The average piece of produce purchased at a supermarket travels approximately 1,500 miles to reach your table. This equates to one million barrels of oil that could be conserved per week if each U.S. citizen ate one meal a week made from local, organically grown produce. In addition, you would be supporting a local business and eating healthy.

DO YOU KNOW where your food comes from? Who grows it? How it was grown? Did the farmer use pesticides? Did the farmer use genetically modified seed? Were the farm workers paid a fair wage? Are you eating food grown locally and in season? Are you paying a fair price and know this is going directly to the farmer? Do you know a farmer?

The City of Damascus, working with local farmers, is developing a plan to integrate local food production into the city’s comprehensive plan. While the plan is in development, we are also creating concepts for integrating the farmers into the city. How do you build a local food economy? What is the best way to encourage farmers to continue to farm and produce food? How do you integrate uses that may have conflicts?

While some farmers, once their farms are inside the urban growth boundary (UGB) are more than willing to sell their property to the nearest developer for a housing subdivision and retire, others are interested in leaving a legacy for their families and for the community. We are creating an environment where relationships between farmers and the community can grow and thrive.

The Farmer’s Perspective

Farming is hard work. There is more to it besides plowing, planting, and harvesting. There are irrigation lines to move, water rights issues, wells and pumps to maintain, and the risk of losing crops to the weather. A farm with diversified crops like Thompson Farms requires that crop varieties are reliable and accessible.

Larry Thompson, the owner of Thompson Farms, employs a small harvest crew, which has been working at the farm for 10 to 20 years, creating a dependable workforce that plants, harvests, and works the fields. A sales crew of mostly college-bound students works at three farms stands, various farmers markets, and local hospital stands. Thompson’s unique marketing approach allows him to directly market all his produce, without middle-men taking a cut of the profits. This was not always the case; his father sold his crops to canneries and supermarkets that set prices and decided which crops to accept.

Like any other business, there are conflicts and challenges to farming. Land use laws are one challenge. Land partitioning laws and zoning regulations, including permitted uses on farm parcels, do not always allow for the full array of potential uses on the farm. Other uses that could be hosted on the site, including weddings, concerts, and other gatherings that may
have limited connection to the raising of crops, is one issue that has not been resolved between farmers and government regulators about appropriate uses on farms.

Conflicts with neighbors are common. On one day in early spring, a truck liming the field covered an entire neighborhood in Damascus with a white haze for hours. Running tractors at night, irrigation and field crews working from dawn to dusk, and truck and equipment noise and traffic conflicts with tractors and other large delivery vehicles are just a few of the issues that farmers and neighbors deal with. Wildlife control and damage to crops, vandalism, theft, and complaints are common issues for farmers and urban neighbors.

Farmers also deal with environmental regulations, such as water rights, stream, wetland, and wildlife issues. Certification for organic produce, marketing to farmers markets, labor issues, road and access issues, the list goes on. With all these challenges and barriers, no wonder there are fewer and fewer farmers willing to carry on the family businesses.

However, according to Thompson, farmers need to think in new ways. The “business as usual” way of farming has to change with the times. This can be hard for farmers; they are mostly risk adverse, relying on crops and practices that have proven successful over the years. Farmers need to embrace new crop varieties and adopt sustainable practices that reduce the need for inorganic fertilizers. Farmers also need to work with local governments to seek support for economic development and developing new business models. In addition, new ways to interact with the community is essential, developing relationships with neighbors and the community is essential to a sustainable farmer in the city.

The City’s Perspective
Creating a new city from scratch isn’t easy. The city isn’t really new and the creation isn’t really from scratch, but developing a comprehensive plan is new for this community. In particular, the community values its rural character, natural resources, and endeavors to plan a sustainable community. Local food production is a key element in the city’s planning concepts. It’s not preserving the farms for sentimental reasons, it’s creating opportunities for farmers to continue farming, allow flexibility, and create an environment in which relationships with the community can grow.

One challenge is the state land use planning program. While the program has done a good job in many respects, protecting farms and forests outside UGBs, the economy and environment have changed in the last 30 years. Protecting existing farms inside the city is not allowed by state law. State regulators have said, “You can’t do that! You’ll have to zone it for a Wal-Mart distribution center!” Of course, the farmer can continue to farm as long as they want to, but in the end, the conversion to an “urban land use” is required under state land use law. What if the city wants to allow the property to continue as a farm?

Innovative zoning concepts could be one way to address these issues. The city is exploring the option of an Urban Agriculture overlay, which would allow the base comprehensive plan designation (an urban land use) with specific master plan requirements that has allowances for agricultural uses and allows for the transfer of development rights, either to somewhere else on the site or a direct transfer somewhere else in the city. The overlay also contemplates other allowable uses related to farm activities, such as harvest activities, farm stands, restaurants, small scale processing, or, special events, such as weddings and concerts with specific limitations, that preserve a direct relationship to the farm, in exchange for a conservation easement on the farm. The city is also seeking to designate a place for a permanent farmers market and community gardens within new developments.

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Another option would look at farm uses as employment. Farming is very similar to industrial uses, there are conflicts relating to noise, emissions, transportation, and infrastructure issues. The city could develop siting standards that allow these uses as an employment designation. As with any business, the city could provide economic development incentives, but would not require a business to stay in business if the market doesn’t support it.

The Shared View to the Future
The City of Damascus, along with its local farmers, are exploring options to encourage local food production, create community, and develop a local economic model to encourage the integration of farming with the community. We hope to create an environment where the farmer can become part of the city, marketing directly to residents, providing business incentives, allowing compatible development along with farming, and create relationships that will help the community recognize these farms as a local asset. We have a lot to learn from each other, but together we can design a vision for the city that will be sustainable for years to come.

These concepts can have a broad application, not only for Oregon, where there is always tension on both sides of the UGB, but for other communities where local food production can integrate with communities. Local elected officials support opening this discussion, which can lead to a regional strategy for local food production and urbanization. Lynn Peterson, chair of the Clackamas County Board of Commissioners states: “Sustainable agriculture is a leading industry in Clackamas County. As we look to diversify our economy, local food production, both inside and outside the urban growth boundary needs special consideration. The work that Damascus is exploring, encouraging local food production and integrating urbanization is key to a new paradigm for sustainable communities. Oregon’s land use regulations that are responsive to these issues will make all the difference.”

State Senator Martha Schrader, former Clackamas County Board of Commission, and farmer from the Canby area states: “As a farmer and now as a state legislator, I know that local food sheds and their proximity to local markets make our communities livable and sustainable. The renewed connection from farm to local market energizes the local economy. It is estimated that farming has a multiplying effect of seven to one dollars on businesses that support farming: equipment, local hardware stores, feed for livestock, seed purchasing—even the local restaurants. Sustaining the local food economy is not only healthy for the community—it’s good for business and supports the essential social fabric of our communities.”

We believe we have a unique opportunity in Damascus to create model for a new way to integrate urban and rural thinking, living, and eating. The time is now to move towards this new vision.

About the Authors:
Larry Thompson is a second generation farmer in Damascus Oregon. He is a member of the City’s Community Coordination Committee and Vice Chair of the Development Code Topic Specific Team. In addition, Larry has served on the Portland Multnomah County Food Policy Committee and is the longest tenured member of the Western Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (SARE) Administrative Council.

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Note: No photos of the authors were available at the time of publication.