

My Turn: Henniker's view of 'agritourism' is far too narrow

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The Sept. 17 Monitor included an article on the Christmas tree farmer's dispute with the Henniker zoning board over the term "agritourism." The activity of agritourism started in New Hampshire well over 100 years ago. In 1899 Gov. Frank Rollins gave birth to a new tradition, Old Home Week, which aimed to encourage former residents to return home for a vacation, to renew their ties to family and fortify the values associated with "old New England." This brought revenue to the state, and within a few years all the New England states had followed New Hampshire's example.

One hundred years later, agritourism is even more important to help preserve New Hampshire agriculture. Since the early 1900s much of New Hampshire's farm land has returned to forest. Aerial photos taken in the 1940s and now can communicate how much agriculture has retracted from the state. Does anyone want the future of New Hampshire to be nothing more than trees, highways, power lines and rooftops void of any of the scenic farms we associate with our state?

The Henniker zoning board's definition of agritourism and particularly the definition of "enjoyment of farm environment" appear to be a narrow "look, gaze, but don't congregate" mindset. This definition doesn't leave much to pay the rent.

The intent of the original legislation was to generate extra income for struggling farms. Surely the ability to capitalize and preserve the views of some of New Hampshire's most stunning parcels, many of which still exist because of farms, is a worthy cause protected by legislation. Current use taxation helps farmers with the tax property tax burden of their farm land, but the land under and around farm buildings is assessed at development value.

If towns want to have their prized sites and vistas maintained as farms, and not be subject to development, they must meet the farmers half way and permit agritourism to help satisfy the tax burden. Many a farmer has turned down attractive offers from developers to keep their farms as working farms, some of which are in Sanbornton. Those farmers now find themselves land rich and cash poor as a result. New Hampshire doesn't tax cash but it does tax land.

New Hampshire citizens need to support agritourism in all ways possible to keep these remaining farms a part of New Hampshire's future.

(Ralph Rathjen lives in Sanbornton.)

I have followed this issue from the get-go, through the excellent minutes kept by whoever records such things for the Town of Henniker. I agree, the Town boards got hoodwinked and drawn into a neighborhood squabble, aided and abetted by some town employees, and this issue should have never gone this far, but knowing of the neighbor, I'm not surprised it did. One of the documents filed is a letter from the NH Commissioner of Agriculture, Lorraine Merrill, who wrote a letter, declaring holding weddings on a farm setting is, in fact; Agritourism, and that should have ended the conversation. What part of this is the Town of Henniker missing??? I was curious enough to ride out there to see where the farm is. It is up behind Pat's Peak, and the view is breath taking. No wonder people want to get married up there. I know many towns have been stewing over how to keep farms, and more importantly, open space, viable, and my own town is one. Our Planning Board and Agricultural Commission has spent many hours trying to come up with ways to keep 'em down on the farm, by allowing and encouraging agritourism and value added items to the usual farm production, because milking a few cows isn't a viable option anymore. OK, Henniker; chase this guy out of town and watch the houses grow! Oh, while you're at it, the newbys from away will want that dirt road paved, and the school is no where near good enough, and by the way, why do I have to take my trash to the dump? Or maybe that's what they want: Million dollar McMansions up there with a million dollar view tax?