

## Part 1 – The Death of Meaningful Public Participation

by Doug Baird

Today’s rural residents have no place in Tompkins County’s future.

This statement is based on more than two years of research and review, questions and public meetings concerning the most recent Agriculture and Comprehensive Plans of Lansing and Tompkins County, NY.

The amount of evidence that supports this conclusion is so great, that even in outline, it covers many pages. In this, and in following blogs, I will present a summary of this evidence under various topics and include some of the letters, statements, and links to research that support this viewpoint. The full scope of evidence is still waiting for public review and discussion — an occurrence that has so far been successfully stonewalled by the vested interests that have drafted these plans.

### The Death of Public Participation in Tompkins County

From its very beginning, the Lansing Ag Plan has deliberately excluded any meaningful participation by Lansing’s rural residents [who comprise 95% of north Lansing’s residents and, as usual in Tompkins County, the poorest, least represented and most economically hard hit segment of its population.]

The Lansing Ag Plan, although it is funded by the state, shaped by rich agribusinesses and directed by Cornell through its powerful and federally connected Cooperative Extension, is described as “local.” How big a lie this is can be easily exposed. In fact, the parties involved are so sure they are “untouchable” that they have not even bothered to cover their tracks in what amounts to a privatization of public policy.

The EPA’s “Public Participation Guide” states: “Public participation affords stakeholders (those that have an interest or stake in an issue, such as individuals, interest groups, communities) the opportunity to influence decisions that affect their lives.” The guide lists the forms public participation can take:

- “Informing the public by providing information to help them understand the issues, options, and solutions.”
- “Consulting with the public to obtain their feedback on alternatives or decisions.”
- “Involving the public to ensure their concerns are considered throughout the decision process, particularly in the development of decision criteria and options.”
- “Collaborating with the public to develop decision criteria and alternatives and identify the preferred solution.”
- “Empowering the public by placing final decision-making authority in their hands.”

It can be shown that not one of these forms participation was ever adopted the by Ag planning committee, and that no meaningful public participation was ever allowed in deciding the policies and practices put forth in the Lansing Ag Plan.

### A Brief History

In response to my email more than two and a half years ago, expressing concerns with the “Summary of Findings” section of Lansing’s Proposed Agriculture and Farmland Protection Plan, after my opening comment “This Summary gives the overall feeling that nobody else lives [or deserves to live] in North Lansing but farmers.” Monika Roth [CCE-Tompkins County Agricultural Issue Leader and the lead writer of the plan] inserted the phrase “You are right.”

I have used this example many times in communications with the people involved in Lansing Ag Plan’s formulation and approval, state and local politicians, boards and planners, and of course Cornell Cooperative Extension, and have never had even one response that repudiated or expressed any fault with this discriminatory policy statement.

Following Monica Roth’s disclosure, and in light of the questionable and biased nature of the proposed Ag Plan, I sent a letter to CCE-Tompkins County in December of 2015, along with a Title VI Environmental Justice form detailing seven major categories of complaint, including deceptive and false plan information, ignoring mandates for meaningful participation, incidents of CCE-Tompkins County bias, and negative impacts of the plan on the rural community. This resulted in a meeting with the CCE-Tompkins County Director Kenneth J. Schlather. The only outcome of this meeting, however, was his decision that further study of the Lansing Ag Plan was needed — there was no follow up to this meeting, and all subsequent attempts at communication were unacknowledged.

Finding this door was closed to rural residents, I took all the previous information and sent it higher, to the office of the state CCE Director Christopher B. Watkins, along with quotes from the CCE website declaring that their programs “build the capacity of New York State communities to engage in and direct their own futures.” The letter I received in response admitted no accountability or wrongdoing in their actions [even though these actions directly contradict their publicly stated policy and mission] and placed all responsibility solely on the Town of Lansing.

Similarly, Senator Nozzolio answered by saying he did not have “authority or jurisdiction” and that the Ag Plan “falls under the control of a local municipal government,” while Senator Gillibrand’s office agreed that it fell “under the jurisdiction of your local town government” and returned my correspondence.

In addition to the above, I have not been able to find one lawyer, or Tompkins County or New York State department, not one Cornell or Ithaca College professor, administrator or student activist group willing to help in this matter — even to the extent of writing a letter of protest. And at Ithaca College, the home of rural activist Janet Fitchen’s famous studies on rural poverty, a current professor wrote back excusing himself with “Janet worked in a simpler time.“ Doing the right thing is always simple; it’s finding excuses for not doing it that’s complicated.

## Local Lockstep

Local Lansing government and town officials, moving in lockstep with CCE, county and state agencies and politicians, have never once responded to questions about the lack of representation for the rural families living the Ag Plan area, or to the negative impact this plan would have on these families — and not one of the letters or emails sent to them has ever been acknowledged.

The Ag Plan's "public meeting" was announced with the minimum publicity allowed by law, even though Lansing Town Board members knew that few of the affected rural families received the newspapers that posted these notices, and that many rural residents did not have computers to track the meeting, or even know how to use them.

The public Ag Plan meeting itself was no more than a small part of an ordinary Town Board meeting. Attendees were told that no questions could be asked, and that it was only as a favor that they would be allowed to speak at all, since the law did not require it. Those wishing to speak were given a maximum of two minutes each, after which the Town Board immediately approved the Lansing Ag Plan without comment or discussion.

Total public meeting time: 15 minutes.

Total respect for Lansing's rural families: 0.

Part 2 - "Debunking the Lansing Ag Plan" — A plan whose only strength lies in its being unquestioned and unexamined.