

For the past two months, the Comprehensive Plan Committee has published a monthly report of our progress. This month, in view of the events of the past several weeks, I have taken the liberty of writing something a little more reflective.

Jeanne Mettler, Chair.

Our Committee had scheduled a special session on December 17, 2009, to discuss the future of agriculture in Copake. I was on my way up to Copake when the cell phone rang, and I got the message that our member Bill Kiernan could not attend. There was a barn fire at Miller's and he was over there, along with our member Dr. Beneke, trying to save cows. January 21, 2009 was another of our regular meeting nights. I received another call. This call was from Bill, who told me that he could not attend the meeting that night because he was helping at the Pierson farm. George Beneke did come to that meeting, and told us of the heartbreak in that barn.

They say that there are only six degrees of separation. That if you go through the world everyone is only separated by six people. But in a small town like Copake everyone knows—or used to know—each other. I knew Dean Pierson because I rode the school bus with him in the 1950s and 60s. Then, it seemed like everyone knew everyone in our town. Now things have changed.

Our committee spent six months listening to all sorts of people in Focus Groups. We heard from the young, we heard from business people, we listened to artists and realtors and town leaders, a pastor, restaurateurs, fire fighters and first responders. The one thing that we kept hearing is that people long for stronger community. They want better communication. They seem to feel like a lot of us have lost touch with each other. One of our focus groups was for farmers. We heard from dairymen and the foreman from the tree farm, and the farmers at Camphill. We heard about the struggles of farmers in this economy. We talked about how in the last century there were dairy farms all up and down this valley and how there are not that many anymore.

In the wake of the January 21 tragedy, Copake was in the news all over this country. The heartache of our town was spread across the wires and the printed media and the internet. Columnists and bloggers wondered about the plight of farms and farmers. In lamenting the harsh life of farmers, a columnist from the New York Times bemoaned the condition of our downtown. He called Copake a "farm village fallen on hard times". Whatever the rest of the country thought about what was going on in Copake, the enormity of it was felt most deeply by all of us here. We were joined in community sorrow. The day after this tragedy, you could not meet a person on the street who had not heard this news, and cried. Our committee is charged with looking into the future and trying to come up with a plan which will reflect the hopes and visions and dreams of the people of Copake. We are, right now, working on an application for a grant from New York State Ag and Markets which will assist Copake in devising strategies to help farmers. Farms have been the backbone of this community. If Copake had lost 90 cows in the space of four weeks in the 1950s, it would have been terribly sad, but it would not have been devastating. Those cows would have been 90 out of 1000s of cows. And those cows would have been replaced.

Our mission is to lay out a plan for what Copake will look like in 20 years. But our vision for then is shaped by the events of now. Will it be that when we look back twenty years hence, we will see these days as a turning point? Right now, the Round the Clock committee is working hard to revive the hub of this community. The Conservation Resources Committee is cataloguing our historical and natural resources. Our committee is meeting, week after week, talking, planning and working to capture a vision of Copake for the future. When we look back, will this be the moment when out of sadness, Copake seized the energy and initiative to move forward—to rebuild a downtown, to forge a future for farms and the people who farm them, and to revitalize a sense of commonality and community in our hometown?

Jeanne E. Mettler, Chair
William F. Kiernan, Jr.
Dr. George Beneke
Charles Dodson
Harvey Weber

Rus Davis
Marcia Becker
Frank Peteroy
Robertta Roll
Dan Haas

P.S. Please let us know if you would like to be removed from our list, if you would like to add someone or if you have questions or comments.