

# CASE STUDY: Town of Topsham, Maine



## TOPSHAM AT A GLANCE

**Population:** 8,750<sup>a</sup>

**Land Area (in sq. mi):** 32.2<sup>b</sup>

**Median Income:** \$61,607<sup>c</sup>

**Population in Poverty:** 17.2 percent<sup>d</sup>

**Additional Resources:** Topsham Comprehensive Plan; Topsham Natural Areas Plan

The town of Topsham spans 32.2 square miles along the Androscoggin River, just off Maine's southern coast near the Merrymeeting Bay tidal basin. It is also part of the scenic Casco Bay region, which includes the state's largest city of Portland located some 30 minutes from Topsham, along with smaller towns like Freeport (home of retailer L.L. Bean), Bowdoinham, Bath, and Brunswick. Topsham's 8,750 residents are 93.6 percent Caucasian, 0.1 percent African American, 1.7 percent Asian, and 0.9 percent Hispanic.

Topsham is a historically rural community that has, particularly in the past three decades or so, transitioned to a more suburban character. The timber industry around which the town developed has given way to a growing retail and service sector, and the town boasts several commercial clusters that ring its central village of more concentrated residential and mixed-use development. An extension of Interstate 295 in the mid-1970s, followed by the completion of the "coastal connector" linking I-295 with US Route 1 in 1996, improved Topsham's accessibility such that it is now located within commuting distance of two-thirds of the state's workforce.

Today, Topsham is an interesting mix of such newer developments as big-box retail, retirement facilities, and an improved transportation network, as well as its historical residential and commercial buildings and abundant natural resources. The latter include many farms that have been a part of the town's rural landscape for multiple generations. According to Town Manager Rich Roedner, a farm field is viewed as a rural resource, and an attachment to land and appreciation for those resources are embedded in the community fabric.

But in a growing community like Topsham, affinity for agriculture isn't always enough to ensure it remains a viable and protected part of the local identity and economy. The town has employed a mix of proactive and reactive, formal and informal strategies to do so, often playing a supporting role but one that is clearly valued by local food advocates.

## Local Food and Agriculture

Unlike some communities where local food is more of an emerging or novel idea, Topsham hasn't had to introduce its residents to the concept. Residents gather at the Topsham Fairgrounds for the annual agricultural fair, which just celebrated its 160th anniversary, and for other community events throughout the year, including a winter season farmers market—one of less than 20 in the state. They purchase bacon, milk, meat pies, and assorted other specialties from the 85-year-old, five-generation meat market, abattoir, and livestock farm located on 500 acres in the town.

<sup>a</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 2009-2013.

<sup>b</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, 2010.

<sup>c</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 2009-2013.

<sup>d</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 2009-2013.



Midcoast Winter Farmers Market.

Source: [Facebook.com](#)

### Adapting and looking ahead through plans and policy

As the demographics and perception of agriculture have changed over time, Topsham has looked for ways to accommodate shifting needs and priorities identified largely through community planning processes, including the most recent comprehensive plan, which was adopted in 2005 and amended in 2007, and includes a goal to preserve its working farms, forests, and natural areas.<sup>1</sup> As part of its implementation, development of a natural areas plan followed.<sup>2</sup> This reinforced and expanded on specific recommendations for changes in policy and practice that would support conservation and farm landowners.

A seasonal retail provision added to Topsham's code in 2006 "seeks to create an opportunity for local agricultural producers to sell their products in expanded areas in Town, from which they are currently restricted, in an expanded 'farmer's market' manner," and allows on- and off-site sales subject to a set of criteria related to lot size, hours, parking, and other operational characteristics.<sup>3</sup>

Other code amendments passed in 2008 give rural landowners the ability to do things other than just farm in hopes of providing more flexibility to those looking to diversify their business models and waiting for resurgence in the agricultural sector. Under the new code, landowners can now engage in rural entrepreneurial activities, which may include lab and research facilities; light manufacturing; professional offices; service businesses; wholesale businesses; and warehousing storage, and distribution. The reuse of agricultural buildings was also permitted for these same types of nonresidential activities in an expanded list of zones.<sup>4</sup>

Just as the building reuse provision hoped to prevent the demolition of existing agricultural infrastructure, other land use policies have been oriented toward farmland conservation. While the zoning code laid out agricultural land conservation and development standards for residential

subdivision proposals of at least 10 acres of open fields or pasture, Planning Director Rod Melanson notes that in recent years, the town has taken additional steps to turn the subdivision regulation process on its head.

Prospective major subdivision developers must now first complete a preapplication process in which they submit a site inventory, analysis, and conservation plan. This allows the planning board and staff to consider the potential impacts on natural and cultural resources before being presented with a detailed development plan.<sup>5</sup> New types of open space development also allow for the consideration of density bonuses in exchange for the protection of valued natural resources via conservation easements.<sup>6</sup>

## A Key Partnership: The Brunswick-Topsham Land Trust

### Leadership in land conservation

The local government is not alone in its conservation interests. In 1985, a group of community members banded together out of concern for a 20-acre coastal meadow under threat of development. They pooled resources to establish the Brunswick-Topsham Land Trust (BTLT), which has since grown from an all-volunteer effort to a 1,100-member organization, operating on a budget made up of membership fees, donations and grants, and a staff of 3.6 full-time employees.

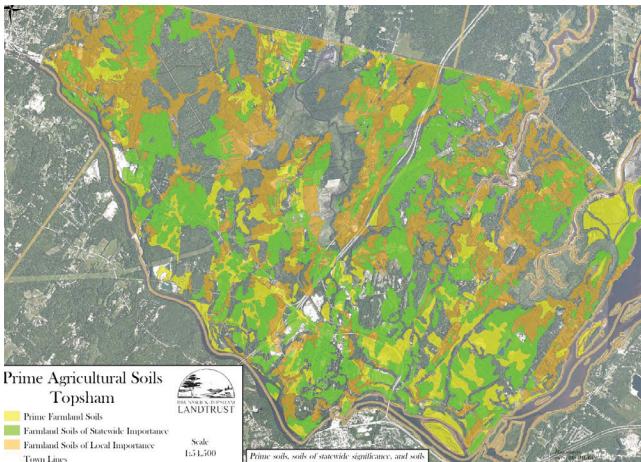
BTLT's mission is to "preserve, protect and steward the cherished landscapes and rich natural resources of our communities, to provide access for recreation, and to support local agriculture and other traditional land uses, now and for generations to come." In three decades, the trust has conserved more than 2,300 acres of natural areas.

Among BTLT's most well-known conservation efforts is the Crystal Spring Farm in Brunswick, which the trust purchased outright in 1994. The farm has expanded from 170 acres at that time to 320 acres today. On this signature



Scammon Farm, preserved land in Topsham.

Source: Chris Cabot



**Map of Topsham's soils, developed by Chris Cabot as part of a farmland inventory conducted through the Local Farms - Local Food initiative.**

Source: [kennebecestuary.org](http://kennebecestuary.org)

property, BTLT operates one of the state's largest farmers markets, a community garden benefitting people challenged by food access or physical disabilities, and five miles of public nature trails that weave around farm fields; 115 acres are farmed and managed by a couple who have leased the land from BTLT since 2004.

In 2014, following a series of short-term leases, the farmers and BTLT entered into a 50-year lease agreement that took approximately three years to develop. This innovative model is transferable, allowing the farmers to build equity in their business, but ensures that the public access and the trust's assets—the land itself and the structures on the property—will be maintained.

### Local Farms – Local Food initiative

While BTLT's focus on agriculture and farmland preservation has been integral since its inception, in the past five to seven years, it has expanded work regionally to enhance, support, and grow a local food economy. The Local Farms-Local Food initiative is a partnership with the Kennebec Estuary Land Trust and is active in a dozen towns in the region, including Topsham.

With major goals to preserve farmland and farmer viability, the partners have worked to identify and protect the best soils for farming and facilitated outreach to farmers to gain a better understanding of their challenges. They've also worked to raise community awareness of local agriculture, promoting farm to school opportunities, expanding EBT access at farmers markets through a partnership with Maine Access Health, and taking steps toward establishing a community food council.

The ability to aggregate and distribute food to retail and institutional markets is critical to the viability of local agriculture, and the initiative has worked with municipalities in the region to identify infrastructure gaps and opportunities.

In Topsham, one such opportunity arose when the Brunswick Naval Air Station closed in 2011. The base's former commissary, located in an annexed area now known as Topsham Commerce Park, was identified as a potential site for a highly-desired food hub for the region—a need initially championed by local agriculture and preservation advocates and affirmed by interest from local institutions. A local fair trade, organic coffee roaster has since purchased the entire 35,000 square-foot facility and is also supportive of the concept, though full financing for the food hub element remains a challenge to secure. Nonetheless, partners remain optimistic that given the persistent support of key stakeholders, including the local government and its economic development agency, some version of their food hub vision is on the horizon.

"By having the local economic development folks and the municipalities, in addition to the nonprofits who support conservation and farming, all saying that 'this is good for our economy, it's good for our quality of life, it's good for all of these things,' it will happen," says BTLT Executive Director and Topsham resident Angela Twitchell, adding, "The partnership with the town makes all of this work possible."

## Opportunities for Local Government Management

### Be a "responsive driver"

That's how Roedner describes the local government's role in supporting Topsham's local agriculture. "We've looked at it from an economic development standpoint," he says, "It makes sense. It puts people to work." While he and other key planning and economic development staff have embraced this basic idea, they haven't usurped the activities and capacity of nonprofit and private stakeholders. Rather, they have leveraged their planning and policy tools to enhance those efforts and further encourage the viability



**Former navy commissary and site for potential food hub.**

Source: Laura Goddeeris



**The Local Farms-Local Food initiative is a regional partnership working to raise awareness of food system issues in Topsham and neighboring communities.**

Source: [kennebecestuary.org](http://kennebecestuary.org)

of local agriculture.

Topsham has been able to do this while maintaining a generally neutral position, attempting to balance competing interests by creating options in response to community feedback. In 2008, as the town looked to develop its natural areas plan, it recognized that some rural landowners felt threatened by growing interest in protection of open space. Staff reached out to both sides of the debate and invited stakeholders to community input sessions in which they sought to identify common interests. Melanson says the message to the town was essentially, “You want to do the right thing, let’s make it easier for you to do that.”

#### **Recognize the intersection of food and agriculture with various municipal functions**

As local governments around the country are becoming interested in food systems, they are finding potential overlap with a wide range of departments’ functions. Whether this percolates from the departments and staff themselves or is directed by top-level management, recognition by the latter is ideal. In Topsham, Roedner can quickly identify several government staff whose work intersects with food and agriculture in some way, including the directors of planning, economic development and code enforcement. While each works on food issues through their own particular lens, they, too, are aware of the intersections and collaborate when appropriate.

#### **Facilitate connections to external resources and partners**

The local government also embraces the role of facilitator, making connections with regional, state, or federal resources whenever possible. The town, for example, has applied for state-administered economic development fund-

ing, which is part of its Community Development Block Grant allocation, on behalf of the food hub project at the naval commissary. Twitchell and Melanson also noted that local government engagement in local food and agriculture initiatives can open up access to funding streams that would otherwise be difficult to access.

In addition to seeking financial resources, Topsham has benefitted from connections to human capital at various public, private, and nonprofit organizations within the region and state, where partners administer or advise on supportive programming or research. Examples have included the Maine Department of Agriculture, Maine Farm-land Trust, Sagadahoc Agricultural and Horticultural Society, and Bowdoin College.

#### **Lessons Learned**

- **Local food and agriculture can have a place in a suburbanizing landscape.** With respect to development, Topsham has kept an eye toward the big picture. It knows many of its small town aspects and especially its natural resources, including local farms, must maintain a place in its future. By being flexible, forward-thinking, and receptive to community input, they have been able to broker plans and policies that balance interests of developers, conservationists, and local producers.
- **Distribution infrastructure remains a challenge and an opportunity.** Topsham, like other towns in Maine, is fortunate to possess many local food system assets at either end of the supply chain—new farmers and good soils on the production end and interest in local purchasing by schools and other institutions on the market side. But the infrastructure to aggregate, process, and package local produce appropriately for these markets is not yet sufficient. The challenge here is capitalizing—literally—on this interest as an economic development opportunity.

Topsham’s story also illustrates that **it’s possible to be a strong supporter of local food and agriculture without major commitments of resources**. Here are simple strategies that foster a spirit of collaboration, while allowing partners to do much of the heavy lifting:

- **Be open to building personal relationships.** “We’re small enough that when someone has an issue, one of the things they think to do is to call the town office,” says Manager Roedner. Twitchell agrees that personal relationships have been critical to the success of efforts to preserve and promote local agriculture. Having gotten to know local government staff through participation in various committees as an active resident, she agrees that “It’s just easier to go talk about things that we’re doing, things that they’re doing, and try to problem solve together.” She suggests building those relationships should be an early step when other communities are looking to engage in local food system development.

- **Speaking a common language goes a long way.** “Even just recognizing that there is a common goal, that it would be good for our local economy if we had stronger food systems and better ways to distribute local food to our institutions, just by [municipalities] being aware that that is an important goal for our communities, opportunities that you may not see come about,” says Twitchell. “And the message can be simple and inclusive as ‘supporting local agriculture is supporting our local economy,’” In Topsham, it hasn’t been critical to define local food in terms of specific types or scales of production. Even the organic Christmas tree producers are considered part of the local agriculture movement.
- **Don’t assume others know what you know.** This applies to your active collaborators who may not be aware of relevant legislation, funding opportunities, or other matching activities at the regional, state, or federal levels. Sharing that information is an easy way to help to build those relationships with your partners, as has been the case in Topsham.

This lesson also applies to the general public. Consider the opportunities for signage and other branding or communications tools to affirm why and how you support local food and agriculture. Sometimes what seems obvious still bears repeating.

## Endnotes

- 1 Topsham Comprehensive Plan 2005. Topsham Comprehensive Plan Update Committee & Topsham Comprehensive Plan Implementation Committee: May 2005, amended May 2007. <http://bit.ly/1G2ON5x>
- 2 Topsham Natural Areas Plan. Town of Topsham: May 2010.
- 3 Topsham, Maine, Municipal Code, § 225-60.5 (2006). <http://ecode360.com/9088023>
- 4 Topsham, Maine, Municipal Code, § 225-60.11 & § 225-60.12 (2008). <http://ecode360.com/10391067> & <http://ecode360.com/10391068>
- 5 Topsham, Maine, Municipal Code, § 191-2.2 (2012). <http://ecode360.com/16235051>
- 6 Topsham, Maine, Municipal Code, § 225-20.1 (2010). <http://ecode360.com/14479866>

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## Study Participants

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