crops, organizing summer educational programs for school children, and conducting myriad seasonal events on the farm.
- Next, how can you tap available public resources? The Massachusetts Farm Viability Enhancement Program provides technical consulting to the farmer as well as grants for capital needs.





Conservation Restrictions and Agricultural Preservation Restrictions not only guarantee that the land won't be developed for other purposes but can provide a source of funds for capital investment in the farm.

- Finally, how should the farm be legally organized to maximize the likelihood that it will continue into the future? Are there educational or other "public" purposes at stake, such as land or water conservation, protection of scenic vistas, or preservation of wildlife habitat? If so, it may be possible to create a tax-exempt organization to own the property and attract broad financial support.

HISTORIC O'NEIL FARM TODAY

Some seven years after Carl O'Neil and the Wildlands Trust first began their discussion about the future of the farm, a good deal has been accomplished:

- All of the required funds were raised. Permanent agricultural and conservation restrictions were placed on the property to insure that the land would stay in farming and not be developed for housing or commercial purposes. A tax-exempt nonprofit corporation was formed and the farm property was transferred to it. Carl and the new corporation entered into a lease, which allows him to continue to live on the property and operate the farm for as long as he wishes.
- Carl and a task force from the board of directors are in active discussions with consultants supplied by the Farm Viability Enhancement Program to develop a sound business plan, identify the farm's financial needs, and establish the value-added strategies that will help make the farm profitable.
- A beautiful 3,700-foot walking trail, the Avery Trail, has been completed and opened to the public. A second, the Chandler Trail, is in the works. Hundreds of visitors have been welcomed to two farm days on the property to enjoy music and refreshments, get up close to real farm animals, enjoy hay rides and other activities, and share the experience of a real working dairy farm.

There is still much to be done, of course, but Carl O'Neil's vision of a viable, permanent dairy farm in Duxbury is now much closer to reality. 🌱

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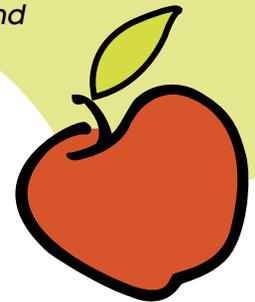
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