

Reaching municipalities in Massachusetts

Land Trust/ State Agency Retreat at Saima Park, Fitchburg MA
Wednesday, October 7, 2026

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Agenda and Goals

Agenda

- Why involving municipalities is important
- Working with AgComs
- New resources
 - Planning for Farmland in Massachusetts. An Overview at a Municipal and Regional Level.
 - Summary of Municipal Role for APR Application and Enrollment Process
- Some Farmland Partnership Projects that are building municipal capacity
- Share some examples from recent Farmland Partnership discussion on this topic
- Discussion!

Today's Goals

- ❖ Explore some examples and ideas for how to strengthen municipal relationships and build municipal capacity
- ❖ Share best practices and lessons learned from your own work
- ❖ Dig into some new farmland resources that include some concepts that are transferrable to other types of conservation, or could even be adapted to other situations.

Three-legged stool for protecting land



State government
Land trusts
Municipalities

Question for the room – Have you worked for a municipality?

1. Yes, I have worked as a member of staff for a municipality
2. Yes, I have been a municipal decision-maker – City Council, Selectboard, Planning Board, etc
3. Yes, I have served on a committee for a municipality
4. No, but I have worked for other government entities
5. No, but I have worked under contract for a municipality
6. No, but I have worked with municipalities on projects
7. None of the above

Question for the room – What type of work have you done with a municipality?

1. Protected land – open space, farmland, park, etc
2. Co-held restriction with a municipality
3. Work on setting up CPA, Conservation Fund, Agricultural Preservation Fund or other funding mechanism for conservation
4. Write a plan or report – eg Open Space and Recreation Plan
5. Resource inventory – wetlands, natural resources, etc
6. Other?

Why involving municipalities is important

Municipalities, state agencies and land trusts are juggling many competing priorities for scarce resources with limited capacity.

Municipalities

- Have required, recommended and optional roles and decision making when land is protected
- Have required, recommended and optional roles for the future stewardship and monitoring of protected land
- May have access to funding sources that land trusts and state agencies may not
- Can be an important part of the local support system for protected land
- Often lead efforts to plan for current and future land uses

Who at a municipality?

- Decision makers – eg Towns Selectboard and City Council
- Staff leadership – eg Town Manager
- Other staff – eg town planner, town conservation agent
- Volunteer board and committee members
- And, by extension, the public at large



Working with Agricultural Commissions (AgComs)

MDAR contract with Conservation Works
(Pete Westover and Sarah Gardner)



Conservation Works supports AgComs

MDAR provides funding to Conservation Works, LLC to support their work around Agricultural Commissions (AgComs) and municipalities interested in establishing an AgCom.

Work includes

- Ag Com Roundtables by county – additional dates starting October 2026
- Technical assistance
- Maintaining list of active Ag Coms

Learn more on [MDAR Agricultural Commissions webpage](#)

Questions to Pete Westover westover03@comcast.net and Sarah Gardner sarahsperrygardner@gmail.com

Some lessons learned so far by Pete and Sarah

What makes a good AgCom?

- Spearhead person leading the effort and keeping things moving
- Membership that includes young farmers, variety of farm experience
- Good relations with other town boards
- Knowledge of Chapter 40, Section 8L
- Townwide Farmland Preservation Plan and plans for funding farmland protection
- Collective knowledge of every farm within the town

Who does the work? Finding staff support

- Arranging a few hours a week from town planning or conservation agent
- Possible multi-town shared support position
- Regular volunteer(s) familiar with the farm community
- Grant-funded position
- Assistance from regional planning agency or land trust



New resource – Planning for Farmland in Massachusetts

A new resource for municipalities and land trusts



Creating this document

Creation of Planning for Farmland in MA recognizes

- Need for a deeper understanding of farmland and agriculture amongst some municipal and land trust staff
- Need for explaining how farmland is similar to and differs from areas where staff may have more experience, such as open space
- A gap in existing resources
- A good source of information is a good start for building capacity
- Variety of perspectives relating to farmland and agriculture

Approach taken

- MDAR written, with review and feedback from variety of partners – municipalities, land trusts, Regional Planning Agencies, non-profits who specialize in farmland and farming, and others
- Balancing comprehensive and achievable
- Not just about written – presentations and discussions also important

Planning for Farmland in Massachusetts

About the document

- Released August 2026
- Written by MDAR and informed by a group of partners

Audience

- Primary – staff at municipalities, Regional Planning Agencies (RPAs) and land trusts.
- May also be a useful starting point for volunteer board and committee members of municipalities and land trusts.
- Other resources exist for farmers

Why is this document important?

1. Farmland is not the same as open space and other land uses
2. Farmland is more than the land
3. Commercial farming is not easy
4. There is no one-size-fits-all for planning for farmland

Document overview

This document is intended to

- assist staff with planning documents as well as wider planning activities, engagement and municipal operations
- supplement the 2025 [Open Space and Recreation Planner's Workbook \(OSRP Workbook\)](#)
- provide information relevant to the wider realm of planning for farmland
- support the implementation of the 2023 MA Farmland Action Plan
- focus on farmland, not broader agriculture

Section 1 - Agriculture in Massachusetts

A brief overview of some useful context related to agriculture in Massachusetts

Section 2 – Tools to support farming and protect farmland

Including some definitions of terms used later in this resource

Section 3 – Understanding farmland and agriculture in your community

In addition to what is already on the municipality's radar when planning

Section 4 – Things to keep in mind when developing strategies to protect farmland

In addition to what is shared in the OSRP Workbook

Learn more about Planning for Farmland

[MDAR Ag Resources for Municipalities webpage](#)

- Full document
- Slides from 9/23/2026 webinar
- Video from 9/23/2026 webinar





New Resource – Summary of Municipal Role for APR Application and Enrollment Process

A new resource for municipalities



New resource - Summary of Municipal Role for APR Application and Enrollment Process

About the document

- Released August 2026
- Written by MDAR

Audience

- Primary – staff at municipalities
- May also be a useful for land trusts and volunteer board and committee members of municipalities.
- Other resources exist for farmers

This document is intended to increase the awareness among municipal staff and officials of their statutory responsibilities and many opportunities to support the mission of the APR program to permanently preserve farmland for its economic, cultural, and environmental benefits.

Learn more from [MDAR APR Program Resources for Municipalities webpage](#)

Content within Municipal Role for APR Process

Introduction to Protecting Farmland in Massachusetts, including the APR Program

- Phase 1 – Pre-Application and Initial Project Vetting
- Phase 2 – Application review and other work leading to MDAR making a formal offer
- Phase 3 – Secure Funding and Survey
- Phase 4 – Final Preparation and Closing
- Phase 5 – After the farmland is protected



Farmland Partnership

New program funded by MDAR to fund partners
and MDAR to work on projects



Farmland Partnership Projects

The following is a highlight of some of the projects with oriented towards municipalities

- [Municipal Farmland Protection Plan template created and piloted](#)
- [Education on planning and zoning that reduces farmland loss](#)
- [Resources on how municipalities can respond to ROFR](#)
- [Municipal training on Chapter 61A](#)
- [Education on how to use Community Preservation Act \(CPA\) funds for protecting farmland](#)

Upcoming event

- **Saving the Farm: Municipalities' Right of First Refusal (ROFR) During Chapter 61A Transfer - 10/15 Webinar**
- Hosted by Wildlands Trust as part of their Farmland Partnership Project
- More information and sign up on [SRPEDD project webpage](#)

For updates on opportunities, sign up for the [MFAP newsletter](#).

Farmland Partnership Cohort meeting

discussion about engaging with municipalities

Every municipality is unique with its own needs, layers of people with experience, resources (budget, staff capacity, volunteer support, etc), and systems. Their relationship to farmers, farms, and the food system can vary greatly.

Wide range of “municipal” entities to interact with, including:

- Municipal staff,
- Municipal officials,
- Selectboard/City Council,
- Board of Health,
- Ag Com,
- Planning Board,
- Conservation Commission, etc.

Resources

- Leverage connections of those who already have municipal relationships – e.g. farmers, Regional Planning Agencies, local ag champions, land trusts, community partners, local legislators, Buy Locals.
- Sarah Gardner and Pete Westover, with funding from MDAR, are working to support and create Ag Coms
- Manuals and guides for working with/ engaging with municipalities created by Land For Good, MA Food System Collaborative, CISA and others

Challenges and opportunities for engaging with municipalities

- Municipalities have different language, vocabularies, and styles to farmers and service providers.
- Municipalities may not understand farming and the impact their requirements have on a farm. Need relationships and resources to work on this.
- Public perception of Chapter 61A and its impact on the municipal budget.
- Farmers interact with municipalities in a variety of arenas – zoning, permitting, conservation commissions, and more.
- Municipalities have a wide range of capacities based on budget, expertise of people involved, proportion of paid staff versus volunteers doing key functions, etc.
- Takes time to build relationships, trust and shift perspectives of municipalities.
- Relationships can be regularly shifting due to staff turnover, public officials changing after elections, etc.
- Important to understand power dynamics in your city or town



For more information or questions

APR Program Resources for Municipalities Webpage

www.mass.gov/info-details/agricultural-preservation-restriction-apr-program-resources-for-municipalities

Agriculture Resources for Municipalities Webpage www.mass.gov/info-details/ag-resources-for-municipalities

Farmland Partnership Webpage www.mass.gov/info-details/farmland-partnership-program



Discussion (Large group or breakouts)



1. What are some of the best practices you have for reaching municipal staff and municipal officials? What have you found doesn't work, and/or needs to be approached carefully?
2. What networks and connections can you help your partners connect to?
3. Do you have any follow up questions or comments about a specific approach you've been hearing about?
4. Is there anything you would like to learn more about?
5. If you have time – Can you see a collaboration opportunity with a project you are working on?

Break into groups



What types of municipalities do you work with?

- City/ urban community
- Medium sized community that is growing rapidly
- Medium sized community that is staying the same size or growing slowly
- Rural community
- Statewide