

Agri-tourism & Direct Sales Focus Group Notes

Feb 4, 2014

5 Attendees

Land Use – what issues are you having with local land use regulations?

- No one knows that the wine store and gourmet market is in Aurora because can't put up a sign. Can't use a green DOT sign because the grapes are not grown at the store. Can use a blue sign but not sure where to put it, outside the village limit?
- In the Village of Union Springs (or Town of Springport?), organic farm was told that the process to get a sign put up to direct people to the farm would take one year. If you want to get people to farm? Show people where the farms are.
- Want to bring people to the sugar house, do tours that generate some revenue. Make a better profit by bringing visitors to the farm. Built a shelter to do events like pancake breakfasts. There may be setback requirements, etc. but it hasn't been an issue (Town of Brutus). The town doesn't allow home occupations but agricultural uses are no problem (Town of Brutus). Hold open house weekends during the season. 500-600 people came to the open house on second weekend last March. There are some state regulations because I'm processing.

Future Plans for businesses

- Land is limited. May expand down the road
- Would like to expand but need more woods. There aren't a lot of woodlots in central New York, maple operations look to lease what is available. It's an education issue, property owners with woodlots don't know they can use them for syrup.
- Rent the building that the store is in. Store is outgrowing the space. The business is becoming a destination, but since we don't own the building we can't enlarge it, and it's difficult to relocate a business like this, since it's so important that people know where we are and how to get to us. Even changing the phone number would be difficult because it's been the same for so long.
- The county tourism way-finding project will be great in several years.
- Connections with motor coach operators have helped generate business, but need signage and facilities that are large enough to accommodate the big buses.
- The smaller-scale agricultural businesses need marketing staff, but it's expensive. It would be great if multiple businesses could share a marketing person. Was going to host a chili cook-off but the logistics of putting it together was complicated, food permits, etc. It would be great if someone could coordinate these types of events for multiple agri-tourism enterprises.
- Dickman Farms has a marketing staff, they do very well. They host events and hold classes, etc.

Business Development

- Small winery production, 600-700 cases wine. Planning to grow, but must do slowly, can't take on debt. 80% of sales are through shop, 20% is through other venues. Since the store can't get bigger, the key to growth is to increase distribution, which Kit does himself. But, have to find the markets first. Winery industry expands and contracts annually. We make the wine we like to make, not to please the crowd. The production facility in Seneca County is large enough to expand. On a good Saturday during the season, we'll get 3-4 dozen, 100-150 people in the tasting room. A lot of the visitors are wine touring, get some people attending weddings at the Aurora Inn, the Barn Sale at Mackenzie-Childs and the Route 90 garage sale day.
- At organic farm just outside Union Springs, have not noticed a difference in sales during the Route 90 garage sale day or the Mackenzie-Childs Barn Sale. Growth strategy is slow and smart. We're figuring

out what we can grow and sell without borrowing a lot of money. Going to start a CSA, just 20 shares or so. Don't see us getting big, just want to be viable.

- The key to bolstering agri-tourism is SIGNAGE!!!

What educational or training resources do you access to help you manage your business?

- Read a lot, learn from others. Need to manage risk. Looked for support through USDA for hoop house grants, CCE for a few questions. A lot of times just get referred to a website but don't get someone to sit down with. Resources out there tend to defer and refer to others.
- The key to business development is the market: finding it, gaining credibility, logos and branding.
- Selling to restaurants: it's challenging to establish relationships with them. Drop off gift baskets with meats for them to try. The timing is challenging, farmers are busy when chefs are not, and vice versa. Also, chefs want something quick and easy; it takes effort from them to make connections with local farmers

Where do you process your meat?

- Hogs go to Schrieder's Meat Market in Romulus (USDA). Can sell these at the farmers market. Poultry – on-farm. Other facilities are NYS certified, can only sell ½ or whole. Need more slaughterhouses. In Vermont, can sell cuts that were processed in a state certified facility, if they're sold within the state.
- USDA certified facilities: Moravia, Romulus, Canandaigua. There aren't many of them and they're not conveniently located for many Cayuga County meat producers.
- Could sell ½ a hog to a restaurant but they don't have butchers

Distribution and Market Access

- In the wine industry, it's a challenge to make connections. There a lot of wine around here, so how do you stand out?
- In the maple syrup industry, educating the public is a big challenge, about all the different ways to use maple syrup
- Restaurants have opportunities but they often take the path of least resistance. Restaurants need to market their local food, this is a weak link.
- Farmer's Markets – they're a mixed bag. In a way it's a lesser Wegman's. The Auburn Market: younger people don't go because the food is trucked in, not sold by farmers. Cayuga County should have a regional facility. There are too many small markets. The Union Springs Farmers Market is doing fairly well.