

What is a town agricultural commission?

A town agricultural commission is an appointed town standing committee that:

- Represents the farming community.
- Encourages the pursuit of agriculture.
- Promotes agriculture-based economic opportunities.
- Preserves, revitalizes, and sustains agricultural businesses and land.

Ag commission members are primarily farmers who get together with residents and town officials in order to understand each other, share concerns and opportunities, and then get the word out to the other folks in town.

Ag commission members document and address the interests of farmers, then consider how to work effectively with residential, municipal, commercial, and industrial interests.

In some towns, residents have formed planning groups for new schools, businesses, town-owned buildings and open space preservation, but seldom for the cherished resource of farming.

What if farming issues were addressed by a committed group of folks from your town who *want* to understand your needs, preferably before there's a problem?

Your own agricultural commission, like those that have formed in eight other Massachusetts towns in the last two years, could be the answer.



Does my town need an agricultural commission?

As a farmer in Massachusetts, if you've seen your rural town change from primarily agricultural to increasingly residential, you may find yourself facing new issues and concerns. Ask yourself...

When your new neighbors moved to your town because they enjoy the country scenery and lifestyle, were they aware that farming activities can cause odor or noise?

Do your town officials understand the challenges that are unique to running a farm business and how the decisions they make affect local farms?

Do residents and officials fully appreciate the important role that agriculture plays in the local economy and the character of your community?

If the answer to any of these questions is no, an agricultural commission might be right for your town.

What are some objectives of agricultural commissions?

Master Plans that protect agricultural lands, preserve rural character, and provide viable options for retaining the use of the land for agricultural purposes.

Open Space Surveys that include active agriculture, including one where 80 percent of respondents said that it is important to preserve farmland and agricultural businesses.

Town Planning that retains agricultural land and agricultural businesses.

Grassroots Advocacy that provides a voice for farmers and farm businesses and improving the visibility of farming in your town.



What else are agricultural commissions doing?

- Mapping farms and farmlands
- Identifying farmers' and the community's needs, issues and concerns
- Serving as an information clearinghouse and forum for farm-town relations
- Facilitating the technical, educational, business and regulatory assistance needed to farm and to live near farms
- Developing trust and a working relationship among farmers, residents and institutions
- Advocating at state and federal levels for support of community-identified agricultural needs
- Facilitating access to conflict resolution services for farmers and the community
- Hosting community agricultural events
- Recommending actions on land use programs that would help agriculture thrive, including Chapter 61, tax valuation, APR and other preservation programs
- Sponsoring right-to-farm by-laws and making farming practices known to new neighbors moving to town
- Seeking out informational and educational resources relevant to farms and farm communities
- Matching farmers with available land and helping the landowner and the farmer promote sustained use

Steps to organizing a town agricultural commission

1. Identify community and farming leaders and organizers.
2. Assess interest. Talk to farmers, residents, boards and committees, and community decision makers.
3. Gather the support of farmers and town leadership by creating a list of issues and opportunities they would like to have addressed.
4. Organize an informational public meeting
 - a. Invite farmers through letters of invitation
 - b. Invite the public through press releases and newspaper articles.
 - c. Invite members of established agricultural commissions to speak about why they organized, what they do, and the benefits to agriculture.
5. Determine whether an ag commission is important for your town and whether you should proceed.
6. Form an agricultural commission steering committee.
7. Publicize newly established steering committee meetings.
8. Draft an agricultural commission by-law and town meeting warrant article with input from town boards, town counsel, and several farmers.
9. Research advocates and opposition.
10. Present article at Town Meeting for discussion and vote. Presentation should be provided by well informed and prepared advocates.

What happens after passage?

1. Steering committee and town leadership work together to solicit applicants for agricultural commission members.
2. Steering committee reviews applications and makes recommendations to the Select Board.
3. Select Board appoints members, assigns terms of service, and establishes date for convening first meeting.
4. First meeting business:
 - Identify facilitator and recorder. Follow Robert's Rules of Order.
 - Review by-law, focus on mission, membership, terms of service, and vote in officers.
 - Identify needs and priorities.
 - Establish goals and begin development of a work plan.
 - Guiding principle: identify and work on achieving one or two measurable goals at a time... build success!
5. Share results of the first meeting with farmers beyond the commission membership to check that their needs will be addressed.
6. Seek involvement from community through a Circle of Friends: people in the community who have skills and abilities that the agricultural commission needs to achieve their goals.

For more information:

Call the Mass. Dept. of Agricultural Resources' ag commission information line at 617-626-1726 or visit www.mass.gov/agr/agcom.

A CD-ROM is also available to provide the tools and sample documents needed for organizing an ag commission. To order a copy of the CD-ROM contact:

Pilgrim RC&D Area Council
15 Cranberry Highway
West Wareham, MA 02576
(508) 295-1317 x130
irene.winkler@ma.usda.gov

A Farmer's Guide to Organizing a Town Agricultural Commission



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