



Food System Planning in Plymouth County Community Advisory Board Meeting, July 30, 2025

Meeting recap

The first Community Advisory Board meeting for the Plymouth County CARAT introduced participants to a 9-to 12-month initiative aimed at strengthening the local food system, with partners including the Marion Institute, Old Colony Planning Council, and Plymouth County. The meeting covered various aspects of the project, including discussions on farmland protection, water management, animal welfare policies, food waste management, and land practices. The group explored numerous local programs and resources that support soil health, conservation practices, and coastal preservation efforts, with plans to continue discussing the remaining indicators in future meetings.

Next steps

- Rita to create a guide document with introductory information for future meetings
- Joanne to distribute meeting agendas with indicators listed before future meetings
- Rita to work with Joanne to set up Google Forms for theme submissions between meetings

Summary

Plymouth County Carrot Project Launch

The first Community Advisory Board meeting for the project was held, with Rita Higgins from the Marion Institute serving as the facilitator. The meeting introduced participants to the project, which aims to build a resilient food system in Plymouth County. Partners involved in the project were highlighted, and the agenda was outlined, including welcome and introductions, a project overview, discussion of the carrot tool, and the roles and guidelines of the Community Advisory Board. The meeting began with introductions from the team, including Liz Wiley, the executive director of the Marion Institute, who briefly joined before leaving the meeting in the hands of Rita and Tess Washburn.

Plymouth County Food System Resilience

The Marion Institute, led by Liz, is partnering with Old Colony Planning Council and Plymouth County to conduct a CARAT assessment over the next 9-12 months, focusing on strengthening the food system in Plymouth County. Joanne explained that the project aims to develop a food action plan to improve environmental, social, and economic resilience, with the CARAT tool serving as a starting point. Rita described the structure of the Community Advisory Board, emphasizing the importance of participation and collaborative efforts to identify gaps and opportunities within the food system. The team encouraged active involvement, respect, and

openness to feedback as they work through the CARAT 101 indicators. The facilitators also highlighted the value of using the CARAT as a platform for cross-sector learning and relationship-building, noting that many important conversations about food system opportunities often happen for the first time in this kind of setting. CAB members were reminded that no technical expertise is needed—lived experience and local knowledge are just as important. “If you eat food, you belong at the table,” Rita said.

Plymouth County Farmland Protection Programs

The group discussed natural resource management, with a focus on farmland protection in Plymouth County. They explored various programs and policies, including Chapter 61 agricultural preservation, community preservation funds, and local agricultural boards. The discussion highlighted the importance of tax relief for landowners, zoning protections for farming activities, and the right of first refusal for municipalities. Participants also mentioned agricultural preservation restrictions and the work of organizations like the Wildlands Trust in conserving land for farming purposes.

Plymouth County Farmland Preservation Challenges

The group discussed the challenges of farmland preservation in Plymouth County, including tensions with the Agricultural Preservation Restriction (APR) program and concerns regarding housing development. They examined how some communities are hesitant about the APR program, and noted that sometimes unprotected farmland is converted into solar panels or housing. The discussion emphasized ongoing pressures on cranberry farming due to declining prices. The group also addressed state-level initiatives aimed at guiding solar development away from farmland and discussed preserving agricultural resources beyond just farmland.

Regional Watershed Organizations

The group discussed various watershed associations and water management organizations in the region, including the North and South Rivers Watershed Association, Herring Pond Watershed Association, Jones River Watershed Association, and Taunton River Watershed Alliance. Joanne noted that state programs exist for agricultural water conservation, but their activity in the region is unclear. The group also mentioned the new Old Colony Regional Water Plan and the work of the Central Plymouth County Water District Commission. Frank clarified the difference between the North and South River Watershed Association and a state-created organization that manages the North River.

Agricultural Water Quality and PFAS

The group discussed water quality issues in agriculture, especially concerning PFAS contamination and farmers' use of untreated groundwater. They observed that while state programs aim to improve water quality, septic regulation remains weak, and there are rising concerns about PFAS impacts on farmland. The discussion also highlighted ongoing bog restoration projects in Plymouth County and state efforts to expedite permitting processes for such initiatives.

Animal Welfare Policy Overview

The group discussed animal welfare policies and regulations in Plymouth County, with Andrea mentioning the town of Plymouth's newly approved farm and livestock compact. They explored various municipal and state policies, including animal inspections, licensing requirements for horse stables, and regulations for poultry and livestock. Molly explained that the state Department of Agricultural Resources handles inspections and licensing for equine and poultry operations, while local boards of health typically only intervene when complaints are filed. The discussion also touched on the role of agricultural commissions in promoting sound agricultural practices and working with boards of health.

Plymouth County Food Waste Initiatives

The group discussed food waste management practices in Plymouth County, including pilot programs for curbside composting in Redbrook and Pine Hills, as well as a correctional facility that diverts food waste to a local pig farmer. They noted that the Plymouth Agriculture Commission is working on creating a list of local farms that accept compost, though this project is still in progress. The discussion also touched on the capital-intensive nature of large-scale animal husbandry for food waste processing and mentioned that some restaurants and breweries donate excess food to shelters or pantries. For agricultural waste, they found that most large-scale farms have on-site manure management programs, with the waste typically reused on the farm rather than ending up in landfills.

Indigenous Land Protection and Policies

The group discussed land policies and practices concerning BIPOC farmers and Indigenous lands in Bristol and Plymouth counties. They learned about the Herring Pond Wampanoag Tribe's recent state recognition and their efforts to acquire land, as well as the Native Land Conservancy's work in protecting sacred properties. Howard expressed concerns about the development of Hedges Pond in South Plymouth, which may contain burials and does not have proper protection measures for Native American sites. The group agreed to explore the Native Land Conservancy's work further and learn more about land protection efforts in the region.

Plymouth County Soil Conservation Strategies

The group discussed soil health and conservation practices in Plymouth County, including the use of cover crops, crop rotation, and water conservation measures. They identified various local programs and resources, such as UMass Extension and the Cranberry Experiment Station, that support these practices. The conversation also touched on the impact of lawn treatment practices on water supply and agriculture. The group noted that many farms in the region already engage in diversification and weather-resilient practices. They discussed coastal wetlands preservation efforts, mentioning organizations like the Buzzards Bay Coalition and the Southern New England Program. The conversation concluded with plans to discuss the remaining indicators at the next meeting and to create a guide for future participants.

Attendees

Andrea Dickinson, Sustainable Plymouth / Plymouth Open Space Committee
Bill Napolitano, OCPC
Cassandra Thayer, Town of Cohasset

Ellyn Craig, Massasoit Community College
Frank Basler, Plymouth County
Howard Randall, Resident
Jacqueline Millar, Terra Cura Inc.
Joanne Zygmunt, OCPC
Judith Henze, Food for Tomorrow
Karen Barry, Plymouth County Sheriff's Office
Kerrie Liroi, Resident
Lauren Bartell, Old Colony YMCA
Liz Wiley, Marion Institute
Luke Tocher, Bay State Mushroom Co.
Michael Jackman, Rep. Keating's Office
Molly Vollmer, Plymouth County Extension
Rachel Weil, Metropolitan Area Planning Council
Rita Higgins, Marion Institute
Sarah McCormack, Town of Plymouth
Tess Washburn, Marion Institute

AI Disclaimer

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