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NEWS



‘Farm Hub’ to train new crop of local growers

by JESSE J. SMITH on Dec 23, 2013 • 9:55 pm

No Comments



John Gill at Friday's announcement. (Photo: Phyllis McCabe)

Gill Farm's sweet corn, for decades a mainstay of summertime meals in the Hudson Valley, is no more. But a nonprofit group is betting that the 1,255-acre tract along the rich bottomlands of the Esopus Creek can nurture something even more critical to Ulster County's agricultural economy — a new generation of farmers.

Last Friday, Dec. 20 farm owner John Gill and representatives of the New World Foundation announced the new initiative before a packed house in a conference room at Cornell Cooperative Extension of Ulster County's Kingston Plaza offices. Under the terms of the \$13 million land purchase, the farm will be transformed by





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the Local Economies Project into an “incubator” for aspiring farmers. Other parts of the farm will be set aside for continuing education for local farmers, as well as research and development of new farm technology and sustainable farming techniques tailored for the Hudson Valley.

The Local Economies Project is funded by the nonprofit New World Foundation (another charitable group, the Novo Foundation, put up the money for the land purchase). The project is focused on promoting sustainable agriculture in the Hudson Valley as a means to creating resilient, self-sustaining communities. LEP Executive Director Bob Dandrew said that agriculture as an economic cornerstone makes sense in the Hudson Valley, based on the area’s proximity to the enormous New York City food market, its long tradition of farming and an existing network of agriculture supporting nonprofit groups.

“It was very clear that the Hudson Valley was the place to dive in and start this work,” said Dandrew.

That work, Dandrew said began over a year ago with a series of meetings with local farmers to solicit opinions about how a land-based “farm hub” could best serve them. The discussions identified needs like training, reliable local research, access to capital and affordable land. And, with the average age of a Hudson Valley farmer at 57 and many without heirs interested in taking over the business, there was a crucial need for a pipeline to connect would-be farmers with training and land to carry on the region’s agricultural traditions.

The end result was the purchase of the Gill farm and an ambitious plan to turn the 76-year-old family farm into what Dandrew called the largest farm hub and incubator in the country. Bruce Davenport, president of the Rondout Valley Growers Association, said that despite the uneasiness about the loss of one of the county’s mainstay family farms, the new Farm Hub would benefit the agricultural sector as a whole.

“Our findings look a lot like what we’re talking about here today,” said Davenport of the discussions with LEP. “I feel like our time was not wasted.”

Dandrew said that the Farm Hub would emerge from a multi-phased transition process. One of the first initiatives would be the creation of a farm incubator for aspiring farmers. Under the plan trainees would be selected via a rigorous competitive selection process. The would-be farmers would be given responsibility for anywhere from an acre to 25 acres of farmland. Farm Hub staff — including John Gill who will stay on as a farm manager — would guide the trainees through everything from crop selection to marketing and distribution.

Meanwhile, LEP partners like Cornell Cooperative Extension and Scenic Hudson would continue to work to identify suitable farmland and credit sources. After five to seven years, Dandrew said, the trainees would be able to use those resources to purchase their own farms and make way for a new group at the incubator. Plans call for the first group of five to ten trainees to begin work at the Farm Hub in February 2015. Another part of the plan calls for the development of an “incubator without walls,” which would work in conjunction with CCEUC and the Hudson Valley Agribusiness Development Corporation to provide local farmers with technical expertise, networking and grant writing assistance.

The second phase of the proposal calls for the development of an applied research operation utilizing acreage on the farm. The goal, organizers say, would be to research new techniques and equipment tailored to local growing conditions. The



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R&D operation would be run in conjunction with Cornell University. The proposed second phase also includes the creation of a training and demonstration program to aid area farmers and farm workers. Backers say that the Gill Farm, which is famous for its rich, productive topsoil, is ideally suited to large-scale field testing and demonstration projects. A third phase would involve developing community programs, including farming education in area schools and producing food for local food banks.

Dandrew said that much of 2014 would be taken up with master planning for the project, with actual farming resuming at the site in 2015. Meanwhile LEP will take over maintenance of the farm to ensure that the valuable farmland does not degrade during the transition. Dandrew also pledged to keep the popular Gill Farm farmstand open once the incubator program is up and running and he added that the nonprofit would continue to pay taxes on the full assessed value of the farm which straddles the towns of Ulster and Marbletown.

John Gill's grandfather purchased the farm in 1937. His father expanded the operation, buying up prime cropland along the creek. Gill called the end of the family's operation of the farm a bittersweet moment. But, he added, he would take heart knowing that the rich land would continue to do what it had done for centuries — feed the people of the Hudson Valley and support farmers.

"That's not just soil, it's a lot of blood sweat and tears," said Gill. "The last thing I ever wanted to see was houses built there because, as my dad said, they don't make land anymore."

Tags: Cornell Cooperative Extension of Ulster County, Gill Farm, New World Foundation

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