

Some Thoughts on Our New Master Plan, Small Farms and other Large Tract Landowners

Recent events have once again caused me to take a look at the land use maps for our Town. It is quite apparent that many of the landowners in our community own parcels that are more than “building lot size”; that is greater than a ½ acre lot as required for installation of a leach field and also larger than ¾ acre in size. Another item that has stuck in my head is the comment to the following effect by the lead engineer from Wendel Duchscherer regarding one of the primary features of the economic composition of our Town:

Are we an agricultural community or a community with agriculture in it?

What we, as a community need to consider is what constitutes an agricultural community, and the overall environmental impact of losing our “agricultural nature”. The overall impact, from a global perspective (meaning Town-wide, in this instance) is extremely important; once greenspace is lost due to development, residential or commercial, it is lost for good. Before I get in to the discussion of why preserving our Community nature is vital, I wish to give you some background.

On December 21, 2008, as I write this, we are experiencing another famous Lake Effect Western New York snowstorm. I’ve just finished cleaning about 12 – 16 inches of snow off my driveway for the second time. Obviously, a fair amount of this is new snowfall, but a considerable portion is drifting, wind driven snow. It’s the latter that is important. I also watch the weather quite closely; despite recent watches and warnings for flooding along Cayuga Creek and other creeks, I’ve noted that Alden does not seem to suffer flood damage the way other communities do. There may be a reason for this. I, like many others that day, turned to the television for some entertainment. There was a hunting show on the Outdoors Channel before noon; the host/commentator delivered an interesting perspective on how we now live. This perspective noted that **85%** of our population now lives in “concrete canyons” and in “steel and glass caves”. The few people left who do hunt, fish and enjoy the outdoors are lucky in that they get to see the interrelationships in nature that forms the world we live in. Another was recently finishing the book, *The Unthinkable*, by Amanda Ripley. This book is about disaster and survivor mentality it is well worth reading if you are interested in self-preservation in tough and potentially fatal circumstances. (Depending on your perspective, snowstorms are rather easily survived by staying in shelter where it is warm and you have food.)

Working backward. My educational background is an AAS in Fisheries and Wildlife Technology and a BA in Biology with a concentration in Ecology. My choice of education was due to my love of all outdoor activities, especially hunting and fishing (Trust me, the economic return working as a Fish or Wildlife Biologist or Technician is quite poor.) My actual career choice put me squarely in the field of Environmental Engineering and Environmental Management; remediating and managing industrial pollution to prevent negative impacts to Human Health and Safety.

From there, I eventually wound up in the field of Municipal Risk Management, and work in this field today. I've never left any of my old loves or pursuit of current knowledge behind. During rainfall events and snowmelt events, I've noted that the area in the Town of Alden is capable of draining off the excess water to surface impoundments or creeks that flow to larger bodies of water (like Lake Erie) or absorbing it to recharge groundwater aquifers by percolating through soil and rock (a very good thing if you have a well). I can take some comfort in the fact that when this snow does melt, most of the residents of Alden can be reasonably assured that their basements will be dry and they won't have to face the specter of a flood event that devastated their home and possessions. Trust me, the latter happening is not pretty to observe or experience.

But there is an ominous warning, and the drifting snow provides it. Due to a lack of trees and brush to break the velocity of the blowing wind, thus dropping out snowflakes from atmospheric suspension, the drifting snow continues to clog driveways and roadways in our Town. Why is this important, why am I calling it an ominous warning you may ask.

Consider the impact of snow clogged roads and driveways on emergency responders; Fire, EMS and Law Enforcement. We rely on dedicated Volunteer Firefighters and EMT's to respond in the event we need them; and respond they do; sometimes at great risk to their own lives. Snow clogged and drifted roads create serious delays and endanger lives in responding to emergencies. Snow clogged driveways increase time, physical effort and potentially causes injuries to these dedicated responders. For physically disabled, ill and elderly persons; it cannot be expected that residents clear the path, however, I cannot help but think that the drifting snow could have been mitigated. This is in addition to the obvious negative impact on business and pleasure travel.

Understandably, we did lose trees during the October 12, 2006 snowstorm; but what if we, in our shortsighted desires to "create" an "ideal" community removed large tracts of trees and brush to build housing subdivisions and shopping centers? What if we removed or extensively modify existing wetlands (both Federally defined and what ecologists refer to as wet areas) to satisfy our desire for additional schools and churches?

There are precedents to guide us in our decisionmaking regarding tinkering with the environment. Look to the South. Between Hurricane Camille in 1969 and Hurricane Katrina in 2005; development in the area around New Orleans, Louisiana had destroyed much of the coastal and riverine wetlands in the area. Although both hurricanes were of similar characteristics, Katrina was more devastating. Why? The buffering effect of wetlands in this area mitigated the impact of the influx of stormwater, storm surge and mitigated the wind velocity. These wetlands literally saved people's lives and property. When they were destroyed, this buffering was lost. We can review the effect of their disappearance; the media archived it quite well.

Whether or not you believe in Global Warming and the political maelstrom that surrounds it, I can state that our environment (and not just rural ambiance) has a decided impact on how we live, the quality of our life and our future survival as humans and our Community. (Yea, I know, it's kinda hard to think of Global Warming when the wind

chill is in the negative column and outside looks like a Winter Wilderness rather than a Christmas Village.) By now, you may be curious as to how this all ties in to agriculture and significant acreage holdings. First, consider the situation the farmer is in. When your livelihood and economic existence is inextricably tied to the soil you walk on, you quickly become a Good and Wise Steward of the Land. Not to do so, means your failure. Next to the outdoorsperson, the farmer becomes a Conservationist and Ecologist in order to survive.

Large commercial farms do require literally “property line to property line” sized fields to be economically viable. This is due to the size of the equipment used to reduce labor and fuel cost in producing animal feedstock crops and produce. However, large commercial farms contain land and ecological features that preserve greenspace; the same greenspace that serves as a buffer against climatic events (such as snowstorms) that impact our area. The economic production of plant feedstock that is used in animal husbandry helps to keep the price of food (meat, milk, eggs, etc.) at an affordable level for us. Also, there are usually areas of large commercial farms such as ravines and wetland areas that cannot be economically placed in to production and are generally left alone by the farmer. These areas serve the environmental function as below. Also, crops and produce left in the field (due to harvesting equipment inefficiency or weather events) provide food for wildlife; often ensuring animal population survival in the winter season. Despite the size of the farm and equipment, the basic principles of Natural Resource Conservation and maintaining the Ecological Balance must be adhered to or failure results.

Small farms, which are also analogous to “significant acreage holdings” may (and in many cases are) economically viable with smaller field sizes that are bounded by tree lines, hedgerows with brushy growth and small patches of woodlots. These areas act as the southern wetlands did; absorbing stormwater from rainfalls and snowmelt, mitigating wind velocity causing snow to fall in the woods instead of on the roadways, providing shelter for wildlife and the environmental benefits of wooded tracts in general (like use Carbon Dioxide to produce sugars to sustain plant life and give off Oxygen in the process). Also, the plant biodiversity of smaller field sizes helps to increase the diversity of the wildlife population and mitigate the spread of pathogenic organisms that rely on a homogenous environment to survive and propagate. (Think of colds and flu making their way through the Public School System – one sick child today, many sick children and parents in a few days. Then Holiday Break, and without the child to child spread of pathogens, all folks begin to get healthy again.)

Woodlots may also hold a potential significance to those who use wood as primary or supplemental heat; currently NYSDEC requires elaborate and expensive procedures to certify that wood imported from a distance of more than 50 miles is free of disease and insects. Old (and still true) formulas have stated that one acre of properly managed woods can provide enough wood to heat a single family home for many heating seasons to come. Those who own significant acreage of wooded property may have a potential source of income and energy in times to come.

The biodiversity offered by “significant acreage holdings” and small farms also provides a visual aesthetics for residents and visitors to Alden. This was alluded to in the previous Public Comment Meeting; “...people like to look at cows, barns and fields.” This is somewhat important to our residents as well. We value this aesthetic versus looking at the endless cookie cutter housing tracts and commercial rows that have evolved in other Townships nearby.

Yes, it is expensive: owners of “significant acreage holdings” pay taxes out of proportion to the property use or need; farming is physically AND mentally challenging, requiring a great deal of intelligence and continuous upgrade of knowledge (think BA or BS from an Agricultural College) to make enough money to pay the taxes and cover operating expenses; and property management (farm, significant acreage holding, residential, commercial, etc.) is increasingly requiring close attention be paid to the political and regulatory environment that exists. However, there are some property owners willing to pay their allocated share to preserve a rural way of life versus another. Some of us clearly understand the value of greenspace and managing our environment as “Good Stewards”. We also understand the benefit to the community at large; aesthetics, environmental impacts and economic impact.

Most people do not consider the following economic impacts: Ever consider the savings on homeowner’s and light commercial property insurance that an owner of flood mitigating wetlands creates? (Federal and NYSDEC regulations regarding wetlands development are quite extensive and onerous; compliance to perform minor, and sometimes necessary modifications is quite expensive.) How about the lessened need for risky and expensive snow plowing (not to mention whiteout mitigation) that an unbroken hedgerow provides in windbreak about 50 – 75 yards from and paralleling a Town Road? How about the owner of a Diner in the Township who benefits from serving breakfasts and lunches to out of town hunters? What about the consumer who purchases locally grown produce from a farmer who follows organic farming practices? By the way, environmental engineers, Risk Control engineers, economists and others have calculated these “soft costs”, the results are impressive when you put a “\$” in front of them.

This is all leading to what can we; the Alden Community must provide support for. One activity we could engage in is to recalibrate what we define as “agriculture”; expanding that definition to include some out-of-the box thinking. If we consider some non-traditional land use practices in our planning as agricultural practices, we can create, enhance and preserve what we in Alden value about our community.

- ❖ We’ve heard about large commercial farms and from farmers engaged in Community Supported Agriculture. I’m not going to elaborate on these issues further, except to say this. We have seen \$4.50 per gallon gasoline. Energy costs in transporting produce from farm to processor to market will become a significant factor in food pricing in the future. Short supply lines may yield benefits in lower food prices. Here’s a thought for an entrepreneur: Community market meat processing and direct sales; these are quite common in the Finger Lakes area – read Amish meat markets. A local butcher can contract with

farmers for animals to process and sell. I still remember the wonderful pork, beef and chickens that were raised by my Grandfather and Uncle on the family farm (next door). We ate organic, free-range meats before they were trendy. For those who get the Buffalo News on Sundays read the Viewpoints section for December 21, the Science Page. Note that the price for a 20 lb. Heritage Turkey (either Midget White or Bourbon Red) is approximately \$180. Who would guess that a farmer could raise and sell over 400 turkeys at approximately \$9 per pound? Could an enterprising Alden farmer beat that price by say, \$2 per lb.?

- ❖ Our community has a viable and vibrant Farmer's Market allowing small farmers to sell produce directly to consumers. Our support and marketing of our Farmer's Market can extend viability to small farmers and landowners. We also should look carefully at what we define as produce – wood from a woodlot that will be used as heating fuel (even if it is used in a fireplace for a decorative Christmas fire) is still a naturally produced plant product. It would also meet the 50-mile radius restriction for local residents who are looking to purchase wood. If we tap the creativity of our community members, we can possibly expand this enterprise in variety of goods offered and possibly hours of operation. Think Alden Food Market Co-Op to supplement our Tops and local Deli's.

- ❖ The engineer from Wendel Duchscherer spoke of "ecotourism". Some of the oldest forms of "ecotourism" consisted of allowing outdoor enthusiasts the use of property for hunting, fishing, hiking, birdwatching, etc. Guided hunts and fishing trips (OK, so Alden does not have a wealth of Trout Streams, but there are some neat fishing holes on Cayuga and Ellicott Creek.) are one of the oldest recreational uses of land. One interesting and viable economic opportunity available to "significant acreage" landowners as well as small and large farmers is the leasing of hunting access rights to property. (Most of us used to, some still do, for a knock on the door, a respectful request and a share of the harvest.) This contributes to the overall satisfaction of community residents as well. (Ask around, you'll find a lot of people move to Alden for the outdoor, specifically hunting and fishing, opportunities offered here – guess what, they pay taxes too!) Should the landowner wish to optimize their holding for wildlife population survival (currently, food plots optimized with plant feedstock for whitetail deer and turkeys are heavily promoted by some hunting enthusiasts), the activity becomes another form of agriculture – raising wildlife for harvest. There are ringneck pheasant hunting preserves in Darien and Orleans County and they are economically viable. With the closure of NYSDEC's last pheasant farm, the Reynolds Farm in Dryden, NY, there may be an economic opportunity to raise birds for an agricultural entrepreneur here in Alden. Non-hunters also reap the benefits of wildlife habitat management for maximized population survival; all wildlife populations increase, not just game species. This benefits hikers, cross-country skiers, birdwatchers, etc. They come, they see, they spend, Alden and Aldenites benefit.

- ❖ I've noted an extensive network of snowmobile trails in this area set up by local clubs; by promoting local restaurants and taverns on the routes, we benefit Alden merchants greatly. Personally, I'm none too fond of the noisy machines and some operator's hijinks, but New York communities that have taken advantage of the economic opportunities offered by winter recreation activities have reaped an economic benefit. I have spoke with Central New York community leaders who have seen an economic impact from winter tourism that rivals or exceeds summer tourism and is rising in the rank of income versus industry and mercantile. Could we learn to value snow, yes snow, as much as Ellicottville or Colden?
- ❖ Increased recreation opportunities to outsiders could require lodging; thus stimulating a resurgence of the hospitality industry in the Village of Alden. Maybe a refurbishing or re-creation of a Black Water Bathhouse? How about a Black Water Bath, Bed and Breakfast – BWB³?

None of the above should be taken to be anti-development. Note that what I'm mentioning has the potential for economic benefit for Alden residents and the enjoyment of our community by non-residents. But we also need to develop knowledge based industrial operations and potentially some type of manufacturing. Here's why.

Agriculture and mercantile alone cannot provide the tax base necessary to create a vital, vibrant community; at least in our part of WNY. Currently, Alden has a number of residential areas that create a high demand on municipal resources that cannot be wholly supported by residential taxation alone. We do have a resource in the Walden Ave. industrial corridor that needs to be addressed in a positive manner, supported with proper zoning, potential wastewater treatment resources (to support light manufacturing where chemical processes are employed) and transportation infrastructure. Except for wastewater treatment, most of what is necessary is in place. We may want to create a business incubator area with the appropriate municipal infrastructure that will eventually be supported by the industries that locate there. Is this something our planners want to try? Along with planning for industrial development, there should be some type of forward thinking taxation structure designed for this area that delays the full impact of taxes to allows business to become economically viable once profitability increases as the business matures. We may also want to work with the Village of Alden to revitalize the small industrial areas that are in the Village limits.

In terms of residential subdivision development, I urge caution. Again, remembering the specter of \$4.50 per gallon gasoline, I don't look for energy costs; especially hydrocarbon fuels to remain low for long. Either the price of oil will rise (it looks like it will shortly) or there will be a carbon tax imposed by the Federal Government (may be likely to happen with this Administration) to encourage alternative fuels development and use. This will greatly influence people's choices where they live; no longer will the long commute from the Country to the City (or suburb where the job is located) be financially attractive or feasible. Planners must consider that new job creation will most likely be in the knowledge worker category.

This will mean more telecommuting, not physical translocation to an office in “the City”. The important support for the coming paradigm shift in new jobs will be high-speed broadband access to the Internet (cable, fiber optic, etc.) and enhanced telecommunications networks. Verizon and Time Warner, along with other providers of telecommunications should be encouraged to bring high quality, high-speed broadband access to Alden-all portions of it. This will not require rezoning or major recalibration of the planning process; however, our Town legislators may want to recalibrate the definitions of what is considered a home based business to ensure that persons performing work at home for their employer (or a limited number of persons) are not regulated as a permitted business, nor create a new tax based on what telecom services are installed in a residency. While it may be hard to resist, by allowing free enterprise to flourish, we will reap the benefits in a positive downstream manner. As a corollary to this thought line, would we want to set aside an area, possibly in the current C-2 and C-3 areas that favor the construction of small business incubator offices in a readily accessible area with advanced telecommunications ready connections? (Look at Alura Drive and Broadway as a potential example.)

Extending or creating expensive municipal services in anticipation of a “building boom” that does not materialize would only overextend existing Town taxpayers. I’ve spoken before regarding construction of water and wastewater treatment infrastructure. Now, we have seen the cost of Water District #5. Oddly, some people I’ve spoken to who could really benefit from this District are not in favor of it. The increased tax to cover the cost of the construction of Water District #5 would force them out of their homes. Plainly put, they cannot afford it. This is a \$10M water project; imagine what a \$40 – 70M Sewer project would do to the tax bill. Until the cost of infrastructure construction drops, or increased NYS or Federal aid becomes available (don’t plan on either for a LONG while), the increased tax burden would have a negative effect on our Town’s population. Those people who could afford an expensive commute and the increase in Town Tax most likely will be looking for the enhanced experience of living in a rural area; this will be created and supported by low lot (and population) density and larger lot sizes, the sizes that would support drilling a deep well and installing an adequate leach field. This should be codified in the new Master Plan (current housing stock notwithstanding-grandfather it in).

I urge the members of the Planning Commission to take their time, gather all the facts, listen to the opinions of informed Town Residents and properly construct a plan for our future. I also request that they reject any attempt by moneyed interests in Alden to influence the Commission’s decisions – in the favor of the interests. We’ve seen the results of bad planning before; we can do better in the future.

Sincerely;

Thomas M. Weisbeck