



## SECTION III. AGRICULTURE

Agriculture plays an important role in LaFayette, contributing both to the economy and to the open space and rural character of the Town. (See Section II. Open Space regarding agriculture's contribution to the character of the Town). 91% of land is zoned Agricultural-Residential, and 4,775 acres, or almost 18% of land in the Town is used for productive agriculture, with another 362 acres classified as primary residential with productive agriculture. There are 51 landowners (grouped by name and address) that have parcels associated with agriculture in the Town. Presumably some of these owners run joint operations with other owners or rent some or all of their parcels to other farmers. Some of the Town's farmland is also used to support farms located outside of the Town boundaries. These farms are part of the 692 farms, or 150,499 acres of agricultural land county-wide. The average farm size of an Onondaga County farm is 217 acres. According to the Census of Agriculture Onondaga County farms made record breaking total farm sales of \$137.3 million in 2007, up from \$82.1 million in 2002.

The majority of farms in LaFayette belong to one of two agriculture districts. Onondaga County Agriculture District 1 includes farms west of I-81 in the Towns of LaFayette, Tully, Onondaga, and Otisco and District 4 includes farms east of I-81 in the Towns of LaFayette, Tully, Pompey, Fabius, and Dewitt (See Map \_\_: Agricultural Districts and Farmland). An initial inventory of farms in the Town of LaFayette using Real Property Data from 2010 shows 94 productive agricultural parcels under 51 different owners. LaFayette has 5,136 acres of productive agricultural land, including land used for dairy products, field crops, orchards, and more (see table \_\_ below).

**TABLE \_\_: AGRICULTURAL LAND IN THE TOWN OF LAFAYETTE**

<b>TYPE</b>	<b>DESCRIPTION</b>	<b>ACRES</b>
<b>Dairy Products</b>	For raising livestock for milk, butter, and cheese	852
<b>Field Crops</b>	Potatoes, wheat, hay, corn, oats, or other field crops	2,103
<b>Orchard Crops</b>	Apples, pears, peaches, cherries, etc	461
<b>Productive Agricultural</b>	Land used as part of an operational farm, not specifically related to other categories	1,338
<b>Residential &amp; Agricultural</b>	Primary residential, also used in agricultural production	362
	<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>5,136</b>

Source: 2010 Real Property Data

The types of farms in LaFayette are fairly consistent with other farming types found in southern Onondaga County. As detailed in the County's 1997 Agriculture and Farmland Protection Plan, almost half of the orchards in the county were in the Towns of LaFayette and Onondaga. In addition, the County has a huge livestock industry, with dairy cattle being the most numerous. Corn and alfalfa, which support the dairy industry, are the top two acreage consuming crops in Onondaga County. These dairy farms and associated livestock are mostly in the southern half of the county. LaFayette only has two dairy farms based in Town, each with approximately 100 cows; however, much of



the more than 2,000 acres of field crops in LaFayette is used to support other farms associated with the dairy industry.

While not categorized separately above, there are several horse farms in the Town as well. The horse industry in Onondaga County is made up of pleasure, draft, and race horse operations. The County is supportive of horse operations with major shows like the New York State Fair and other competitions held at the fairgrounds in Syracuse and the draft horse sale held in nearby Cortland County.

## AGRICULTURE AND THE LOCAL AND REGIONAL ECONOMY

Agriculture is an important part of the local and regional economy. A number of businesses in LaFayette are agricultural or equine based. As mentioned previously, there are almost 700 farms in Onondaga County, who made a record breaking \$137.3 million in total farm sales in 2007 (from the most recent Census of Agriculture). The average market value of products sold per farm was \$198,515. Between 2002 and 2007, the number of part and full time farm businesses decreased by 4.5%, however, the number of farms with over \$10,000 gross farm sales increased from 325 farms to 338. The average net cash farm income of operations was \$63,758 per farm, up from \$17,019 in 2002. Additionally, the number of farms reporting net gains rose 13% between 2002 and 2007.

**TABLE \_ : OVERVIEW OF FARMS IN ONONDAGA COUNTY, NY**

	2007	2002
Number of Farms	692	725
Land in Farms	150,499 acres	156,284 acres
Average Size of Farm	217 acres	216 acres
Market Value of Total Products Sold	\$137,372,000	\$82,164,000
Avg. per Farm of Products Sold	\$198,515	\$113,330
Avg. per Farm Net Cash Farm Income of Operations	\$63,758	\$17,019
# of Farms with net gains	330	293
# of Farms with net losses	362	435

Source: 2007 Census of Agriculture

The economic impact of the agricultural industry goes beyond total farm sales. Three main sectors of the industry include farm production, direct farm sales, and agribusiness, and each sector supports and relies on the others. Farming supports a wide variety of agribusiness through the purchase of feed, fuel, fertilizers, chemicals, maintenance, machinery, and more. A study in Onondaga County, conducted by Cornell Cooperative Extension (CCE), found that, on average, farm operators buy the majority of all supplies and services within 30 miles of their farm. In 2007, Onondaga County farms spent \$21.7 million on feed, \$15.4 million on hired farm labor, \$12.7 million on supplies, repairs, and maintenance, \$6.2 million on gasoline, fuel, and oils, and \$4.8 million on fertilizer and soil conditioners.



While the economic outlook for farming in Onondaga County may look promising, it can still be a struggle financially for some farms. Profit margins are tight for many, and while fewer farms are reporting net losses, several hundred across the County still do. In 2007, over \$2 million in government payments were paid to 230 Onondaga County farms through an array of farm programs, including direct payments, countercyclical payments, loan deficiency payments, emergency payments, and conservation payments.

**Local Food Movement** - The local food movement trend has been growing in the Central New York Region in the last few years. More area residents are interested in where their food comes from and are eating sustainably. For many this means eating locally grown and raised food which means less consumption of oil for transporting and which contains fewer pesticides. In recent years the area has seen an increase in farmer's markets and increased attendance at the Central New York Regional Market. Many new restaurants in the area have made commitments to buying locally grown food. Local specialty food markets, including the Syracuse Real Food Co-op and Natur-Tyme in Dewitt, have seen increased business and have plans to expand in 2012. A new local specialty food store, Green Planet, opened in Camillus in 2010. And finally several local advocacy groups have formed, including Slow Food CNY and Syracuse First.

It is unclear at this point if the local food movement will be a long term trend or not. It is also unclear if this type of movement will increase business for agriculture as a whole across the region, or simply for a few select farms. The trend, however, does provide an economic opportunity for farmers who are searching for supplemental income. This could be in the form of agri-tourism endeavors, direct sales to area stores and restaurants, or creating opportunities for direct farm sales to customers. This could include offering farm stays, apple picking, or cheese making classes, or selling value-added products such as apple cider, apple pie filling, maple products, or cheese. It may be hard for some dairy farms to take advantage of this if their primary product is milk, since their milk is processed off of the farm. However, other dairy farms and orchards can benefit from this, along with the few vegetable and beef farms in Town. While numbers are not available for the Town of LaFayette, in 2007, 39 of the Onondaga County's 692 farms produced and sold value-added commodities, and only 11 farms generated income from agri-tourism and recreational services.

The LaFayette Apple Festival takes place each fall at the Apple Festival grounds along Route 20 (See Section IV. Economic Development for a more detailed description). This annual festival draws tens of thousands of visitors each year, providing beneficial exposure to the community and area orchards, and revealing the rural and farming character of the Town to visitors. This exposure provides an opportunity for area farmers to continue to expand the area's agri-tourism offerings, gain from the local food movement, and grow financially.

## LOCAL ASSETS TO FARMING

**Soils** - Onondaga County soils have been categorized as some of the best in New York State. The southern portions of the County have alluvial soils along valley



bottoms, which means they are fine grained fertile soils deposited by water flowing over flood plains. Some deep acid soils on glacial till over hilly terrain can also be found in this portion of the County. The majority of soils in the Town of LaFayette are considered to be of significant local importance. (See Map \_\_: Agricultural Soils). Most of these soils are Prime Farmland Soils, which means they have the best combination of physical and chemical characteristics for producing food, feed, forage, fiber, and oilseed crops. Minimal fertilizer and energy is needed. There are also soils classified as Farmland of Statewide Importance, which means they provide fair to good yields of crops when treated and managed according to sound agricultural practices. LaFayette's high quality soils are an important asset to area farmers.

**Location** - Agriculture in and around the Town of LaFayette has a strong system of infrastructure, support businesses, and nearby markets to support the industry. Interstate Route 81 and US Route 20 provide easy transport for trucks taking product to markets or for supplies to be brought to farms. The Town is minutes from the City of Syracuse, with a population of approximately 150,000 people, and within the Syracuse Metro Area, with over 662,000 people according to the 2010 Census. In addition, the Town is within a day's drive of over 130 million people, including New York City, Boston, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, Buffalo, and Toronto. The many dairy farms in the area have several milk processing facilities nearby, including Byrne Dairy, Preble Milk Cooperative Inc, Cortland Bulk, and Dairy Marketing Services. There are also several feed suppliers in and near the Town, including CNY Feeds, JJ Feeds Inc, and Lee's Feed Store. And finally, there are several local machinery dealerships nearby, including Cazenovia Equipment and Amidon Tractor Sales.

## **SUSTAINABLE AGRICULTURAL PRACTICES**

Sustainable agriculture involves food production methods that are healthy for people and animals, do not harm the environment or deplete natural resources, are humane for workers, provide a fair wage to the farmer, and support and enhance rural communities. With many aspects of sustainable farming to consider, there are a variety of ways in which farmers are or can incorporate sustainability into their work.

Field crops supporting dairy farms dominate the agricultural landscape in LaFayette and Onondaga County. Many dairy farming practices are already sustainable in nature, especially as it relates to protecting the environment and conserving natural resources. Cow manure is used as organic fertilizer for cropland and compost, reducing the need for commercial fertilizers that use fossil fuels. Onondaga County farmers are able to grow and buy feed for their cows locally, also reducing the need to ship feed great distances. Water is recycled on farms to wash barn alleys and irrigate fields. Farmers take care to spread manure on fields responsibly, to prevent the pollution of the local waterways they depend on for their cows. However, the livestock industry is responsible for 18% of greenhouse gas emissions worldwide, with the dairy sector estimated to be responsible for 2-5% of all emissions. Researchers' suggestions for solutions are limited so far, but include using higher production cows and using methane digesters. While some larger dairy farms in Onondaga County are using methane digesters, smaller farms cannot afford the high up front cost. Recent research has also



found that injecting liquid manure into crop fields below the surface, and immediately incorporating manure into the soil, reduces ammonia emissions.

Practicing rotational or management intensive grazing is another way to protect the environment. Rotational grazing utilizes repeating periods of grazing and rest among two or more pastures with cattle, sheep, pigs, chickens, or other animals. The animals graze one portion of the pasture, while the other portion recovers. This allows the vegetation to renew energy reserves and deepen root systems, and often improves animal productivity and temperament. Per the 2007 Census of Agriculture, in Onondaga County, 148 of the 692 total farms practiced rotational or management intensive grazing. It is unknown how many farms in the Town of LaFayette practice rotational grazing.

Organic farming is a growing industry both in dairy and elsewhere in agriculture. For dairy farmers, the higher price a farmer receives for organic milk has generated interest in becoming organic. However, to be organic, a cow's feed needs to be grown on land free of chemicals for three years, cows cannot be treated with hormones or antibiotics, and cows must graze for at least four months of the year, among other requirements. This makes organic dairy farming much more realistic for smaller farms with fewer cows. In 2007 there were 21 farms used for organic production in Onondaga County, and eight farms used for organic livestock and poultry products. There are few, if any, organic farms in LaFayette.

The agricultural industry is also working toward becoming more sustainable, and saving money over the long-term, by using alternative energy sources. This can include windmills, solar panels, or methane digesters for larger dairy farms. According to the 2007 Census of Agriculture, only 7 of Onondaga County's 692 farms are generating energy or electricity on their farm. The Town of LaFayette recently updated its Zoning Ordinance to allow for up to 3 windmills on any farm actively used for agricultural purposes. It is unknown how many farms are using alternative energy sources in LaFayette, and the dairy farms in Town are not large enough to be able to afford methane digesters. However, with three residential lots in LaFayette having installed windmills as of 2011, it is likely some farmers will as well.

## **LOCAL CHALLENGES TO FARMING**

**Farm Consolidation-** In November of 2009, a District 1 Farm survey was conducted by Cornell Cooperative Extension (CCE) and results are outlined in the District's Eight-Year Review dated March 2010. Thirty-two of the thirty-eight respondents reported different combinations of farm consolidations, fewer farms, and more houses. Several dairy farm operations have significantly increased their herd sizes, requiring more land, and farms in general are consolidating and growing. To meet their needs, many farms have purchased land from smaller farm operations and former rental lands, creating a competitive land market. This can be a challenge for smaller farmers who have lost the rented farmland they need to support their businesses. However it is important to note that this can also be helpful to some smaller farms, particularly those operated by older farmers who are planning to retire but have no family



to take over the farm. The competitive land market allows them to sell or rent their properties when they might not have had that option otherwise.

**Residential Development-** Additional housing in District 1 has also brought challenges for many farmers. Between 1970 and 2000, Onondaga County's overall population declined from 472,835 to 458,336, however, the Syracuse Urbanized Area almost doubled in size from 96 square miles to 184. Over that same time period Onondaga County farm acres declined by 76 square miles. As a result, the northern portion of District 1 is becoming increasingly urbanized as water and sewer infrastructure is extended, especially in the Town of Onondaga, LaFayette's neighbor.

In the four Towns across District 1, this increase in residential development has been a challenge for many farms, although a few have found that the increase in houses has increased business. In the 2009 CCE survey, farmers noted that new neighbors have complained about noise, odors, manure, mud, and hours of operation. New neighbors who used to live in urban or suburban neighborhoods are often uneducated about rural living. New York State has a Right-to-Farm Law meant to help protect farms. It offers farms in agricultural districts limited protection from private nuisance claims, and requires landowners in an agricultural district to provide a prospective buyer with a notice advising them about the sights, sounds, and smells associated with modern agriculture before they sign a purchase agreement. However, this is still an issue in the area.

A few farmers who were surveyed also noted issues such as ATVs trespassing and damaging crops, and the loss of rental land because more houses are being built. In addition, increased taxes and traffic from residential development is an ongoing problem. In 2002, 32% of the average farm operator's net income was used to pay property taxes in Onondaga County. This went down to 9.5% in 2007, but only because profits increased significantly. Because of the large amount of land needed, farmers are more susceptible to rising property taxes, especially when profits are down.

## **TOOLS FOR STRENGTHENING AGRICULTURE**

There are a variety of zoning and other tools LaFayette can use to support agriculture. The Town should be sure that the tools they use support and do not hinder the development of smaller low-impact farms that serve local markets. These tools should also be used to encourage the growth of a wide range of agricultural services and businesses to support a sustainable local farming community.

**Zoning Ordinance** - The majority of land in the Town, 91%, is zoned Agricultural-Residential. This zoning permits farms and single-family dwellings without site plan approval, unless a lot is subdivided. This allows for agriculture in a large portion of the Town; however, the reality is that 38% of land is used for residential lots while only 17% is used for agriculture. With limited zoning districts dedicated to residential uses, conflict can arise between farmers and their residential neighbors. Certain types of farming are not compatible with residential areas due to the associated noises, odors, chemicals, conflicting hours, and other farming practices. As noted previously, this can create issues for working farmers, and also create an uneasy



situation for homebuyers who are not sure if the neighboring lot may one day become a farm. Designating areas for residential growth and preserving larger blocks for agricultural production can help alleviate these issues. Since the Agricultural-Residential Zoning district has been a part of LaFayette's zoning for many decades it will take careful planning to change this, but it can be done.

**Subdivision Regulations** - The Town's Subdivision Regulations encourage the preservation of unique and natural features when possible, but they do not mention farmland. The subdivision regulations should include the preservation of the natural and scenic qualities of open lands and farmlands as part of the main purpose of the regulations to help developers understand the Town's goals. The Subdivision Regulations can also require the review of the potential impacts of new subdivisions on productive farmland and nearby farm operations, stipulating design standards that would help reduce negative impacts. For more detailed information see Section XII. Land Use and Zoning.

**Town Right-to-Farm Law** – As previously mentioned, farmers enrolled in state-certified agricultural districts receive important "right-to-farm" protections. The Town can also adopt a local right-to-farm law aimed at maintaining a supportive environment for agriculture by limiting conflicts between farmers and non-farm neighbors. A local right-to-farm law should document the importance of farming to the Town and notify non-farm rural residents that generally accepted agricultural practices are to be expected in farming areas. The law can also establish dispute resolution processes to mediate conflicts and avoid expensive legal battles. The New York State Agricultural Mediation Program (NYSAMP) can provide mediators trained in resolving disputes involving agricultural issues. For a Town right-to-farm law to be effective the Town must widely promote the dispute resolution process.

**Purchase of Development Rights (PDR)**- A PDR is where a private party (typically an organization) purchases the development potential of a property, guaranteeing its preservation as farmland. This allows the landowner to continue to farm the land, and own all other rights to the property, except the right to develop it. In Onondaga County, the American Farmland Trust and New York Agricultural and Farmland Trust hold the conservation easements and provide easement stewardship on behalf of the County. While nine farms in Onondaga County have secured funding for this since 1998, no farms in LaFayette have. A PDR program is a good way to preserve farmland and open space, while also providing the farmland owner with some financial support. See Section II. Open Space for more information regarding using PDR programs to preserve open space).



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## GOALS AND IMPLEMENTATION MEASURES

**GOAL 8:** Support low-impact, sustainable agriculture as an important part of LaFayette's economy and rural character.

### IMPLEMENTATION MEASURES:

- A) Develop an Agricultural and Farmland Protection Plan.
- B) Update the Town Zoning Ordinance to better support agriculture. Updates should support a farm-friendly business environment and small-scaled farms, and reduce the likelihood of conflicts between farms and non-farm neighbors by providing for growth in appropriate areas and stabilizing larger blocks of agricultural land.
- C) Adopt a Town Right-to-Farm Law aimed at maintaining a supportive operating environment for farmers by limiting potential conflicts between farmers and non-farm neighbors. This law should document the importance of farming to the Town and notify non-farm rural residents that generally accepted agricultural practices are to be expected in farming areas.
- D) Work with the Cornell Cooperative Extension on educational outreach regarding issues such as alternative energy, agri-tourism, etc.
- E) Encourage the use of Onondaga County's Purchase of Development Rights Program for LaFayette farms to preserve farmland and support farm operators financially.

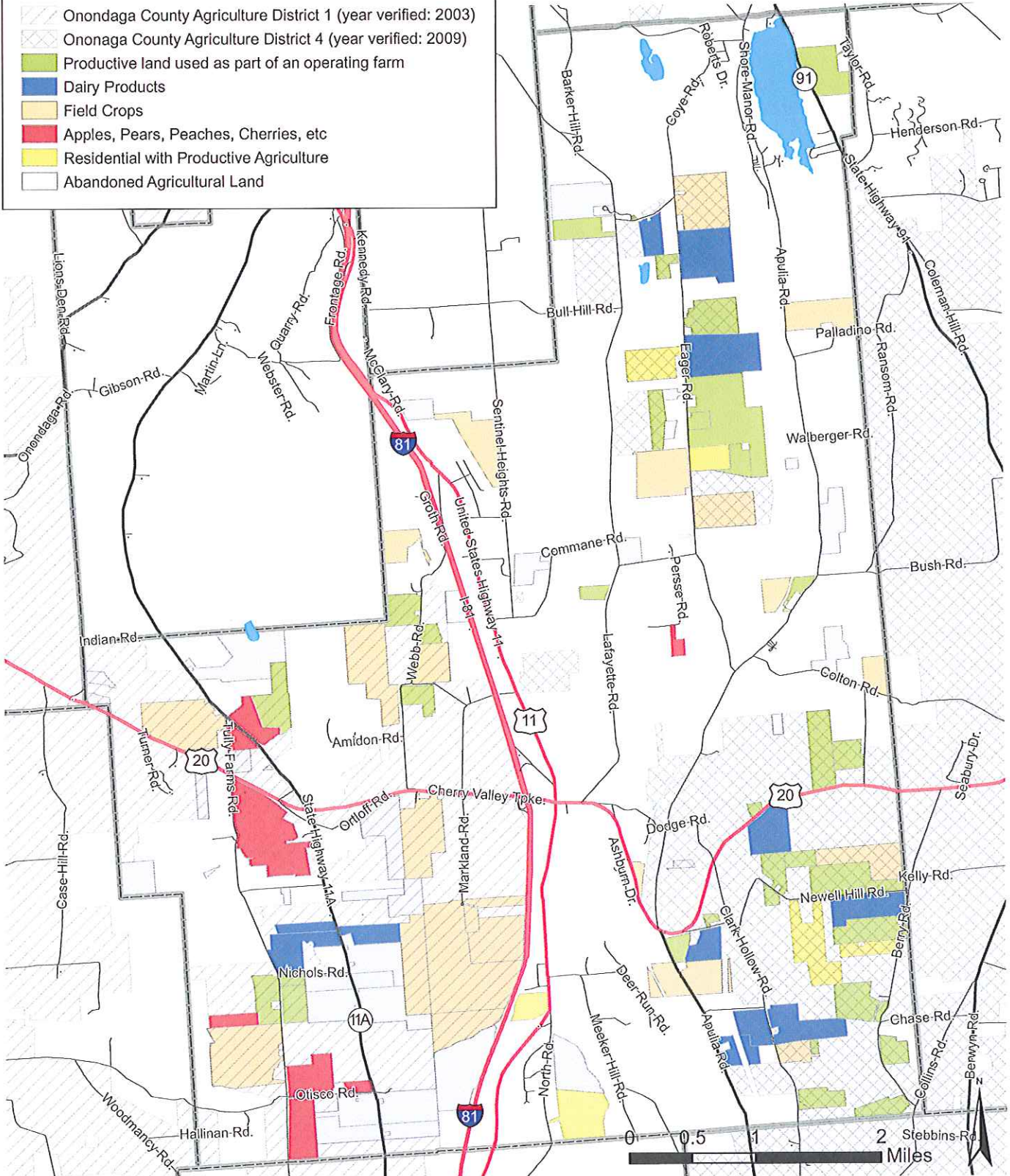
**GOAL 9:** Utilize agriculture as a means of economic growth in LaFayette.

### IMPLEMENTATION MEASURES:

- A) Encourage area farmers, including equine related farms, dairy farms, and apple orchards, to develop an agri-tourism industry in the Town.
- B) Advocate for more programs and projects that strengthen the region's agricultural industry with the Onondaga County Office of Economic Development and other agencies.
- C) Capitalize on LaFayette's annual Apple Festival as a means of branding the Town.
- D) Encourage growth in a wide range of local agricultural services and businesses in support of a sustainable local farming community including local processing and markets.



-  Onondaga County Agriculture District 1 (year verified: 2003)
-  Onondaga County Agriculture District 4 (year verified: 2009)
-  Productive land used as part of an operating farm
-  Dairy Products
-  Field Crops
-  Apples, Pears, Peaches, Cherries, etc
-  Residential with Productive Agriculture
-  Abandoned Agricultural Land



Data provided by Syracuse-Onondaga County Planning Agency and NYS Office of Real Property Tax Services (2010 data).

Date Created: 23 August 2011

# Map \_\_ : Agricultural Districts and Farmland

## Town of LaFayette Comprehensive Plan





Data provided by Syracuse-Onondaga County Planning Agency