

# The Warwick Advertiser

**A decade of success for Warwick's farmland and open space has been a success**

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By Roger Gavan

Thousands of acres have been preserved while also bolstering the area's agri-tourism economy.



File photo by Roger Gavan Bellvale Dairy Farms: Today almost every resident is within a short drive or even a walk to a picturesque view of a farm, a mountain, a lake, a park or a forest.

**WARWICK** — In the late 1990s many residents and farmers were lukewarm about the idea and the expense of farmland preservation and quite a few were dead against it.

Although purchasing development rights had been successful in Long Island, local farmers were hard to convince.

In those days, development rights, which for the past 10 years have been funded by county, town and home sales, were purchased through an approved bond referendum. And in 1998, the Sweetman Farm became the first of many to sign on.

“Go up by the creamery on Mount Peter and lookout on a thousand acres of undeveloped property in the Warwick Valley,” said Al Buckbee, owner of Bellvale Farms and the second farmer to join the Property Development Rights (PDR) program. “That’s a magnificent view and a terrific benefit for all the people who live here. And I’m always amazed by the number of people who choose to run or walk along the picturesque roads adjacent to my farm instead of a track.”

Buckbee explained that PDR gave farmers an opportunity to do what they love and still benefit from the appreciation of their land.

## **The legacy of Seymour Gordon**

Much of Orange County's beauty has been preserved thanks to the work of the late Seymour Gordon, who was involved in the promotion of agriculture and open space preservation since the 1940s.

Gordon spearheaded the Warwick Purchase of Development Rights Alliance, which subsequently labored to achieve the authorizing of a bond issue that not only permanently preserved more than 2,500 acres of Warwick farmland and saved 17 farms at that time, but also resulted in other local improvements including the development of a Town beach at Greenwood Lake. There are now 21 farms preserved by the bond referendum. .

Gordon, who passed away in 2010, was also involved with Warwick Conservancy and he became a founding member of Sustainable Warwick.

Ten years ago this coming April, homebuyers in the Town of Warwick began paying a real estate transfer tax.

In November 2006, voters had approved the measure that called for 0.75 percent of the purchase price on new real estate sales be used by a Community Preservation Fund (CPF), which would preserve open space by buying the development rights to farms.

"I always believed the Community Preservation Transfer Tax would benefit Warwick and only increase the value of our community, making it an even more desirable place to live," said Warwick Supervisor Michael Sweeton. "Since it's passage by our residents the fund has allowed us to preserve more than 2,000 acres of farmland that to this day remain in farming.

"Many of these farms have diversified thereby bolstering our agri-tourism economy, adding millions to our local economy with very little added tax burden," the supervisor added. "Newcomers recognized the special place Warwick is and gladly contributed to continue the efforts of those who came before them."

Sweeton cited examples of agri-tourism including the popular Bellvale Farms Creamery, Pennings Orchard and Farm Market and other farms attracting numerous tourists during the apple and pumpkin-picking season.

### **Defining community**

Home sellers and real estate agents, however, were not pleased with the tax at that time. But although not everyone is on board, some now see the value of preserving open space as a unique quality of life consideration for buyers in this area compared to neighboring communities.

"I must admit that I was initially against the Warwick Preservation Fund Transfer Tax, not because I didn't believe in its merits, but because I am against most taxes in general," said Geoff Green, owner of the Green Team Home Selling System. "With that said, I did what I could to keep a lid on my opinion because I knew smart people were at the helm. Sure enough those smart people were right and it has turned out to be a huge success for Warwick. We all really owe a debt of gratitude for those who pushed it through."

Farsighted individuals, community organizations and public and private agencies played key roles in this success. And today almost every resident is within a short drive or even a walk to a picturesque view of a farm, a mountain, a lake, a park or a forest.

There are currently nine farms, totaling approximately 770 acres, in various stages of land preservation.

"Warwick's bold and far reaching efforts to preserve open space have been a win-win proposition," said Town of Warwick Historian Professor Richard Hull. "Through extraordinary foresight, we have saved critical aquifers, lakes and streams, productive farmlands, natural forestlands and wetlands and scenic landscapes for ours and future generations. These visionary and synergistic efforts have strengthened our sense of common identity and are helping to make our community a safer, healthier, happier and more beautiful place in which to live and to raise our families."