



NYS Legislative Commission on Rural Resources

Inside This Issue:

### Thoughts From the Chair

Welcome to the latest edition of *Rural Futures*! It's been a busy year at the Legislative Commission on Rural Resources, and I'm proud to say that our efforts have raised awareness throughout state government about the importance of rural New York and the challenges our rural communities face. In fact, I believe we may eventually look back on 2023 as a turning point when all levels of government began to join forces in support of our rural communities.

At the state level, our first-ever Rural Resources Fair in the State Capitol was a huge success, bringing together dozens of rural organizations for networking and outreach to legislators and government staff. Former Senator CeCe Tkaczyk brought a lamb named "Little Moo" to charm everyone, and several NYC legislators told me they really had their eyes opened by the exhibits on beekeeping, fiber processing, rural health, education, emergency services, and more.

Outreach like this helped us secure record levels of funding in the budget for agriculture and rural land preservation. And since, the state announced new investments in regional economic development, including several grants to expand much-needed food processing capacity, provide repair services to farmers, and support family farm and agritourism operations.

At the local level, I continue to be astounded by the amount of creative thinking and volunteer energy that goes into making sure rural New Yorkers have the services they need. I'm always humbled to present awards to volunteer firefighters and EMS workers, who put in untold hours of service over the course of decades in order to protect our communities. Just this morning, I had the opportunity to meet with a very diligent and knowledgeable watershed council from my district and talk with a representative from the food bank in Cayuga County, who has a pilot project to create "food lockers" with cold storage capacity so that people in rural areas can get access to food from food pantries on their own schedules.

And finally, at the federal level, I've been learning about how President Biden's Inflation Reduction Act is bringing down rural health care costs. Under the provisions of the new law, about 65% of rural residents can get health insurance premiums for free, and many others will be able to get insurance for as little as \$50/month. This could go a long way toward closing the gap in coverage between rural and urban areas.

I hope you enjoy the articles in this issue. One topic you can read about in this edition is rural elections. Our new elections calendar requires petitioning to get on the ballot to occur during the winter months. This is challenging for a host of reasons and can be especially onerous - and even treacherous - in rural areas. I'm hoping in the next session we can address this legislatively, possibly through two bills I carry: S.304, to reduce the number of signatures needed in rural counties, and S.241, to create an option for online petitioning, as is done in some other states.

Please reach out to Corey and Steve at the LCRR with your ideas, questions, and suggestions for topics you'd like to see us cover in the future.



*Rachel May*  
 Senator Rachel May

Chair, Legislative Commission on Rural Resources

Thoughts From the Chair ..... 1

Reflections From the Co-chair ..... 2

LCRR: 2023 Updates ..... 3

The Institute for Rural Vitality at SUNY Cobleskill:  
 Economic Vibrance in Rural New York ..... 4

NY Fiber Trail:  
 Driving Business to Rural Fiber Farms ..... 5

The Potential of Small Grains ..... 6

Clean Energy Construction in  
 New York's Rural Areas ..... 7

A Year in the Life of a Rural Board of Elections ..... 8

NY Forward: Renewed Promise in  
 Our Small Towns and Villages ..... 10

Grants ..... 11

Upcoming Events ..... 11

## Fall 2023 Rural Futures

### NEWS OF INTEREST ABOUT RURAL NEW YORK STATE

A Publication of the NYS Legislative Commission on Rural Resources

The NYS Legislative Commission on Rural Resources is a joint bipartisan commission of the State Legislature with a mission to promote the viability of rural communities.



**Senator Rachel May**  
**Senate Chair (48th)**

**Senate Members:**

Rachel May, Chair (48th)

Michelle Hinchey (41st)

Lea Webb (52nd)

Pamela A. Helming, Ranking Member (54th)

Mark Walczyk (49th)



**Assemblyman**  
**Angelo Santabarbara**  
**Assembly Co-chair (111th)**

**Assembly Members:**

Angelo Santabarbara, Co-chair (111th)

Carrie Woerner (113th)

Philip A. Palmesano (132nd)

**Staff:**

Corey Mosher, Executive Director  
Steve Gamache, Deputy Director

Tel: 518-455-2631

E-mail: [ruralres@nysenate.gov](mailto:ruralres@nysenate.gov)

@RuralNYS

@nysruralresources

@RuralNYS

## Reflections From the Co-chair

Across the expanse of New York, a tapestry of rural communities unravels, each woven with its own unique history and distinct needs. Pledging our commitment to the future of these enclaves requires us to confront the enduring challenges that have plagued them for generations. Despite the distinctive hurdles that set rural territories apart from bustling urban landscapes, there is a palpable momentum propelling us toward progress.

Often, the sparsity of residents within these rural realms accentuates the array of difficulties they encounter. These challenges culminate in barriers to accessing crucial health and legal services, attaining high-speed broadband connectivity, and ensuring sufficient emergency medical services (EMS) staffing. Moreover, the reverberations of noise pollution from local railroads reverberate more profoundly in these regions compared to their metropolitan counterparts.

At the heart of many of these quandaries lies the financial shortfall that has cast a shadow over these areas. This Commission has identified this issue and embarked on a journey to rectify it. Our collaborative efforts have borne fruit in securing the requisite funding to bolster rural ambulance services, address concerns regarding EMS staffing, facilitate wider accessibility to legal services, and broaden the reach of high-speed broadband. Charting our course ahead, our focus remains resolute in establishing zones of tranquility along railroads to mitigate the cacophony that burdens rural communities.

Steering the helm as co-chair of the Legislative Commission on Rural Resources, I am steadfast in my dedication to enriching the quality of life for the rural denizens of New York. As time unfurls, we have achieved strides in recent years and must continue along this trajectory toward a more radiant and promising future.



**Assemblyman Angelo Santabarbara**  
Co-chair, Legislative Commission on Rural Resources



For updates on our work, visit our website:

<https://www.nysenate.gov/committees/legislative-commission-rural-resources>

## LCRR: 2023 Updates

By LCRR Staff: Corey Mosher, Executive Director, and Steve Gamache, Deputy Director

Created by the Legislature in 1982, the Legislative Commission on Rural Resources is Albany's only independent body focused on the needs of rural New York. The past year has seen significant changes and encouraging developments for us.

In August 2022, there was the first of two staffing changes. Steve Gamache joined the Commission as the communications director after teaching middle school English for twelve years. He was born and raised in Upstate New York and studied English at Fordham University, later receiving a master's in education from The College of Saint Rose in Albany. His career in the classroom spans three states (Louisiana, Massachusetts, and New York), and in 2019, he earned national recognition with the Milken Educator Award for his work in turnaround schools. He combines his background in research and writing with a passion for problem-solving and public service in his current role as deputy director. He also sits on the Professional Standards and Practices Board for Teaching at the NYS Department of Education.

The final staffing piece came together in January 2023 with the appointment of Corey Mosher as the Commission's executive director. Growing up in a military family, he spent time living in different parts of the country before beginning work on his family farm in Bouckville, NY, where he spent 20 years cultivating crops and a family. Eventually he sought opportunities away from the farm, joining the Cornell LEAD program, where he found an aptitude for communication and leadership. During this time, Corey also joined the New York Vegetable Growers Association Board to increase awareness of challenges facing today's fruit and vegetable growers. After graduating from LEAD, he took a leadership role in the Madison County Cooperative Extension, overseeing a merger with the regional agricultural team to expand resources to local farmers. He later helped to introduce barley as a crop to allow farmers in Central New York to diversify and led conversations on barley's potential to transform New York's beverage supply chain.

As the 2023 Legislative Session began, we began meeting with stakeholders and groups from around the state during the week and attending conferences or doing site visits on session off-days. As we forged connections with new groups and individuals as well as others who had long histories with the Commission, our knowledge of rural issues in New York deepened.



In March, we organized and hosted the first Rural Resources Fair in Albany, where over 20 groups from across New York tabled and interacted with legislators and staff, raising the profile of not only the Commission, but the needs of our rural communities. Downstate members may have come to sneak a peek of "Little Moo," but they quickly learned about a host of rural concerns from agriculture to health care to education and so much more. We're looking forward to hosting the event again in 2024, and we are already brainstorming ways to make it bigger and better!

The 2023-2024 Budget saw record spending on local agricultural programs, and we like to think that we helped to play a part in that with our advocacy. We also created Rural Resources' first budget summary, a document that highlights items in the budget that impact rural New York. We distributed copies to members and staff in Albany, and it is available on our social media accounts and our website, which you can find on page 2 of this newsletter.

This past summer, we continued doing our homework, reviewing legislation and budget items while strategizing for January, which will be here sooner than we think. As you can see, we have also revived our newsletter, *Rural Futures*, which we are hoping to once again distribute on a regular basis, much like the Commission has done in the past.

Working with Senator May and the other members on the Commission has been a true honor. We remain optimistic about our work in Albany to serve the residents of New York's rural communities, and please feel free to reach out to us - you can find our contact information on the previous page.

## The Institute for Rural Vitality at SUNY Cobleskill: Economic Vibrance in Rural New York

*Article Courtesy of Jason Politi, Director of Communications at SUNY Cobleskill*

María Bído arrived at the Institute for Rural Vitality in the waning days of the COVID-19 pandemic, unemployed but hoping to realize her dream of one day owning her own business. At the time, many small businesses and family-owned restaurants were still recovering, and starting a new venture posed unprecedented challenges. Today, María owns and operates Mía's Cocina, a full-service catering company in New York City and Schoharie County, providing authentic Puerto Rican cuisine for weddings, parties, and corporate events. María also offers cooking classes and has been showcased on news outlets like CBS and Fox.

As María notes, her success as an entrepreneur is a result of the opportunities that SUNY Cobleskill provided. "With the help of the Institute, Mía's Cocina was born, and I was able to prepare my food and sell it at the Sharon Springs Harvest Festival! I had an unbelievably successful weekend and realized this was exactly what I needed to continue doing. The Institute for Rural Vitality has supported me and my business venture every step of the way."



*María Bído cooking.*

Since its inception in 2018, the Institute has created a strong record of providing a wide range of support services at no cost for new, developing, and established farm and food entrepreneurs, intending to help launch, grow, and sustain businesses. María's story is just one of many. To date, the Institute has served more than 620 farms and food businesses and helped launch more than 70 new products to the local and regional food market.

In addition to financial and technical assistance, client partners of the Institute have access to SUNY Cobleskill's shared-use facilities, including: a Dairy Processing Center; a USDA-certified Meat and Fish Processing Laboratory; four certified kitchens; an operating bistro; a Taste New York retail store; food packaging, brewing, and distilling laboratories; and multi-purpose training rooms and workspaces.

With robust student involvement, the Institute creates boundless new immersive learning opportunities both on and off campus. Each of its three centers complements SUNY Cobleskill's academic programs to support research opportunities for faculty and students, as well as internships and applied learning opportunities.

The Institute has been raising its profile steadily across its brief history and was designated as a USDA Agriculture Innovation Center (AIC) in 2021, one of only three such centers in the United States at the time.

The AIC delivers comprehensive business development services through Farm & Food Business Incubator and Accelerator programs. These initiatives are funded by a grant from the U.S. Department of Agriculture, totaling \$1.2 million, supporting efforts to better equip growers and producers in the Mohawk Valley in addressing the farming industry's diversification and profitability challenges.

The Institute continues to open new doors for those like María in not only reaching their full business potential but also wider consumer markets. In July 2023, the Institute was designated as the Entrepreneurship Assistance Center of the Mohawk Valley under a grant from Empire State Development. This represents the Institute's expansion beyond its focus on farm and food entrepreneurship to serving regional business owners across all industry sectors. Executive Director Dr. Scott Ferguson is optimistic about the program, its mission, and its recent advancements: "We welcome the continued expansion and ability to have a positive impact on the businesses of the Mohawk Valley as part of the Institute's growth strategy."

Beyond offering training and facilities, the Institute also organizes events for its client partners. This past spring was its first annual Empire State Entrepreneur Expo, featuring 25 regional vendors showcasing more than 85 products ranging from beverages to dairy products, meats to maple, and more. The public was invited to taste, try, and buy the products. Vendors also had the opportunity to explore possible partnerships with food distributors. Mark your calendars: the next Empire State Entrepreneur Expo will be held in Cobleskill's Prentice Hall on May 10, 2024.

With its continued growth and expansion, its national recognition, and its abundance of support services, the Institute for Rural Vitality at SUNY Cobleskill is sure to continue developing rural New York's budding entrepreneurs for the foreseeable future.

For more information on The Institute for Rural Vitality, visit: <https://www.cobleskill.edu/institute/index.aspx>.

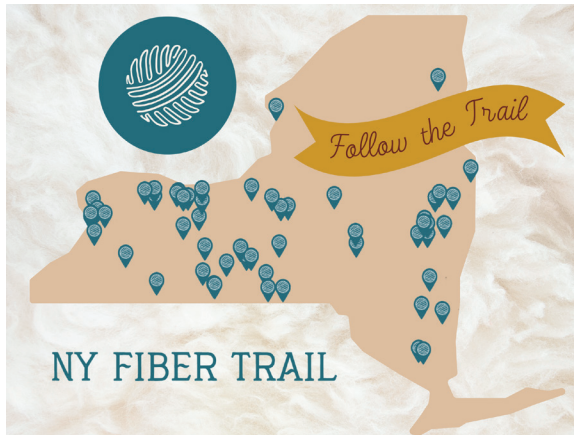
SUNY Cobleskill | INSTITUTE FOR RURAL VITALITY

*The Institute for Rural Vitality at SUNY Cobleskill addresses the region's most pressing issues to develop and enact sustainable solutions that enhance community and economic vibrance in rural New York.*

## NY Fiber Trail: Driving Business to Rural Fiber Farms

*Article Courtesy of Jessie McNaughton and Pam Renfro, Co-organizers of the NY Fiber Trail*

Driving through rural New York, you may spot the occasional herd of sheep or alpaca dotting the lush hillsides. Unless you're already a fiber fanatic, you may not be familiar with the vibrant industry these farms are part of. If you do love all things fiber, you may already include yarn and fiber shopping in any trip itinerary and are always excited to find somewhere new to visit. Finding fiber farms that are open for visits can be difficult since farmers have a never-ending to-do list and little time for website maintenance, marketing, and social media.



Inspired by the many local fiber shops and producers in the state, Pam Renfro and I knew there was a way to solve this problem and connect customers to farms and shops. With the NY Fiber Trail, we set out to use our combined passions and resources to connect fiber fans with all of the amazing producers and retailers our state boasts.

The NY Fiber Trail is a self-guided tourism experience based around fiber producers, studios and retailers, and runs from May 15 to October 31. Customers can visit [www.nyfibertrail.com](http://www.nyfibertrail.com) to see a map and listings of 57 fiber-centric businesses and plan trips around them. Each listing has a description of the businesses' offerings, hours of operation, and suggestions on what to do, where to stay, and favorite local eats.

At a customer's first stop on the trail, they receive a passport. They collect passport stamps at each stop, and after October 31, they submit a photo of their stamped passport for a chance to win a \$300, \$150, or \$75 gift card to the participating business of their choice.

Feedback from visitors has been wonderful. Anna P. from Rochester planned a weekend trip to Ithaca to visit Laughing Goat Fiber Farm. With her two young kids, she got to meet Lisa's herd of angora goats, bottle feed goat kids, and watch the herd frolic to a new pasture. Her experience was unforgettable. Walking away with amazing memories and yarn from the farm, and spending a weekend visiting Ithaca's attractions and businesses was an ideal NY Fiber Trail success story.

The feedback from businesses has been amazing as well. Most farms that have shared data reported an increase in new customers, with an average spend of \$55-\$85 dollars. Battenkill Fiber Mill in Greenwich, NY has seen many folks from outside the region visiting for the first time. They have seen a boost in sales, and visitors are staying overnight and spending time and money in the community.

The data collected by us and Lift Bridge Yarns is incredibly encouraging:

- At Lift Bridge Yarns, 250+ passports were given out, 18+ non-local trail visitors (not all visits were recorded at checkout) and an average of \$60.45 spent.
- NY Fiber Trail-specific data: 3,500 passports sent to participating businesses; as of this writing, [www.nyfibertrail.com](http://www.nyfibertrail.com) has 3,732 unique visitors and 20,508 page views: participating businesses have doubled since its launch, from 28 to 58; 35 shops, 17 farms, and 6 studios.
- Funding donated from outside agencies: \$2,500 from the Empire Sheep Producers Association, \$500 from the Fairport Perinton Merchants Association.

The funding, data, and feedback we have received thus far are wonderful, and we are confident that this is just the beginning of many years of driving business to the many amazing rural fiber producers in New York. The NY Fiber Trail website will stay up all year long as a directory of NYS fiber businesses, and the passport event will happen each year from May through October.

If you are interested in following the trail, visit [www.nyfibertrail.com](http://www.nyfibertrail.com) to find a farm, studio, or shop near you! If you know of a farm that would like to be added to the trail, please have them visit <https://www.nyfibertrail.com/member-shop-faq>.

**Jessie McNaughton** is co-organizer of the NY Fiber Trail and co-owns Lift Bridge Yarns in Fairport, NY ([www.liftbridgeyarns.com](http://www.liftbridgeyarns.com)). She is an avid knitter, mom to two amazing kids, and has a passion for local fiber and boosting other small businesses.

**Pam Renfro** is co-organizer of the NY Fiber Trail and the Fairport Perinton Partnership Admin. She is a novice knitter with a knack for helping launch new ventures and a passion for increasing tourism and promoting the region and state she loves.



*Two visitors at Laughing Goat Fiber Farm in Ithaca.*

*Photo Courtesy of Anna Powell*

## The Potential of Small Grains

By Corey Mosher, Executive Director, Legislative Commission on Rural Resources

“Sustainability” has become a much sought-after characteristic in the everyday systems that make up our society, and this includes our agricultural practices. We want to make sure that our farms are sustainable — that they continue to produce food in the long-term — while also doing this in a way that is environmentally responsible. However, to stay viable, creating environmentally-sustainable farms cannot ignore the fact that financial sustainability plays an equally important role. When we look to farms to combat climate change, the financial viability of New York farms is often unaccounted for, or at least the importance is overlooked. This is a mistake because healthy, sustainable farms absolutely benefit the environment — and they don’t have to suffer a financial loss in the process.

One specific pathway to increase the financial viability of farms, as well as promote environmental stewardship, is to blur the line between fall-planted small grains and cover crops.

### Financial Viability: The Market Opportunities

Small grains such as wheat, barley, and rye have always been a part of New York agriculture. But with the increased prevalence of corn and soybeans as an animal feed source, the amount of small grain acres grown across the Nation as a whole has diminished significantly. With New York’s access to fresh water and our proximity to large consumer populations, New York farms are well-positioned for small grain market opportunities and have the chance to assume a leadership role in the region that was once considered the breadbasket of the Nation. Current mills in our state have the market share and access to demand. They are hungry for new New York-grown channels on the supply side. Today, New York farmers are contributing a very small percentage to this supply chain, but have the capacity to meet the demand of tomorrow’s economy if they were to more widely adopt the planting of small grains.

### Small Grains and Environmental Sustainability

Traditionally, small grains, when planted in the fall, are only considered cover crops when they are destroyed the following March or April to make way for that season’s crop. If that fall’s small grain crop goes to harvest, usually at some point in July or August, it is not considered a cover crop by the USDA definition, thus it is not eligible for cover crop incentives. In one respect, this distinction is correct because you are not returning nutrients back into the soil when the small grain is left to mature and is harvested.

But on the whole, is this the right calculation to make? Are the overall benefits of small grains accurately accounted for in this comparison to cover crops and their relationship to soil health?

There is more to the story: the benefit of small grains does not just end when it is harvested. It is the totality of what a farmer’s crop rotation becomes when it consists of small grains. Now let’s say we’ve planted our small grains as a cover crop and have allowed them to go to harvest in July or August. Generally, we cannot put in another crop that would make it to harvest that same season. In other words, in our northern climate, we do not have the ability to double-crop as other areas do. However, the ability to interseed, or plant a secondary cover crop in an existing small grain crop, is the reason we can place higher positive environmental value on small grains. It is in the secondary cover crop (the small grain being the primary) that the true value to sustained soil health comes through by mitigating soil erosion and returning nutrients to the soil.

One more point about an interseeded cover crop. I have watched interseeded crops of clover thrive and do much more than bring nutrients back to the soil; they provide habitats for pollinators, for instance. In the fall, when populations of monarch butterflies are passing through or starting their migration south, clover fields are teeming with monarchs and many other pollinators.

This environmental stewardship and the increase in market opportunities for New York-grown crops fulfills the requirement that true success in sustainability does not mean compromising the well-being of the environment or the future viability of New York farms.

If you’re interested in learning more on this topic, you can visit <https://cals.cornell.edu/field-crops/small-grains> and <https://www.newyorksoilhealth.org/resources/cover-crops/>.



*Wheat field in Central New York.*

## Clean Energy Construction in New York's Rural Areas

*Article Courtesy of Jeff Jones, Communications Consultant with ACE NY*



*A wind turbine at Bluestone Wind.  
Photo Courtesy of Jeff Jones*

In the near future, blades will begin spinning at Bluestone Wind, a new 28-turbine wind energy project built by Northland Power located in the eastern Broome County towns of Windsor and Stanford. Stretching across six miles of rural hilltops, each turbine has the capacity to generate 4.2 megawatts of power. In all, the clean electricity generated can power some 45,000 homes.

But power isn't the only story. On a recent tour of the site, organized by the Alliance for Clean Energy New York (ACE NY), visitors got an in-depth look at the latest technology. We also heard from project developers, local labor leaders, and entrepreneurs about the economic impact the wind farm has had on the local and upstate economy.

Several years in the making, the project generated 310 craft and 20 onsite management jobs. Of those 330 jobs, 225 were sourced from Southern Tier union halls. According to the company, more than \$14.5 million was spent on goods and services procured locally, with an additional \$3-plus million spent statewide on wood and stone products. With the giant turbine blades coming in through the Port of Oswego, local benefits there totaled more than \$2 million. And locally, over \$52 million has been committed over the next 30 years to landowners who host the infrastructure. Recent beneficiaries of siting include a local summer camp that won't be put up for sale after all. And while these big numbers are great, we will not forget the excellent turkey and bacon sandwiches — along with other great vegetarian choices and salads — we were served at lunch by two local entrepreneurs who used the opportunity presented by the Bluestone Project to create a new catering business in the area. (Somebody has to feed all of those workers!)

Creating new jobs and entrepreneurial opportunities are increasingly a part of clean energy development across New York. The state is steadily moving forward to achieve goals mandated in laws like the Climate Leadership and Community Protection Act (CLCPA), passed by the Legislature and signed by the Governor in 2019. At this time, there are more than 120 new wind, solar, and other renewable power-based projects approved. While the goals are ambitious, training and support — especially for workers transitioning from previous jobs, entering the workforce for the first time, or coming from disadvantaged communities — presents both opportunities and obstacles. One organization focused on addressing these concerns is the Schenectady-based Social Enterprise and Training Center (SEAT).

Jennifer Lawrence, the group's Founder and CEO, spoke about this at a state legislative briefing organized by ACE NY at the Capitol in March. SEAT is known for its work building LEED-certified housing in disadvantaged communities using new, mostly young workers. As she explained at the session, it takes a lot of support to get a trained worker, whether it's in construction, clean energy, or other economic sectors, fully ready for the job market. Her program has evolved to include services such as childcare and ride-sharing. According to Lawrence, this is important in both urban and rural areas, and in the case of grid-scale renewable energy projects, most of the construction work is in rural areas. With jobs that create access to childcare and alleviate transportation needs, it's a win-win for workers and families in Upstate New York.

The majority of the clean energy projects being developed across Upstate New York are solar (downstate and on Long Island, the focus is on offshore wind energy projects). This has also created new opportunities, both for communities and workers. An emerging opportunity area is in what is known as agrivoltaics. Increasingly, research, programs, and incentives are being developed to link farmland preservation and solar siting. In the most recent legislative session, \$1 million was set aside for Cornell University to invest in agrivoltaic research. The measure, sponsored by Assemblymember Anna Kelles and Senator Michelle Hinchey, will help New York catch up to states like Maine, Massachusetts, and Colorado, where combined agriculture and solar projects are already being established. Here again, state clean energy investments are being made that will both advance the economy, protect farmland from sprawling development, and require the establishment of meaningful training and support programs.

As we approach our clean-energy targets, we can anticipate forging a brighter future that consists of more economic development in our rural communities.



*A tour of Bluestone Wind.  
Photo Courtesy of Jeff Jones*

## A Year in the Life of a Rural Board of Elections

*Article Courtesy of Beth McLaughlin, Democratic Commissioner at Warren County Board of Elections*

People will often ask, "What do you do the rest of the year if Election Day is only one day?"

Well, our work starts in January. We begin by sending notices to clerks for offices that are up for election. We then contact poll sites with any necessary updates. In the past, we have had poll sites go under construction, especially in schools during June's primary. That situation raises its own set of questions: *Where are they going to put us now? The hallway? The cafeteria? Where are the outlets located? Is there a jack to plug in our router? Is there an accessible entrance? Is there enough parking? Do we have to find an alternate site?*

Additionally, other hurdles may present themselves, and we have to adapt. As an example, a 2022 change to the election law calls for an early voting site in the county's largest city. We have one city in Warren County: Glens Falls. This is a huge challenge. We searched high and low, reached out to many establishments that we thought might be a possibility. It is hard to find a reasonable site that will give up their space for nine consecutive days once a year, and sometimes as often as two-to-three times per year. Currently, we have struck up a partnership with and are located in City Hall – not ideal, but doable. It won't be an ideal space for 2024, which will require some problem solving. We have also kept our original early voting site in Lake George. Therefore, we run and staff two early voting sites.

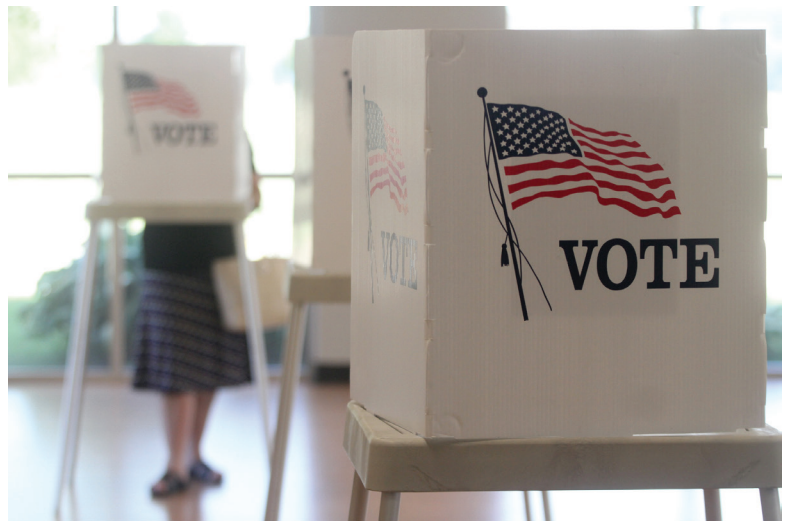
Next up, calendars and schedules are put into place, knowing more than likely they will change. Per diem staff is appointed and trained. Trucks are reserved for the delivery of the voting machines and supplies. This in itself can be an obstacle. In years past, we would go out to bid for moving companies to do this chore, which was costing the county thousands of dollars and creating many headaches. We decided to use our per diem staff (who followed the moving company anyway to ensure proper delivery) and rental trucks in order to save money. As it turns out, finding local truck rental companies with available trucks (while other neighboring counties have the same need at the same time) is difficult. We typically drive to Albany to pick up two trucks. Many times, we get there and there is only one truck for us. We have been given a refrigerator truck a few times, and in another case, maybe we get the truck, get it all loaded up, go to our first stop, and the lift gate doesn't work! Still, the show must go on.

While all of this is happening, we are simultaneously running a voter outreach program. Each January, voter registration forms, absentee applications, early voting information, and any other pertinent details for the current year's elections are sent to schools, post offices, libraries, town clerks, nursing homes, and assisted living facilities.

Additionally, we offer our schools a voter information presentation. In this program we cover: how to register to vote; pre-registering students at the age of 16 and 17; how to apply for an absentee ballot while at college or serving in the armed forces; and how to fill out ballots properly and have them successfully cast. Students truly enjoy this. To practice, they get to vote for their favorite superhero. When students learn about write-ins, they like to write in the name of a teacher or bus driver. We teach them that by age 17, they are able to work as polling inspectors. With this program we have gained a few younger poll workers!

Preparations for petition season begin in February. Packets are prepared with all the information and forms a candidate needs to gain ballot access. The signing of designating petitions starts in late February or early March. Candidates begin trudging through the snow, ice, wind, and rain with their walking lists, where houses may be miles apart, to obtain the necessary signatures to appear on the ballot months from now in November. We often hear from candidates and committee members about how difficult this time of year is to gather signatures. They tell us stories of slipping down driveways and sidewalks or getting stuck in the mud.

Come April, those petitions are filed in our office. Some time-stamped petitions have been thoroughly soaked or covered in mud. We process all petitions and triple-check them to be sure that all of the necessary paperwork has been filed. Next up is independent petition time. These are filed in May. The small towns in Upstate New York see many independent petitions. Candidates may fear losing a primary election, or they just want to have their names appear on the ballot twice.





The month of May also brings school elections. This is a challenge because the school budget vote occurs during the time we are preparing for June's primary. Our hope is to remain good partners with our local schools by helping them out with their elections, which ideally facilitates our use of their accessible space for our polling locations. With increasing safety concerns for area schools, however, using schools as a polling location has grown more complicated.

After canvassing and certifying the June primary, completing audits, conducting any manual hand count and all the surveys the State Board of Elections requires, we pick up the pieces and start working on the backload of voter registrations that were too late for the primary.

As summer continues, we begin training poll workers for several weeks. Poll worker training is evolving with the introduction of new elements, such as electronic poll books (ePBs), in 2019 for early voting. For the most part, the poll workers love working with the ePBs. After one of these classes, however, we had one poll worker (a quick reminder: the average age of a poll worker is 77) close up their poll book and say "Yeah, I quit!" On-demand ballot printing was also introduced alongside the ePBs for early voting in 2019. This



ensures the voter receives the proper ballot to cast their vote. This is another aspect that we have to train poll workers for, and presently the annual poll worker training class is three hours.

With the success of on-demand ballot printing for early voting in 2019 and 2020, we decided to go entirely with on-demand ballot printing for Election Day 2021. This saved us money from having to order excessive pre-printed ballots for all of the registered voters in the county who are eligible to vote. This cuts down on the thousands of unused ballots that were recycled each year. Of course, this brings a new set of concerns: the cost of ink, paper jams, or another technological malfunction. *Do we have a sufficient number of printers for busy election years, such as the looming 2024 Presidential Election?* We realized after the 2022 midterms that even having 55 on-demand ballot printers is not quite enough for the potential

voter turnout for a presidential primary. In 2020, I'm proud to say that Warren County had 77% turnout!

July brings the dreaded budget time and looking at the next year's calendar. *What will the year bring? Two elections? Three elections?* I advocate to the county's budget team what is needed financially to run the Board of Elections, or I might ask for additional staff. That last point is a big one. After three years of asking, we got the positions we had been looking for, but they weren't funded. *What!?* Back to committee we went, and, with success, we got our positions and the necessary funding. We will be prepared for a busy 2024. Receiving grants from the State Board of Elections has been a big help.

In August, we have a little breather. But by September and October, the hustle starts — preparing for the general election. This flurry involves finalizing the ballot, getting absentees ready to hit the mail, testing the machines, scheduling poll workers, delivering voting equipment, and setting up polling locations. Absentee ballots soon start to return. Examining absentee envelopes is quite time-consuming, and if curable defects are found, the voter is notified within three days.

November: Election Day is here! *Are we ready? How many poll workers are going to call out? Is the person assigned to unlock polling locations at 5 am going to oversleep?* Once the first ballots are cast and the phones stop ringing, we take a breath and hope for a smooth day. After receiving the results from the polling locations and posting results to the website, we hope to be home in bed before midnight, because we are back at it the next morning going through the steps to recanvass and certify the election.

If you think your life flies by, work in an election office for a year and see how fast that year goes!

A saying hangs on our wall: "It always seems impossible until it's done". And we always get it done!

## NY Forward: Renewed Promise in Our Small Towns and Villages



### NY Forward

*By Steve Gamache, Deputy Director of the Legislative Commission on Rural Resources*

Sitting in a valley just south of Owasco Lake, you will find the village of Moravia surrounded by farmland and forests. About thirty minutes by car from the nearby cities of Auburn, Ithaca, and Cortland, Moravia's downtown is a hub of business and social gatherings for locals and the immediate neighboring rural communities. Already possessing the organic small-town charm that is characteristic of many upstate communities, it was the recent recipient of \$2.25 million from the NY Forward Program. The funding is designed to promote downtown recovery and redevelopment through investment, positioning small towns, villages, and hamlets to benefit economically and culturally from the opportunities that a thriving downtown provides. With the new investment, Moravia hopes to draw people from across southern Cayuga County (and beyond) who are seeking to conduct business or find recreational experiences.

Created in 2022 by Governor Hochul, NY Forward has administered \$100 million in revitalization funds to roughly two-dozen small-town communities thus far. The program grew out of the NY Department of State's Downtown Revitalization Initiative (DRI), which was launched in 2016 to serve large, densely-populated urban areas. After the success of DRI in creating opportunities for New York residents, businesses, and visitors in our larger cities, the model was adapted for our smaller, more rural communities, and NY Forward was born.

With the 2023-2024 Budget, NY Forward acquired its second round of funding, appropriating \$100 million for the program. But how does it determine where that money goes?

It starts with New York's Regional Economic Development Councils (REDCs), each one representing one of the 10 Economic Development Regions in the state.<sup>1</sup> Each REDC is an economic advisory board consisting of public members as well as community, business, and academic leaders. The REDCs start receiving applications for funding from small communities in late summer or early fall. The members of this board apply their specialized knowledge of local issues and assets to help direct the investment in the most effective way to support job creation and economic growth. The REDC nominates the communities to receive the award and can choose to allocate the money in one of two ways; it can either a) administer two awards for \$4.5 million each or b) give one award of \$4.5 million in addition to two smaller awards for \$2.25 million each. During round 1 of the program, most REDCs chose the latter option with the hopes of spreading out and maximizing the economic returns in the region.

Ideal communities for the NY Forward Program are walkable, and they are smaller and less dense than New York's largest urban centers. Award recipients typically have amenities that serve the immediate local community, and they exhibit a small-town charm centered around niche-based tourism, such as antique shopping or agriculture. The small projects that these communities are eligible for are focused on renovation and redevelopment as opposed to new construction, with the intent of utilizing the assets that already exist in a geographic area.

An example of playing to a community's strengths can be found deep in the North Country along the St. Lawrence River; the village of Cape Vincent was another recent recipient of NY Forward funding. Commercial and residential, Downtown Cape Vincent has a centralized public green space that is used for concerts and other events. With the \$4.5 million awarded in redevelopment money, they are seeking to promote tourism into the community by improving an international port of entry and connecting residents and visitors more directly to the waterfront. Also on the agenda is developing mixed-use and multi-story buildings. Due to the buzz of recent funding, the village has attracted a number of additional public and private investments, demonstrating how state funds can provide a spark for the rebirth of our small towns and villages.

Stories like this are sure to become more commonplace, as the program is currently processing its second round of applications, and awards are being announced on a rolling basis. For a list of communities already seeing an impact through NY Forward, you can visit: <https://www.ny.gov/ny-forward/ny-forward-round-one-communities>.

The next planning process starts in March, and there is one-to-one technical assistance available to communities who are considering applying to the program. To get more info or to find out if your community is a good fit for this program, see their website: <https://www.ny.gov/programs/ny-forward>.

---

<sup>1</sup>Capital Region, Central New York, Finger Lakes, Long Island, Mid-Hudson, Mohawk Valley, New York City, North Country, Southern Tier, and Western New York

## GRANTS

### Energy Improvements in Rural or Remote Areas

Agency: U.S. Department of Energy

Type: Grant

Source: Federal

Website: <https://www.energy.gov/oced/energy-improvements-rural-or-remote-areas-0>

Description: The Energy Improvements in Rural or Remote Areas (ERA) program seeks to improve the resilience, reliability, and affordability of energy systems in communities across the country with 10,000 or fewer people. The ERA program will leverage DOE's expertise and experience in resilient energy solutions to modernize electric generation facilities, address disproportionately high electricity costs, and support new economic opportunities in rural and remote communities.

**Amount: \$500,000-\$5 million**

Matching Requirements: None

Application Period: Applications due October 12, 2023

Eligibility: Industry partners and other for-profit entities; utilities; institutions of higher education; state and local governments; community-based organizations and other non-profit entities; tribal groups; environmental groups; and cities, towns, or unincorporated areas with populations of fewer than 10,000 inhabitants.

Contact: [OCED@hq.doe.gov](mailto:OCED@hq.doe.gov)

### USDA Rural Development Water & Waste Disposal Loan & Grant Program

Agency: USDA

Type: Loan/Grant

Source: Federal

Website:

<https://www.rd.usda.gov/programs-services/water-environmental-programs/water-waste-disposal-loan-grant-program/ny>

Description: This program provides funding for clean and reliable drinking water systems, sanitary sewage disposal, sanitary solid waste disposal, and storm water drainage to households and businesses in eligible rural areas.

**Amount: Long-term, low-interest loans with up to a 40-year payback period. If funds are available, a grant may be combined with a loan if necessary to keep user costs reasonable.**

Matching/Special Requirements: See website for details.

Application Period: Rolling

Eligibility: Most state and local government entities (rural areas and towns with populations of 10,000 or less), private nonprofits, federally-recognized tribes

Contact: [brenda.smith@ny.usda.gov](mailto:brenda.smith@ny.usda.gov)

### John May Farm Safety Fund

Source: Public-Private Partnership

Website: <https://www.nycamh.org/programs-and-services/john-may-farm-safety-fund.php>

Description: The John May Farm Safety Fund provides up to \$5,000 in matching financial assistance to small- and mid-sized farm operations for repairs and upgrades that make for a safer workplace. Examples of past projects: unsafe and outdated electrical wiring, secure footing and drainage, animal handling equipment (squeeze chutes, headlocks), and silo ladders. A free, non-regulatory, and confidential safety walkthrough of the farm will be conducted by a safety specialist for all eligible applications as part of the approval process. The program does not fund costs incurred prior to approval. Once notified of the approval and estimated award amount, the farmer starts the project, with the understanding that the actual award payment is made upon completion of the project.

**Matching Requirements: Awards will not exceed 50% of the estimated total cost of the project, with a maximum award amount of \$5,000.**

Special Requirements: A free, non-regulatory, and confidential safety walkthrough of the farm will be conducted by a safety specialist for all eligible applications as part of the approval process.

Application Period: N/A

Eligibility: Residents of New York, full or part-time active farmers, and annual gross receipts between \$10,000-\$350,000 or a dairy farm that has fewer than 1,000 milking cows

Contact: 800.343.7527 or [jmfsf@bassett.org](mailto:jmfsf@bassett.org)

## Upcoming Events



### Cider Week

**Dates: October 6-15**

Venue: Various Locations

Description: Founded in 2010, this biannual celebration of New York's growing cider industry happens across all regions of the state. Associated events include tastings, workshops, tours, and live music. Some events are ticketed.

Website: <https://ciderweeknewyork.com/>



### The New York State Sheep & Wool Festival

**Dates: October 21-22**

Venue: Dutchess County Fairground, Rhinebeck

Description: An annual gathering of fiber-arts enthusiasts that draws 30,000 visitors and more than 300 vendors. The event includes exhibitions, workshops, contests, and more.

Website: <https://sheepandwool.com/>

### New York State Agricultural Society Annual Meeting & Forum

**Date: January 11, 2024**

Venue: Syracuse Oncenter

Description: Last year's forum saw 400 stakeholders from the ag, food, and natural resource industries meet in Syracuse to discuss current agricultural issues and future opportunities.

Governor Hochul made a surprise appearance in 2023, and the next forum will be the 192nd meeting.

Website:

<https://www.nysagsociety.org/>



# **Rural Futures | Fall 2023**

## **NEWS OF INTEREST ABOUT RURAL NEW YORK STATE**



*If you have any suggestions  
for upcoming editions,  
please email the Commission at  
[ruralres@nysenate.gov](mailto:ruralres@nysenate.gov).*