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By Kate Evans/Kevans@wickedlocal.com

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Local landowners and farmers learn about leasing land at Alfalfa Farm seminar

Farmers, landowners and curious Tri-Towners alike gathered at the Alfalfa Farm and Winery recently to learn about leasing land for agricultural production.

Topsfield Agricultural Commission Chair Trudi Perry welcomed the 20 or so listeners, saying she may very well orchestrate a follow-up event because of the good turnout. Perry wanted to host the event, "Leasing Your Land to a Farmer," because there is a lot of undeveloped land in people's backyards that can be utilized for agricultural production and potentially benefit both the farmer and landowner.

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Massachusetts land is expensive, costing over \$12,000 an acre, which is why pairing farmers with interested landowners makes for a favorable match.

Various speakers took the floor with PowerPoint presentations to explain the importance of preservation, the basics of leasing land to a farmer, the importance of protecting against legal issues and firsthand accounts directly from a farmer and leasers.

"I don't know anything about agriculture; animals are my thing," said Christine Barendsfeld, land leaser for iFarm in Boxford.

Barendsfeld signed on to lease her land to Cambodian farmer Sorn Un so she could learn how to garden, as well as make use of part of her 17 acres of historic farmstead. Barendsfeld first connected with Un after she took the New Entry Sustainable Farming Project's (NESFP) Farm Business Planning Course to become familiar with the program, then she asked if they could help her find a farmer to grow vegetables on her land. NESFP brought Un to Barendsfeld, and the two have been working together since April.

"It's been a kind of real act of faith," said Barendsfeld, who sees the language border between her and Un as problematic.

Barendsfeld entered into a one-year trial license agreement with Un, which she can terminate at any time. After the first year, the duo will evaluate their experience and then decide on the terms of a longer lease agreement if they so choose.

While the NESFP helps many people with an interest in small-scale agriculture to begin farming in Massachusetts, some farmers and landowners get together on their own accord.

Farmer Noah Kellerman, of Aprilla Farm of Essex, had known landowner and neighbor Charlie Storey a long time before he approached Kellerman about leasing his land for agricultural production. The two were able to form a land lease agreement.

Storey voiced the importance of always having a backup plan.



PHOTO/ COURTESY PHOTO

Boxford landowner Christine Barendsfeld, left, leases a portion of her land to farmer Sorn Un, who runs iFarm. The two entered into a one-year trial license agreement after connecting through the New Entry Sustainable Farming Project.

“You do need a roadmap for when something goes wrong, you do need protection for when something goes wrong,” said Storey.

Weaver dove into the different types of land use agreements, which help protect farmers’ and landowners’ goals and security. The agreements range from the “classic handshake” to a formal lease with a lawyer present – parties involved select their best option based on their relationship with their partner and comfort level with the situation.

Weaver also elaborated on the basics of leasing land to a farmer. The first step is to figure out a vision for the land, such as where the farmer will farm and what space will be kept separate for the landowner. A landowner must also identify the major land features. The next step is to find a farmer, which can be done through a local agricultural commission or newenglandfarmlandfinder.org. Once a farmer is selected and a land use agreement is completed, landowners will then work with the farmer to set expectations, establish responsibilities and discuss logistics, such as taxes, fees and liability insurance – Weaver suggested all farmers carry the latter.

Agriculture comes in many different forms, the audience quickly learned. Weaver cited options such as hay production, vegetables, landscaping, orchards, irrigation, potable water, farm equipment storage, animals on the pasture, bee keeping and cut flowers.

Listeners were given a period for networking following the presentation to potentially get in touch with farmers or to hear more on the topics discussed and if that type of commitment may work for them.

“I would recommend this if you have [an acre of] land,” said Barenfeld.

For information on leasing land to a farmer, visit www.nesfp.org or call 978-654-6745.

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