

## **County Tourism Program Awarded USDA Grant for Agritourism Development**

Tompkins County was recently awarded a \$49,390 grant by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Farmers Market Promotion Program to support agritourism development and promotion in and around Tompkins County. The County Planning Department was the lead applicant, in partnership with the Ithaca Tompkins County Convention and Visitors Bureau and Cornell Cooperative Extension of Tompkins County. The Agriculinary Tourism Task Force of the County's Strategic Tourism Planning Board (STPB) also provided support for the application. The overall goals are to offer whole farm and food experiences that link farmers, producers, and chefs to visitors as they travel to the area; to further enhance our community's reputation as a destination for high quality, authentic local farms, food products and farm-to-table experiences; and in the process increase direct sales for farmers and food producers.

Elements of the grant include:

- Evaluating farm establishments to assess their tourism readiness and support them in becoming more visitor-ready;
- Training farm business to improve their capacity to host visitors;
- Building tourism packages including a new farm trail, a new open farm weekend, and other packaging opportunities; and
- Promoting opportunities via the Ithaca Fork.com agriculinary tourism website and associated marketing and advertising investments.

Agritourism opportunities include traditional activities like farm visits, farmers markets, farm-stands and U-Pick operations. But training and support will also to be provided on how to host on-farm dinners, summer camps, and weddings, along with how to develop farmstays, farm tours and other farm-based events. The expected result of the project will be a doubling of direct sales for participating farms during the project's two-year life, concluding in September 2017. The Tompkins County Planning Department will provide overall management of the project and support outreach and program development efforts by the other partners.

Given growing interest in agriculture and local foods, the STPB has identified agriculinary tourism as a focus area that has significant potential to grow and attract new visitors, resulting in increased sales for farmers, and increasing the attractions available to visitors. Agriculinary tourism is defined as the combination of visitor experiences around local farms and locally-produced food and craft beverages. The STPB has been working on a comprehensive Agriculinary Tourism Implementation Plan, and this USDA funded project will advance some of ideas contained in the draft plan. The plan is expected to be completed in early 2016 and will also set out additional strategies and actions to pursue over the next five years to grow tourism around local farms, food and craft beverages.

Direct market farms can become significant tourism destinations, and some in the region around Ithaca are emerging as such. For farms in rural areas with low populations, having the opportunity to attract visitors has the potential to increase sales well beyond what local consumers alone are able to support. Our area has seen success along these lines with projects like the Finger Lakes Cheese Trail and the growth of local wineries and other beverage producers. However, agritourism in Tompkins County and the immediately surrounding region is currently under developed. For example, there are 326 direct market operations in the five-county region of Tompkins, Tioga, Schuyler, Chemung, and Cortland. This includes: 56 Farm stands, 42 Pick-Your-Own farms, 46 CSA farms, 84 direct market meat and dairy farms, plus 60 specialty operations (maple/honey, mushrooms, etc.) and 14 wineries. Of this total, only 18 currently host visitors – mainly school tours or winery visitors.

Another option has been to sell products to area restaurants, and to promote Ithaca as a destination for farm-to-table dining as more restaurants feature local products and more local products make their way

onto menus of local restaurants. The more visitors who enjoy restaurants serving local foods, the greater the benefit to local farmers.

Grant activities will kick off with a day-long agritourism workshop and training in March, 2016. For more information about the grant and how to get involved, contact:

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