

IT'S THE ECONOMY

Geddy Svelkauskas

Transforming local agriculture

*From you have I been absent in the spring,
When proud-pied April dress'd in all his trim
Hath put a spirit of youth in every thing,
That heavy Saturn laugh'd and leap'd with him.
Yet nor the lays of birds nor the sweet smell
Of different flowers in odour and in hue
Could make me any summer's story tell,
Or from their proud lap pluck them where they grew ...'*

— Sonnet 98, William Shakespeare

FIVE HOURS AND 10 MINUTES BEFORE THE end of April, an audience of about 125 persons gathered in the SUNY Ulster cafeteria outside Stone Ridge. They were there to find out more about the future of local agriculture from the most recent, most earnest and most well-heeled entrant into that world, the Hudson Valley Farm Hub at the 1,255-acre former Gill Farm on the Hurley Flats just west and southwest of Kingston.

This is not your father's farm. In December 2013, the NoVo Foundation — non-profit philanthropic vehicle of the youngest son of billionaire businessman Warren Buffett, Peter Buffett, and of Peter's wife Jennifer — put up \$13 million to buy the land from third-generation local farmer John Gill. NoVo intends eventually to transfer ownership of the farm to another not-for-profit. Almost lost in the glitter of the dramatic \$13 million land purchase was the announced intention to commit \$20 million of additional NoVo

funds through 2018 to develop and manage the Farm Hub until it could become an independent non-profit.

It's now a year and a half since the land was bought. The enterprise is being managed by the Local Economies Project (LEP), part of a smaller intermediary non-profit called the New World Foundation. It was LEP which has organized and hired staff for the Farm Hub, whose mission it is to provide farmer access to training, land, capital and markets. Bob Dandrew, the director of LEP, was previously executive director of NoVo. According to its website, NoVo believes that systemic change is necessary "to foster a transformation from a world of domination and exploitation to one of collaboration and partnership."

"We have ambitious plans," the LEP explained in a recent carefully produced brochure, "but we know we can't do it alone. We're engaging others in a spirit of collaboration by convening, connecting and catalyzing the people and the projects that will help realize our vision." An LEP goal is to generate matching resources to fund this effort and provide it inspiration. LEP has already awarded 45 grants to community groups.

Dandrew takes a fundamentalist view of the place of farming in the Hudson Valley. "Nothing is viable if our agriculture can't survive," Dandrew said at the meeting.

Though LEP and Farm Hub staff have been available to share their vision, last week's meeting in the SUNY Ulster cafeteria was the first open general com-

munity meeting held to explain the project.

PEOPLE DRIVING BY ON ROUTE 209 OR STOPPING to look last year saw something other than the packed fields of corn they were used to seeing. What were these new people doing? A mix of farm practices was evident. There were some varieties of corn. There were nurseries of small grains; several fields had cover crops like clover, perennial grasses, barley and wheat. There was white plastic on some planted rows in other fields, black on others.

Passersby saw fields of various grains, soy beans and clover. From Hurley Mountain Road they saw vegetables: eggplant, squashes, cucumbers, tomatoes, broccoli, lettuce, beans, peppers, zucchini, okra and root vegetables like parsnips and carrots. They saw fields to which compost had been added. Some areas had been enriched by chicken manure, others by fish oil. Everyone appreciated the sunflowers near the highway last year.

LEP hasn't come to firm conclusions as to how much of the land will be officially certified for organic production, according to Brooke Pickering-Cole, ex-Marbletown supervisor who serves as LEP manager of community relations. What is certain is that there is a preference for natural pest controls and fertilizers. Farm Hub director Anu Rangarajan made another thing clear. There will be no genetically modified organisms (GMOs) in the crops at the Hudson Valley Farm Hub.

Some locals had taken the late opening last year of the Route 209 Gill farmstand as an uncertain omen. Its opening had been a local tradition, a rite of spring. Generations of passersby would exchange greetings with members of the extended Gill clan every springtime when the stand opened. People at the Stone Ridge meeting were assured the stand would be open earlier this year, though exactly when could not be promised.

Applied research into the region's farming — deciding what to grow and where and how to grow it — is just the beginning of the ambition of the Hudson Valley Farm Hub. Training farmers and connecting them with affordable land is another major part of the system. By next February, the first group of young farmers will begin training.

Efforts to create a viable system of marketing,



ALAN CAREY

John Gill and Jean-Paul Courtens.

packaging and distribution are considerable. In his talk, Dandrew specifically mentioned four grants to community groups that indicate LEP's various priorities in building the food infrastructure of the Hudson Valley. One is a farm-to-institution program which links growers to co-packers, processors and SUNY school lunchrooms. A second involves creation of an agricultural curriculum and teaching greenhouses in Rondout Valley's school district. A third links local agricultural producers with local food banks, which can thereby benefit from reduced prices. The final one involves Hudson-based Hudson Valley Agribusiness Development Corporation, which provides technical assistance to food entrepreneurs.

TWO FARMERS ON THE FARM HUB PAYROLL turned out to be the stars of the Stone Ridge program last Thursday. John Gill and Jean-Paul Courtens make an odd couple. Gill is a third-generation corn farmer whose kids don't want to be the fourth. "It breaks your heart," confided Gill, "but you have to let them go."

The future of the farm was uncertain, when "out of the clear blue Bob [Dandrew] showed up." Bob Dandrew's view of what the farm should do was vastly different from Gill's vision, but Gill was open to change. "I had to re-educate myself," he said. He pointed a finger at the man sitting next to him as the source of much of his re-education. "That was Jean-Paul," he said, smiling.

Courtens is the head farmer at Roxbury Farms, a 300-acre community-supported organic farm in Kinderhook with 1,000 members in its CSA program. The European-trained farmer is a mentor at the Hudson Valley Farm Hub. His main role at the hub is as associate director of farmer training.

The two farmers get along very well with each other. At the meeting, they bantered back and forth about what they had learned from each other.

The core of resilience, Bob Dandrew had explained, was the ability of people to take on challenges, "to create a learning space." There's a lot more training now, a lot more participation. "We're starting to teach every person on the farm how to do every job," said Gill proudly. And Courtens added, "What we're doing at the [Farm] Hub is all about cooperation."

When the future farmers chosen to participate report next February, Courtens said, they will learn by doing. The assumption is that "they will get so proficient that they can run their own farms." They will be trained to run middle-sized farms, which the USDA defines as in the neighborhood of 50 to 500 acres per farm, with gross annual revenues of perhaps \$350,000 to \$1 million. The group also hopes to create a community loan fund to provide financial help, a number of farm training associations to provide support, and agricultural easements to keep land taxes on the productive farmland affordable.

It's an ambitious agenda. A lot is being done with NoVo's and New World's money. Despite NoVo's liberal philanthropy (it ranks in 94th place among the top 100 New York City foundations in terms of money spent, having given away \$65.2 million in 2013), the value of its main assets, 1210 shares of Berkshire Hathaway Class A stock and 440,228 shares of Class B stock, have appreciated handsomely — adding about \$40 million if none of it was cashed out.

"Money should be spent trying out concepts that shatter current structures and systems that have turned much of the world into one vast market." That excerpt comes from one of Peter Buffett's blog posts.

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