

Historic Farming Community Moving Forward

Three Candidates Vie for Two Town Board Seats

By Cathy Redlich

On November 2, 2021, Ancram voters will have the opportunity to cast votes for two contested Ancram Town Board seats. The Board is Ancram's legislative and governing body with responsibility for the annual budget, overseeing and approving monthly expenditures, adopting local laws, and setting policy for the town. The candidates are, in brief:

- **Bonnie Hundt, Democratic Candidate, Incumbent.** Ms. Hundt, who is currently completing a four-year term on the Town Board, has owned and operated a business in the local community for 25 years.
- **Steve Olyha, Republican Candidate.** Mr. Olyha's career has been in the business and technology industries, and he currently runs an executive coaching practice from his Ancram home.
- **Amy Gold, Democratic Candidate** Ms. Gold is the Director of



Town Board Candidates (left to right) Bonnie Hundt (D); Steve Olyha (R); Amy Gold (D)

Corporate Communications for a firm in the high-tech sector, where she serves as an industry advocate and public relations executive.

In Their Own Words

The Town News asked the candidates to respond to four questions. Here is what they had to say to voters.

Town News: The Town of Ancram has evolved over time, but the pace of change has accelerated in recent years. What, in your view, are the 2-3 most critical issues facing our town today?

Hundt: In the 4 years that I have proudly served on the Town Board our world has changed dramatically. Even before the pandemic brought us many new residents who were seeking a safe place, Ancram was already changing. Our farming community was transforming into a blend of farmers and entrepreneurs and people working from their homes.

As leaders in government, we have a duty to step up and meet these challenges. Should I be reelected I will focus on these issues:

- **Housing:** To begin to address the urgent need for housing that our young people and service economy workers can afford, I initiated a housing survey with the Ancram Economic Development Committee that was sent to all residents. With real estate prices rising dramatically over the last 2 years, many cannot find decent housing to rent or buy. I have also been working with all levels of State and Federal government (as well as neighboring towns) to find effective and affordable solutions.

- **Broadband:** Between Zoom meetings, remote learning, home businesses, and Covid lockdowns, the demand for dependable high speed internet is crucial. We have identified and funded high speed service to parts of Ancram, but obviously much more needs to be done.

- **Climate change:** While heading up our new Pandemic Disaster Plan, I learned that the covid virus was not only affecting our health but had a domino effect on our economy, education, travel

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CANDIDATES

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and much more. Similarly, the effects of climate change are numerous. The warming of our planet has already affected our lives. Unprecedented rain and flooding has impacted our farmers as well as our emergency services. The Ancram Fire Department spent days pumping out residents' basements this summer. Our highway department will have an increased need for road maintenance due not only to weather but the fact that there are so many more cars on our roads now. We need to be prepared and our Climate Smart Task Force (with whom I am working) is leading the way by advising the Town Board on what we can do as a town to be ready and how we can do our part in leading by example.

Olyha: I think two issues in particular stand out to me. One is the need for us to expand the number of active participants on the various volunteer boards, committees, and events that we have in Ancram. We tend to see many of the same faces across our meetings and often when we seek volunteers we get a limited response. Securing the involvement of our younger community members would add new voices and points of view, especially to organizations like the Ancram Fire Company. And because Ancram embraces open and transparent conversations and debates, having other points of view added is always a positive. The Board can play a major role here one way by being even more progressive in the use of technology. For example, implementing new technology at town hall to expand remote participation as well as providing options for other events, and using social media which is the primary vehicle most younger people use today to communicate. I would also encourage the board as a member to invest in a resource with expertise in this area. There are inexpensive options to have a social media expert build Ancram a communications and outreach plan, which can support multiple initiatives and build the "Ancram Brand".

A second issue to continue to be aware of is maintaining Ancram's rural character and environmental protections as we have a continuing influx of new residents purchasing properties and building homes, as well as insuring that STR's (short term rentals) don't have a major impact. This needs to be done while also balancing the rights of land-owners and respecting our farming roots. One of the things that we learned from the work of the ZRC is that Ancram already has some of the most tightly written and restrictive environmental protections in the state (according to the outside consultant used), and we still added several new regulations such as expanding the setbacks for wetlands, streams, etc. from 100 to 150 ft. The Board's role here is clear: listening to the input of the community and committees like the Zoning Review Committee which recently wrote new regulations for STR's is vital. Additionally, finding ways to encourage much broader participation in the Town Board meetings where these issues are discussed is important.

Gold: True, the pace of change has most definitely increased in recent years – for better and for worse. Fortunately, Ancram, working in concert with the surrounding towns, has taken great strides to protect the environment and the agricultural zoning which shapes the tenet of our Comprehensive Plan. While I am generally pleased with the direction in which we are moving, there remain areas that are lacking and particularly concerning.

Clearly one very important focus must be on getting broadband, including cellular service, to all residents and in all "dead" zones, across the three hamlets that make up the town of Ancram. The Town Board should prioritize this for the community as it is both a safety and health issue, as well as an educational and work mandate. If we are to attract people and businesses to our town, we must be able to provide the tools necessary for their success. Let's also recognize why Ancram is such a sought-after place to live. The natural beauty of our area is second to none, with its open spaces, scenic views, farmland and protected habitats. We have a Comprehensive Plan that is chartered to

protect all that we hold dear and it is imperative that our Planning, Zoning, and CAC committees work closely together to protect these natural resources, ensuring that the intent of our Comprehensive Plan is maintained.

Town News: What skillsets, experience, educational attainments, or personal attributes make you well-suited to serve on the Town Board?

Hundt: Having grown up on a farm in Wisconsin, I recognize the issues that we are facing in our town. My family taught me, by example, the importance of teamwork, the responsibility of public service and the value of community. Since 2007, I have served on the Comprehensive Plan Committee, Zoning Revisions Committee, Chaired the Zoning Board of Appeals and served on the Ethics Board. The Comprehensive Plan taught me that most people in Ancram want the same things: to preserve our rural character and open space and to be vigilant about protecting our beautiful landscape from over-development while still allowing for smart growth.

My experience as a successful small business owner (with 4 Ancram employees) for the last 25 years has given me management skills and insight into making prudent financial decisions for the Town. I've also learned from my business to treat not only my clients with respect and care but also my employees, who will attest to my creation of a friendly, professional workplace. I believe, as a town leader, it's important to do the same with the boards, committees and citizens.

Olyha: One of the most important things I bring is my active participation and deep commitment to Ancram, our home for many years. As Chairman of the Zoning Board of Appeals, member of the Financial Advisory Council, Board of Assessment Review, Zoning Revisions Committee, and founder and Chairperson of our annual Winterfest event, I know Ancram intimately and care deeply about continuing to give my time.

I believe in thoughtful and respectful consideration of all points of view, and in "listening for understanding, not to

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The Biology of Farming: A Conversation with Stuart Farr of Hudson Hops & Grains

By Susan Arterian

Ancram farmer Stuart Farr, owner of Hudson Hops & Grains on Route 82, practices “biological farming” on the 140 acres he cultivates for rye, wheat, oats, einkorn, black beans, sunflowers, buckwheat and red clover. He grew up working on his family’s 125-acre crops and beef farm in England, and went on to study agriculture at university. After advising firms on the business side of agriculture, he discovered computers and became a software engineer. While he still works in the technology field, Farr has circled back to farming and, ten years ago, began studying the new methods being used by “biological” farmers, which as Farr explains to the Town News, “are actually not new at all.”

Town News: Can you explain how much of what you learned got “lost” during the last generation of farming?

Farr: As I started reading about new methods in farming, it became clear that what was happening was a re-learning of knowledge that was lost when chemical inputs and the new genetics were introduced to farming post-World War II. These new practices did increase productivity in the short term, but over time they have taken a severe toll on soil health, which has resulted in increasing reliance on fertilizers and chemicals. Some of what I was learning resonated with what I had observed first-hand with our farming in England and what my father taught me. Putting these new methods into practice was a challenge that I was keen to take on.

Town News: You define your farming practice as biological. Can you explain in layman’s terms how that differs from conventional farming or organic farming?

Farr: Conventional farming relies on external synthetic inputs (soluble fertilizers, chemical pesticides) to maximize yield and control weeds, pests, and diseases.



Stuart Farr brings historic methods of farming into modern agricultural practice by nurturing soil “biology” to provide plants with necessary nutrients and pest protection.

Organic farming essentially bans the use of synthetic fertilizers and chemicals, which is why it is increasingly popular with many consumers. However, it can lead to simply replacing synthetic inputs with natural ones. There is nothing wrong with this, but it misses the point. Plants can get most if not all of their nutrients from the soil and the air, and with correct nutrition, largely protect themselves from pests and disease. The key to accessing these nutrients is the micro-organisms in the soil (fungi, bacteria, etc.), now referred to as “biology.” Biological farming is quite simply nurturing this biology into providing nutrients to plants. This is a completely different way of farming to what has been taught and practiced over the last 50 years.

What we have now re-discovered (thanks to super powerful electron microscopes and analytical techniques) is that plants form symbiotic relationships with micro-organisms, particularly around their roots. Most commonly known are the bacteria that associate with legumes (clovers, peas, beans) to “fix” atmospheric nitrogen into plant-available forms. Less well known are other bacteria and fungi, which make minerals already in the soil available to plants. Plant roots exude sugars to feed the biology and in return receive mineral nutrition. It is why trees and plants in undisturbed soil like woodlands look so healthy! It is difficult to overstate the importance of these microbial/root

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*Black turtle beans growing through rolled rye.
The rye will act as mulch to suppress weeds.*

HOPS & GRAINS

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interactions in plant nutrition, plant health and building soil organic matter. Nurturing this biology is how biological farmers feed and protect our crops. Rarely do we fertilize the crops directly; mostly we are feeding the biology in the soil. We do this by growing diverse types of crops (crops for harvest, and crops grown just to feed the biology, so called “cover crops” or “green manure”) in rotation, and applying microbe food, such as molasses and fish hydrolysate, directly to the soil. On land we lease that has been farmed conventionally, we inoculate the soil with bacteria and fungi as some conventional farming methods (pesticides, tillage) are highly destructive to soil biology.

Town News: Much of your farming practice involves experimentation. Can you give some examples?

Farr: On-farm experimentation is key. What works in theory or in another region is of no value if it does not work here. My farming practice is still evolving,

but I know now that rye and red clover grow well here (especially together). Buckwheat also grows well—its fibrous root systems releasing phosphorus into the soil and leaving it well conditioned for the next crop. I am experimenting with other clovers too, and am increasingly using turnip and radish in cover crop mixes. Their long

taproots help alleviate compaction, draw nutrients up into the higher soil levels, and their natural glucosinolates help plants resist soil-borne diseases. I am still in the early days of growing sunflowers and black edible beans, but they work well in rotation with the grains.

Town News: Hudson Valley Hops & Grains appears to be participating in an intentional way in the relocation of the Hudson Valley food system. Can you describe that?

Farr: When we grew wheat in England, trucks would come and take it away and that’s the last we saw it. Now, I know my customers personally: the millers, bakers, maltsters, brewers and distillers. There is huge satisfaction in this as well as having the practical conveniences of local processing and delivery. There is also immediate customer feedback: good or bad. Within 15 miles of my farm are two millers with whom I work closely. They tell me what they like and what varieties are most suitable for their flours.

Town News: What are your greatest hopes and greatest concerns for the farm economy and the farming way of life in communities like Ancram?



Radishes and turnips being planted in strips to enhance the soil where sunflower rows will be growing the following spring, a method known as “strip tilling”. The clover crop now growing in between the sunflower rows will be left intact.

Farr: The character of rural communities is determined by the success or failure of farms. Thriving farms engage contractors, mechanics, machinery dealers, suppliers and other practical tradesmen. Local farms provide the raw material, which supports food processors and retailers. Absent thriving commercial farms, you can get “farms as scenery” or very large impersonal farms with little interaction with the local community. I saw this first-hand with the village I grew up in England: it is now a commuter town for London where suburban expectations usurp rural character, and I fear the same for Ancram in relation to NYC. My hopes here are the opposite: farms being integral with and foundational to the commercial activities of the local community.

Town News: For a farmer who wants to convert to biological farming or who is hoping to launch a career in farming, what advice might you offer?

Farr: Start reading and researching: there is so much accessible material online. Not from our region, but books by Gabe Brown, Gary Zimmer, and John Kempf show how this type of farming is done at scale. In New York, Klaas Martens and Thor Oeschner are farming successfully with some of these methods upstate at scale. The rewards are from what comes from growing healthy, tasty food enjoyed by people you know. The challenges are those that come with experimentation: disappointment in crop outcomes; finding affordable right-scale equipment. Also time: it takes time, measured in years, to build the soil into a living productive ecosystem which supports commercial farming. I am six years in and not there yet. Of course, a major obstacle in our region is access to affordable land for farming, which currently makes it extremely difficult for new farmers to get established.

Town News: How can our community support our farmers in more meaningful ways?

Farr: Buy local!

A Sign of the Times

By Lynne Perrella

There are plenty of good reasons to slow down and observe the 35 mph speed limit in the hamlet of Ancram. And now there is one more. A dignified cast-aluminum marker commemorating Ancram’s placement on the National Register of Historic Places has been installed on the roadside overlooking Blass Field.

The Town Board tasked the Ancram Planning Group with finding a suitable spot for the marker, and after several good options were considered, the sign was installed in late August; with a group of neighbors looking on.

Town Board members Hugh Clark and Bonnie Hundt were on hand for the dedication, and remarks from town

historians, Robin Massa and Clara Van Tassell, provided additional insights about long-ago Ancram. The historians described the various rural landmarks that once flourished within walking distance of the new sign, including three stores offering groceries and household goods, a blacksmith, and a one-room schoolhouse on Route 7.

Ancram resident John Hoffman began the process of acquiring the sign by submitting a grant proposal to the William G. Pomeroy Foundation. Nearby hamlets of Boston Corner and Ancramdale also have historic markers in keeping with the Foundation’s goal of “commemorating historic people, places, things or events in New York State”.



Neighbors and residents gather for the dedication of the historic marker placing Ancram on the National Register of Historic Places.

Photo credit: Jay Corcoran.

A Building's Backstory:

The Former Life of What Became The Farmer's Wife

By Bobbie Slonevsky

Make believe, if you can, that it's 1871. The buzz around town is all about the coming railroad. It is being extended from Boston Corner to Ancram Lead Mines (now Ancramdale) and will be operational the following year. Not only will people be able to travel more easily to the hamlet, but more to the point, milk will be able to travel to Boston Corner on the Poughkeepsie & Eastern and then south to New York City on the Harlem Line. With the expanded market, dairy farming is bound to take off and Ancram Lead Mines will become a more prosperous and busier place.

According to Woody Baxt, owner of the Beckenrah Dairy Farm on Fox Hill Road and one-time owner of the building that now houses Ancramdale's The Farmer's Wife, this was the year the commercial structure on Route 8 was constructed. Its builder and first owner was Albert Niver, although some years later it was sold to Barton & Hoysradt, a purveyor of feed and coal also dating to 1871. It didn't take long before the Barton & Hoysradt enterprise was transformed into a thriving general store... but a type of general store an inhabitant of the 21st century can hardly imagine.

"It was the center of commerce," Baxt explains. "A farmer came in with two sheep and left with bags of flour, sugar, or whatever he needed." In fact, it wasn't just barter. A few of Barton & Hoysradt's day books (ledgers), from as early as 1891, were found almost one hundred years later by Baxt in the building's basement. And they attest to the variety of transactions. Cash, labor, check, [bank] transfer were all accepted. What's more, the inventory of goods sold was exhaustive: food, dry goods, notions, hardware, building materials, farm equipment, medicine and more (see sidebar). The store also housed the local post office, with the store owner doubling as postmaster. Eventually, when automobiles arrived, the site even boasted two gasoline



Owner Fred Barton, shop employee Adrian Bishop, and owner Floyd Barton gather on the porch of Barton & Hoysradt, circa 1950–51, at a time when you could gas up your car, fetch your mail, send a telegram, and buy groceries with one easy stop. Photo courtesy of Avery Prope Dietter.

pumps. Throughout its life, it was where local residents came to chat.

For 90 years, the business remained largely in the same family's hands—passing down from founders Frederick Barton and Lewis Hoysradt to brothers Floyd and Fred Barton in 1913, to Floyd's son Kenneth Barton and Raymond Hoag in 1957. When the store closed down after Hoag's death in 1961, it was deemed the end of an era. Perhaps it was. Still, the present occasionally has a way of emulating the past.

While little is known about the store for the rest of the 60s, the 70s saw a revival. New York City real estate developer Charles Rudnick bought up a number of parcels in Ancramdale, including what had been Barton & Hoysradt's. He installed ex-New York teachers and co-owners Don and Cecilia Hurowitz to run what was newly called the Ancramdale

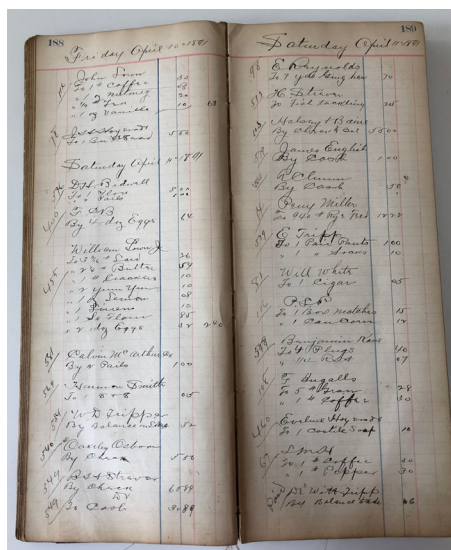
General Store. And they immediately strove to re-create the old store's atmosphere. Old-fashioned display cases contained an array of day-to-day essentials, including Cecilia's much sought after baked goods created in her bakery next door; shelves were stacked with groceries and hardware; and the old general store's candy jars were filled with loose sweet treats likely sold by the scoop.

Unfortunately, stability was not in the cards. By 1975 the Ancramdale General Store was under the new management of Rena and Dan Button. And then, in 1977, Rudnick apparently defaulted on his loans, and the bank foreclosed on all his properties. It took until 1980 before Jean and Henry Lines bought the vacant store. How long they owned it is uncertain, for the newspaper trail goes cold...but Baxt picks up the thread with the tale of a Mafioso and his moll.

“The gangster brought his girlfriend to see the extravagant ‘castle-on-the-hill’ he was building for her off Route 82. She wasn’t impressed. She admitted that the surroundings were nice, but, she complained, ‘There’s no place to even buy a roll of toilet paper.’” Stung by the criticism, the boyfriend bought the general store and stocked it with essentials—to no avail. Enter Baxt and his wife Saida.

The store was actually a shambles. “Nevertheless, it was structurally sound and had good bones,” Baxt insists. So, sometime in the 1980s the couple made the boyfriend an offer he couldn’t refuse and did what we call today a gut renovation. In addition to selling merchandise, they put in a small kitchen, deli and luncheonette, and—many readers may remember—gave over management of the Ancramdale General Store to the gourmet skills of Jodie von Gal. Townspeople loved to congregate in the store, sometimes to eat Jodie’s soup or quiche right there, on other occasions to purchase take-out, to buy the prepared, frozen foods on offer, or even to arrange for Jodie’s catering service.

Of course, neither time nor trade stands still; change was inevitable. Not all the intervening years are accounted for before we get to the current occupant. But still, under Baxt’s ownership, the store lived through a couple of short vacancies (much regretted by the community), plus several other sparkling chapters in its history. Manager Sandy Kilmer and supercook Lisa DeLeeuw made their mark, Baxt remembers, most especially with the homemade cakes, cookies and brownies that became a sort of hallmark. Then in 1990, life-long Ancramdale resident Dave Valden rented the space, adding a pizza oven and a variety of pizza styles to the continuing efforts of Sandy and Lisa. Finally, the last to operate the space as the Ancramdale General Store were Jeff and Dale Boyles, who leased it in the late 1990s. By this time, if not before, the store seems to have morphed into an eatery as opposed to a retailer of merchandise. Its reward was a favorable review in the *Zagat Survey*...an inspiration perhaps? For we all know what came next, although most of us probably don’t know exactly how it happened.



A ledger page from April 11, 1891 shows in meticulous copperplate script purchases made that day, along with the name of the purchaser, which is how we know 130 years later that E. Tripp bought a pair of pants for a dollar and Will White bought a 5 cent cigar.

“There was a group of us who regularly went fox hunting,” Baxt recounts. “After the hunt, we would gather for a glorious breakfast in the kitchen of Dorcas Sommerhoff [of the Sommerhoff dairy farm] on Wiltsie Bridge Road.” Dorcas’s catering, it turns out, gained a reputation for excellence and she soon expanded to cooking for local parties and weddings.

Baxt knew a good thing when he saw it. At this point, he and wife Saida were

looking to wind down some of their activities: Wouldn’t a café and catering business buoyed by Dorcas’s talent be the perfect buyer for their premises? It took three years of persuasion until Dorcas finally agreed, and in 2002, the two parties arranged for the sale. With a name that was both colorful and literal, The Farmer’s Wife was an immediate success. Local farm-sourced food, delicious eat-in and take-out, and serious catering throughout the Hudson Valley have garnered mentions in *Zagat*, *Martha Stewart Weddings* and *Rural Intelligence*, to name just a few complimentary media outlets. Most relevant though is that the building’s story has continued to evolve.

Again the interior underwent a significant makeover and kitchen expansion. During the pandemic, eat-in actually took place outside. And there’s been yet another addition to the human continuum. Today it is no longer the farmer’s wife who presides over the store. Since Dorcas’s retirement about a decade ago, it is the farmer’s daughter Emilie Sommerhoff and the farmer’s son-in-law chef Job Yacubian who own and operate the enterprise. Just the latest installment in the structure’s 150-year existence—but hopefully a long and prosperous one.

Editor’s note: Special thanks to Monica Cleveland for finding and supplying the vintage photos.



The “grainery,” pictured here in the mid 1940s, still stands behind The Farmer’s Wife. The Barton & Hoysradt truck was used for delivering a variety of merchandise, including coal. Photo: Ancramdale Presbyterian Church Homecoming Book.

CANDIDATES

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respond” as a powerful way of insuring respectful engagement. Passion is a powerful thing; thoughtful passion is even more so. One of my passions is dealing with local hunger issues, an area where I also give much of my time through our church.

I also have a deep financial background as well as a progressive view of technology and have been encouraging the board to invest in this area for some time.

Gold: By profession, I am a communicator, and throughout my professional life I served as an industry advocate and ambassador in the semiconductor industry, working with executives on strategies for growth and success. I served on numerous committees, learning to listen, study, learn and advocate on measures that were critical to the favorable outcomes. Understanding the makeup and needs of the community I was serving was central to my success. I am very much a “people person” and I consider myself a good listener. I am also a person who stops at nothing to get things done. When it came to organizing neighbors to secure broadband on our road, I was instrumental in having it installed. When I learned that our community might lose the Thompson Finch Farm, I worked with Rosey and Barry Chase to organize a very successful community outreach to help Donny and Marnie secure the future of their family farm. This ranks high on my list of achievements.

Community matters to me. It is the platform on which I am running. I have lived in Ancram since 2004, and I am thrilled to engage with the diverse set of people that make up our neighborhoods and hamlets. I feel confident that my skill set aligns well with the needs of Ancram and I hope to be able to bring my passion to the Town Board in November.

Town News: Currently much of the work necessary to keep our Town functioning is done by various appointed boards and volunteer committees. What changes, if

any, do you think would improve the way these entities function and/or increase community participation?

Hundt: Currently, we are blessed with an amazing number of volunteers on our boards and Committees. They are smart, dedicated people who are unpaid yet they spend hours and hours of time working on behalf of the people of Ancram. We owe them a debt of gratitude. That said, it is my belief that our Town Board should spend more time and consideration in the oversight of these committees and boards to ensure that they are following proper processes, procedures and laws. Our town is facing increasing challenges every day-- from development to climate issues—and the decisions these boards make can have a huge impact on all of us and our futures. It is my belief that members of these boards should be as well-informed and pro-active as possible in their decision-making.

Olyha: Being more progressive in our communications and outreach strategy would deliver some benefits, particularly in engaging new members and participants. Implementing a new technology infrastructure in Town Hall can dramatically increase our options for remote participation, and also give us some cool options to do things like hold Town movie nights and provide the summer camp indoor entertainment on rainy days. Ideas like new technology and using social media can seem daunting if not downright scary to many, but it’s become so simple today and its use so widespread that the Town Board should be setting an example by using it.

Gold: While I value the individual and combined experience of our town board and committee members, with the influx of new people our town has welcomed over the past several years, we should make the town meetings and activities more inclusive and available to a wider population. The skill sets that our new neighbors bring with them should be explored and tapped. Fresh perspectives and expertise should not only be welcomed but enabled. When, in the process of determining new protocols that impact the community, the Board is presented with expert opinions or incontrovertible evidence,

it must be willing to accept the wisdom and recommendations of experts.

In this regard, I advocate for greater transparency of the work done by the Board and believe that by encouraging more expansive community representation at town meetings this can be achieved. Whether in-person or on-line, the more voices heard from the more inclusive and impactful our work can be.

On a personal note, I am very much a conservationist and as a new member of the Conservation Advisory Council (CAC), I look forward to working with members of the Ancram planning and zoning boards to provide guidance for land use and development. I further promise to support programs that protect our natural resources and to be a dependable steward of our sustainable future.

Town News: Tell us one fun fact about yourself!

Hundt: In 1972 I was the high school homecoming queen (and I still have the tiara to prove it).

Olyha: My last name is pronounced O-LEE-HA; for only 5 letters it gets a lot of interpretation! My grandfather was a Hungarian immigrant, and as far as we can tell our extended family is the only one in the US with that last name.

Gold: I have ventured deep into the Impenetrable Forest in Uganda tracking a family of mountain gorillas led by their adult male silverback.

Town Supervisor Race

Art Bassin is running uncontested for another term as Town Supervisor. Asked to identify the most critical issues facing Ancram, Bassin states: “First, affordable housing to attract young families. Town zoning laws must be adjusted to make it more attractive for investors and developers to build such housing here. Second, the need to attract employees and volunteers to keep the town running. The Town Board can offer attractive salaries and benefits for paid staff, and can make it easy and satisfying for volunteers to participate in town government.”

Ancram Town Board Explores Local Housing Needs

By Suzan Flamm

Affordable housing – the lack of it – was identified as a pressing community issue in Ancram’s 2010 Comprehensive Plan. Almost ten years later, in the 2019 Plan, the same issue was flagged, and its solution incorporated into the Plan’s vision for the future. As a first step, the Town recently distributed a survey to assess housing needs in the community. According to the Town website, the survey results will allow Ancram to create policy incentives and encourage development of housing to address those needs.

“I took this on because I see firsthand the struggle, particularly of young

people, to find decent housing and stay in the community,” explains Bonnie Hundt, the Ancram Town Councilwoman spearheading this project along with the Town’s Economic Development Committee. According to a 2017 report by the Harvard Joint Center for Housing Studies, 41 percent (5 million households) of rural renters in the United States are cost-burdened, meaning that the issue of rural housing affordability is not unique to the Hudson River Valley. Renters identified as “cost-burdened” pay more than 30 percent of their income for housing costs, including

utilities. Councilwoman Hundt notes that the pandemic has made the situation worse. “The flight from the cities into our rural community was a boom for local real estate, but drove up housing prices, both purchases and rentals. The average price for a home in our area went from \$247,000 to \$347,000.” She adds that housing costs are causing young people to leave our area. “Those who go to college are not returning.”

Special Challenges Face Prospective Rural Homeowners and Builders

Even for those who can afford the purchase price of a home, there are

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What is **Affordable Housing**?



The government says housing is “affordable” if a family spends **no more than 30%** of their income to live there.



HOUSING

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challenges to owning them. As in most rural communities, much of the local housing stock is old and in need of repair – and expensive to heat. These costs, when added to local property taxes, can make home ownership impossible for many. The survey, which is anonymous, seeks to determine the extent to which people own or rent their homes. It also asks about the percentage of income spent on housing, whether renters would prefer to be homeowners and, if so, what is preventing that step. And, it includes questions about affordable price ranges for either purchases or rentals.

Paul Ricciardi, Co-Director of the Ancram Opera House and the chair of Ancram's Economic Development Committee, says that affordable housing was one of three issues prioritized by the committee at its inception in 2018, equal in importance to the other two – increased broadband access and local jobs. The survey will provide important information to help assess the extent of the problem and start developing solutions. Those solutions might include partnering with other towns and reaching out to developers to promote new housing in the area. Ms. Hundt attended a meeting in August of this year that included representatives from Hillsdale and Copake, as well as real estate agents, for a preliminary discussion regarding new housing.

Ms. Hundt notes that one obstacle that emerged was the cost of building in rural communities, where unique challenges exist. For example, developers cannot count on municipal infrastructure, such as water and sewers, to be in place.

This adds to the price of construction. According to Ms. Hundt, these conversations will continue once the results of the survey have been analyzed.

Columbia County Habitat for Humanity has been addressing the issue of housing since 1993. According to its Executive Director, Al Bellenchia, the mission of the organization is to make affordable home ownership available to working families. Habitat home buyers assist with construction, or, if that is not feasible, they provide community service as a form of sweat equity. The homes are built to be "passive," meaning very energy-efficient and thus affordable to maintain. Frequently built as side-by-side duplexes, sharing a common wall, they are economical to heat.

The organization has completed twenty-five homes in the county. Two of those, finished in 2019, are in Ancramdale, on Route 8, near the center of the hamlet. Mr. Bellenchia is "super excited" to report that two families have entered into partner-

ship agreements to purchase the homes, subject to the outcome of their mortgage applications. Depending on the speed of that process, one family may be in their new home by the end of this year, and the other early next year.

"The definition of affordability" has to expand, Mr. Bellenchia says. "We need to look at the issue holistically. If residents can't afford to buy homes and live here then businesses have no one to hire. It's an economic challenge for everyone in the county."

Both Ms. Hundt and Mr. Ricciardi echo that concern. "No one can find help," the Councilwoman observes. "Restaurants will have to close in the fall when entire staffs go back to school." According to Mr. Ricciardi, half of the Opera House's audience lives within fifteen minutes of the venue. "We need to find a way for young people to come to Ancram and stay here," he says. "I want the Opera House to be part of the conversation, and our committee will do what it can to facilitate a solution. The housing survey is the first step."



An artist rendering envisions the energy-efficient "passive" Habitat homes in the center of Ancramdale that will soon be occupied by homeowners.

Accommodation

By Pearl Abraham

Editor's Note: Ancram is the home of many writers and artists, including author Pearl Abraham who lives on East Ancram Road. Ms. Abraham has shared the following essay with readers of the Town News. In future issues, we hope to highlight other artists and authors in our town.

This story begins in June 2020, the peak of the pandemic. I looked up from mucking one morning, and saw my retired senior horse using his big, wide tongue on the muddy back of an ancient matriarch, a snapping turtle. The image of his lacerated, bleeding tongue hanging by a thread while I wait for a vet to come stitch it flashed before me. I ran and shouted at him to move off. He protested, liking the swampy taste. I sent him onward and ran for the large shovel parked beside the shed. Snappers were showing up in the field regularly enough, often several a day, I was keeping the shovel nearby, within easy reach.

If you live up here, you already know that persuading a turtle intent on getting her eggs laid to hurry along to her destination is not easy. They retract their heads, hunker down low and heavy, refusing to budge. I had to get the shovel under her tail without hurting her, while staying away from her head. Then I had to lift and carry the thing, which weighs anywhere between 10 and 25 pounds depending on age. I had done this often enough I'd learned something about how to steer them. Turtles move away from pressure, which means to steer left, you prod on their right. To turn them around, you touch their quarters. As with horses, this is not entirely intuitive at first.

This March, after a hard winter, I began worrying about the snapper situation again. I'd read stories about them catching hold of a horse's leg, refusing to let go.

You will have to shoot them, Steve said.

How, where? I asked.

Their heads. With a 22.

They're a protected species.

He shrugged. Self-defense.

Mid April, after my first Moderna shot, I visited Aiken, SC for a weekend, where lucky horses go for winter. This was a last minute booking, it was Easter weekend, and car rentals were sold out. Someone at the hotel desk recommended Dawn of the newly-launched Dawn's Taxi Service.

The next morning, Dawn dropped me off downtown. Along the way we talked. She had chickens and goats on the property. The goats kept the rattlesnakes away. I mentioned my snapper problem.

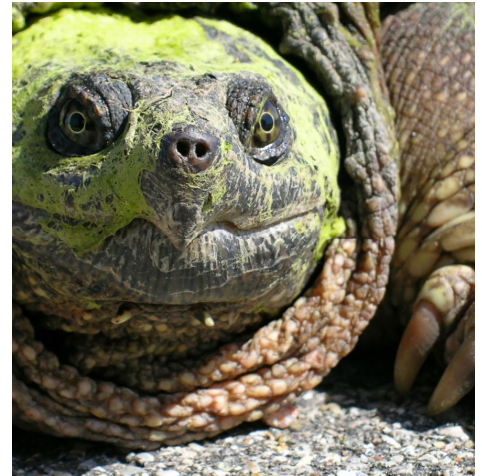
I'll bet, Dawn said, if you create a preferred habitat for them to lay their eggs outside the field, they won't come in.

I liked her way of thinking, but I doubted it would work. These snappers have been trudging up from the wetlands into these fields for decades, maybe centuries; even the newly-hatched babies somehow knew the way.

Back home, I mentioned Dawn's idea. Steve was skeptical. Anyway, he said, you have in fact created a habitat. All the leaves and manure.

We had purchased a leaf vacuum for the piles and piles of leaves in the treed paddock. When we couldn't get the attachment to the John Deere to work, we had to resort to the old laborious way: blowing and raking. We pushed the dry leaves into the hedgerow and under the shrubs below the field. Late winter, a local farmer spread the manure pile in the field north of the paddock.

I spotted the first box turtles crossing the road early May and went on high alert. On warmer days, I started seeing snappers in the gravel at the side of the road. Then I came across one



burrowing in a pile of leaves just below the field; another smaller one was dug deep into the manure pile; the horses continued grazing peacefully. I remained watchful though the snappers seemed to be staying out of the field. We had a cold spell, a pause in snappers. Then after a thunderstorm, I saw one in the friable manure. Late afternoon, another one came walking up from the wetland, head up, pointing toward the paddock.

I watched and worried. She lay her eggs in the gravel at the side of the road, then in the leaf mulch under the forsythia. I saw her again on her way back to the wetland.

I haven't called Dawn yet, to tell her. I think I'll wait past October, when snappers lay eggs again.

Pearl Abraham is the author of, most recently, American Taliban: A Novel and The Seventh Beggar. The Seventh Beggar was a finalist for the Koret Int'l Award in Fiction. Animal Voices, Mineral Hum was shortlisted for the Mary McCarthy Prize in Short Fiction. "Hasidic Noir," published in Brooklyn Noir, won the Shamus Award for best short story. Abraham is the founding editor of sforsentence.com and an Associate Professor of Literature and Creative Writing.

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*Barton & Hoysradt stood on an unpaved road at the end of the 19th century, with an outhouse in back.
The neighboring house currently owned by Annie Walwyn-Jones and Morrison Murdoch can
be glimpsed on the left. Photo: Ancramdale Church Homecoming Book.*