

Agriculture in Ipswich

Interviews with farmers

Ipswich is blessed with a remarkably diverse agricultural community, from the oldest farm in continuous existence in the country to innovative ventures in land- and sea-based production. Vegetable, fruit, nursery and floral fields, equestrian ventures and dairy farms, hayfields and tree farms comprise dozens of viable businesses.

Farms contribute to the scenic and historic character of Ipswich as well as to its social and economic diversity and identity as a community. Farmlands punctuate the woodlands to the west and buffer the marshlands to the east.

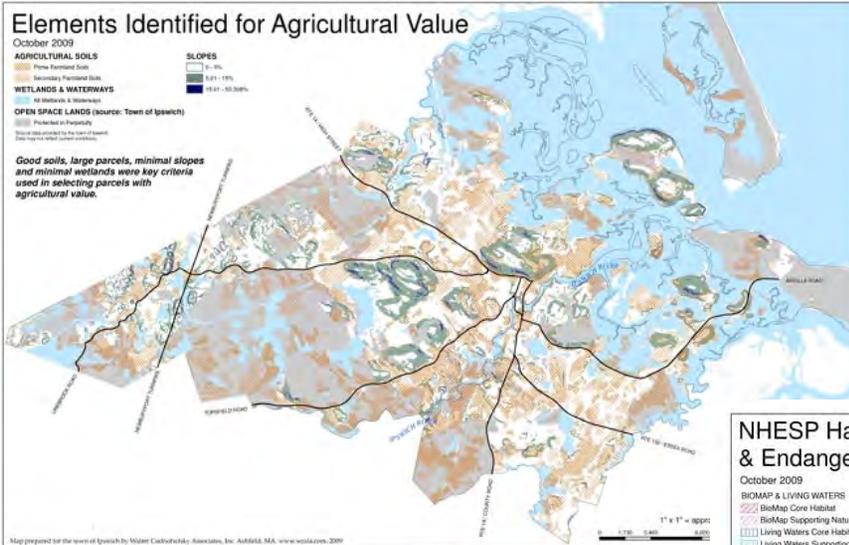
For the most part, these ventures are faring well – Ipswich farmers have diversified, adjusted to new technologies and more environmentally sustainable methods, and have the broad support of the community. Ipswich proudly declared itself a “Right to Farm” community at the October 2009 Town Meeting.

Nevertheless, farming is at risk:

- Increasing cost of inputs overpowers static market revenues.
- Because farm operations are relatively small, there is no economy of scale to offset investments in equipment and operations
- High land values preclude young farmers from acquiring land, and existing farmers from expanding their operations.
- Farmland – cleared and level – is under continual pressure for development into house lots and recreational fields.
- Most farming families must rely on second jobs for health insurance and other benefits, as well as income.
- Increasing levels of regulation and permitting discourage farmers from further expanding their operations

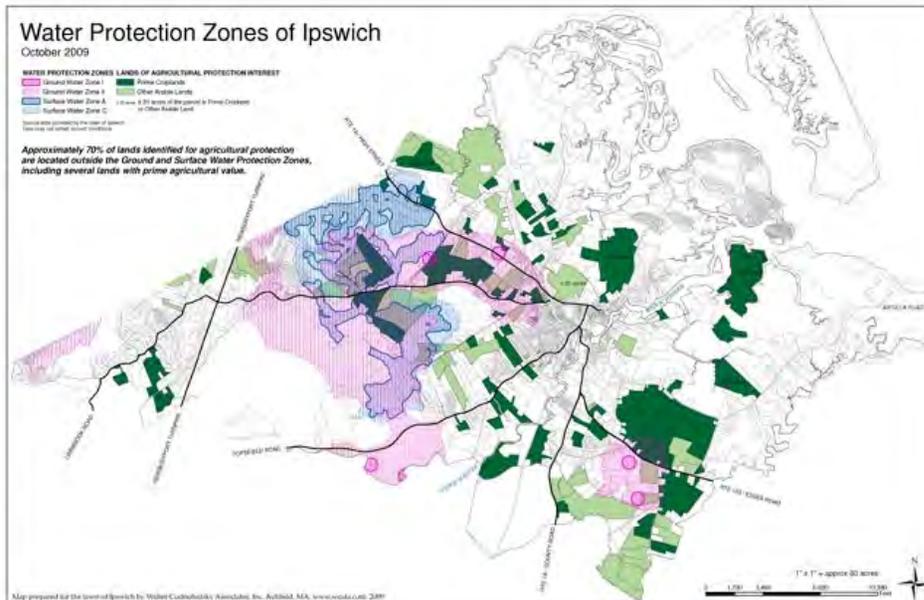
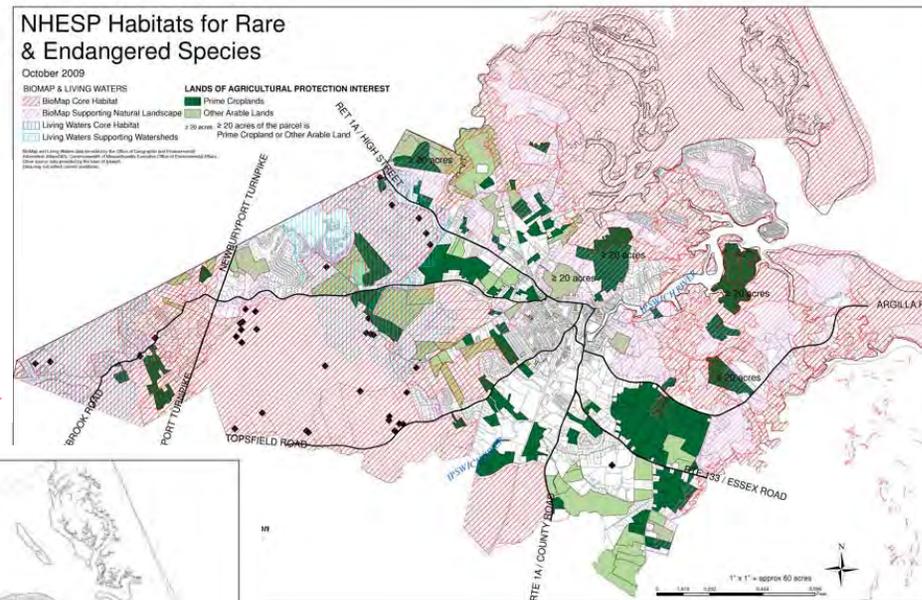


Mapping the Resources



Prime agricultural soils (shown in brown tones) are widely distributed throughout town, but given complex topography and hydrology are scattered in smaller non-contiguous pockets. Many lands in active production do not coincide with the best soils, and many areas of good soils are not currently in production.

Ipswich is remarkably diverse ecologically, from the Great Marsh in the east to the hilly woodlands in the west. Rivers, wetlands, vernal pools, estuaries all have core habitat values associated with them, which deserve a high level of protection. Many existing farms overlap these **ecologically sensitive zones**.



Water – both its quality and its availability – is an issue of particular concern in Ipswich. **Water protection zones** are designated to protect drinking water supplies in town, and cover a broad central portion of the town. Most active farms – and identified “lands of agricultural protection interest” – are outside this zone, but those within it must pay particular attention to the impact of agricultural practices on water quality.

Lands of Agricultural Protection Interest

October 2009

EXISTING FARMS

- Rented Farm and Aquaculture Lands
- Owned Farmlands

OPEN SPACE LANDS (source: Town of Ipswich) ≥ 20 acres ≥ 20 acres of the parcel is Prime Cropland or Other Arable Land

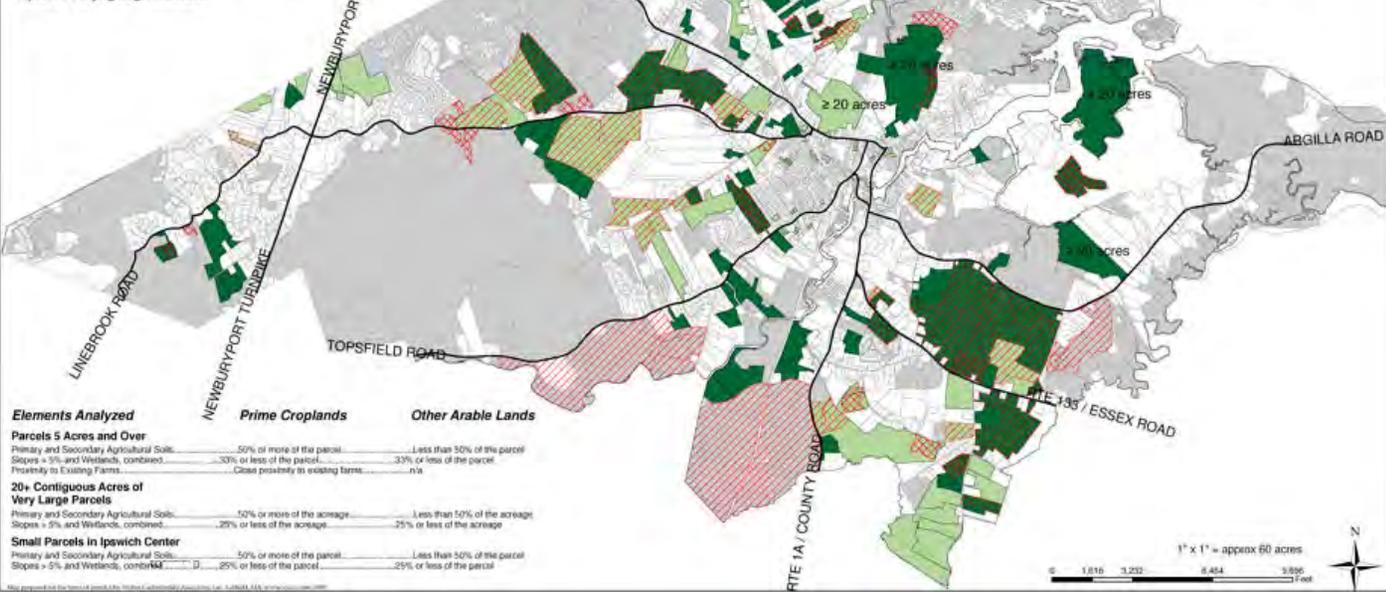
Protected in Perpetuity

LANDS OF AGRICULTURAL PROTECTION INTEREST

- Prime Croplands
- Other Arable Lands

In combination with woodlands and marshes, existing and potential agricultural lands are a significant component of the "Green Ring" embracing central Ipswich.

Identified lands of agricultural protection interest provide opportunities to form new linkages between existing protected lands and additional opportunities for positive impact on outlying neighborhoods.



Elements Analyzed

Parcels 5 Acres and Over

Primary and Secondary Agricultural Soils	50% or more of the parcel	Less than 50% of the parcel
Slopes > 5% and Wetlands, combined	30% or less of the parcel	33% or less of the parcel
Proximity to Existing Farms	Close proximity to existing farms	N/A

20+ Contiguous Acres of Very Large Parcels

Primary and Secondary Agricultural Soils	50% or more of the acreage	Less than 50% of the acreage
Slopes > 5% and Wetlands, combined	25% or less of the acreage	25% or less of the acreage

Small Parcels in Ipswich Center

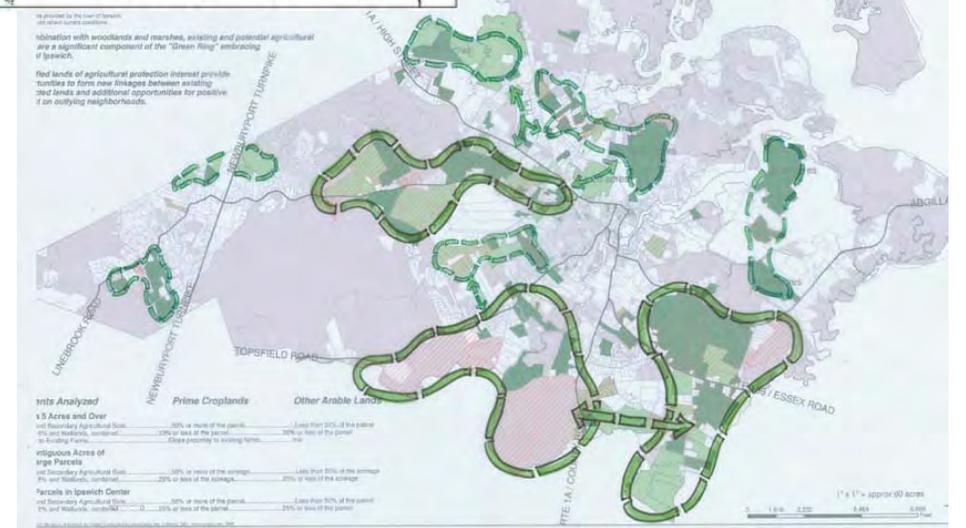
Primary and Secondary Agricultural Soils	50% or more of the parcel	Less than 50% of the parcel
Slopes > 5% and Wetlands, combined	25% or less of the parcel	25% or less of the parcel

Priorities for Protection

Through a process that assessed the agricultural value of lands – quality of soils, grade changes, proximity to other active farmland and protected open space – the study identified specific parcels which could significantly contribute to a more cohesive and viable agricultural community.

Lands of Agricultural Protection Interest can be aggregated into three primary zones, the largest of which incorporates the southeast gateway to town and the Maplecroft acquisition.

Parcels identified for protection contribute to the **Green Ring** proposed in an earlier planning study, and create an inner **agricultural ring** between the densely developed town center and outlying environmentally sensitive lands.



Principal Recommendations

Improve communication/education

Increase the profile of farms and farmers in Ipswich:

- Promote Ipswich as a Right to Farm community.
- Profile individual farmers in local newspapers, photography shows.
- Create a brochure of local farms and products, with map & photos.
- Initiate a community access media program on Ipswich agriculture, aquaculture and equine operations; collaborate with Conservation and Board of Health on controversial issues.
- Host a series of seasonal events featuring local products.

Reduce the climate of tension between farmers and environmental regulators:

- Identify the issues and regulations that trigger the most difficulty..
- Form a time-limited committee to review possible ways to reduce conflicts and facilitate permitting.
- Establish common goals, through mediation if necessary.
- Increase representation of farmers on all town boards and commissions to improve dialogue.
- Design a booklet that summarizes all relevant regulations and permits required; distribute to farmers and other landowners.
- Promote all the ways farmers steward resources responsibly.
- Encourage and reward farmers who employ Best Management Practices; compensate farmers for environmental services.

Establish a sub-regional identity for local foods & goods:

- Create an “Ipswich Bay” or similar identity with surrounding towns..
- Create a logo to be widely used: bumper stickers, farm stands, restaurants, grocery stores, gateway signs.
- Collaborate with participating farmers, clambers, growers on education, processing and marketing.
- Promote the use of Best Management Practices as part of the local food quality.

Farmland preservation and environmental protection are compatible goals; farmers must be our principal conservationists.

Create additional opportunities for farming

Increase the amount of land available to farmers:

- Evaluate town lands for potential agricultural use.
- Create a model long-term lease agreement between farmers and non-farming landowners.
- Develop a process to match new farmers with farmland in transition.

Establish a community farm:

- Work with schools to create a farm-based curriculum with lessons on biology, botany, hydrology, soils, geology as well as food production.
- Host adult education classes on growing & preserving food.
- Focus market production on high-value crops such as berries, tomatoes, greens and flowers.
- Use the site for on-going training in farm Best Management Practices, marketing, processing, etc.

Explore micro-financing and incubator programs:

- Host a conference on alternative financing.
- Bring in consultants from other regions that have explored or instituted similar programs: Farms for the Future (Maine), Farms Forever (Southeastern MA), Glynwood Farm (NY).
- Pursue grants geared specifically to value-added and sustainable agriculture.
- Expand existing or form new food processing centers to be shared by producers.

The local food movement is growing exponentially. This is the time to create a regionally based food system with farmers at the center. Local agriculture is the key to a sustainable, resilient future.

