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The farmers deserve an explanation

The Ulster County Legislature's Economic Development Committee (legislators Hector Rodriguez, chair; Gary Bischoff, Wayne Harris, Mary F. Sheeley, Joseph P. Roberti and Catherine Terrizzi) owes all the farmers of Ulster County an explanation concerning its vote on Wednesday night, June 25, 2008, to recommend the specific exclusion of our property from being included in Agricultural District 2. Even though our property is currently being farmed, has been rigorously vetted and was unanimously recommended for inclusion by the Ulster County Farmland Protection Board, the committee members somehow decided that siding with the small but very vocal opposition would be easier on their political futures. But this isn't a vote against us, it is a total betrayal of FARMING IN ULSTER COUNTY and the Ag District program it has been entrusted to supervise.

In the meeting, the committee members called for no testimony from either the head of the Ulster County Planning Board or the chair of the Farmland Protection Board, both of whom were in attendance for that purpose. There was no discussion, not even a question asked. After only three minutes it voted and slammed the door on the FARMING COMMUNITY OF ULSTER COUNTY. The chair, Hector Rodriguez, is appointed by the legislature to the Farmland Protection Board. Its member, Wayne Harris, serves on another County Cornell Cooperative Extension Board. Before and since the meeting the committee has refused to take or return calls on the subject.

The Agricultural Districting program was initiated by the State of New York in order to provide protection to farmers. The right-to-farm in NYS extends to ALL FARMERS, not just those who grow crops that are somehow "acceptable" or are farmed in a way that doesn't annoy the neighbors. Ag Districts, always in agricultural zones, exist to protect FARMERS from unreasonable requests and requirements that inevitably come from NIMBY suburbanites who have chosen to build homes in those same agricultural zones. By bowing to the demands of this particular group, it makes a mockery of the program with which it has been entrusted and sets a precedent for the complete demise of FARMING in our county.

The Ag District program speaks to one basic concept -- the COMMERCIAL viability of the land in question. It speaks to the BUSINESS of farming. That is why the committee, THE ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE, and not some other, supervises the program. And it is accountable to the FARMERS OF ULSTER COUNTY for both their vote and their method of arriving at it.

What were they thinking?

That our property, part of a farm for 200 years, is too environmentally sensitive to be farmed?

That some unwritten doctrine exists disallowing farming on a property where a developer has built a residence?

ALL THE FARMERS OF ULSTER COUNTY deserve to hear an explanation.

We're waiting.

*Robert Ransom and Susan Wine
Rivendell Winery*