

Project Overview Pied Beauty Farm Stay

The Comprehensive Town Plan adopted by the Town of Albion in 2006 looked forward to Albion being a place where “residents enjoy[ed] . . . opportunities for commercial businesses, along with residences and agriculture. . . rural character is predominant . . . and recreational opportunities are abundant,” among other goals.

The house we plan to build on our farm and our intention to rent it as a tourist lodging supports the broad vision that Albion has articulated in its Comprehensive Town Plan as well as the specific goals, objectives, and policies that follow from this broad vision.

Background on the Farm

When we bought our farm in 2017, it was composed of fifteen acres of woods, fifteen tillable acres planted in corn and soybeans, and ten acres of lawn, gardens, agricultural outbuildings, and a farm house. Over the past five years, we have worked to increase the productivity of the land to secure our farm’s economic and environmental sustainability. To this end, we took the tillable acreage out of conventional corn and soybean rotation and converted it to an organic field with a cover crop of clover. Since 2018, we have planted 230 apple trees to establish an organic cider apple orchard in the clover field. We keep honey bees which feed on the clover, pollinate the trees, and produce honey and wax for sale. We have also planted Christmas trees in the field and have rented a portion of it to a small vegetable farmer. In what was formerly lawn around the agricultural outbuildings, we have planted a test orchard of 60 trees and a wholesale cut flower garden.

The proposed house and conditional use preserves our existing farm operation by maintaining the farm as a viable source of income.

To preserve and foster opportunities for agriculture and to protect Albion as a place where rural character is predominant, the Comprehensive Town Plan aims to “Preserve existing farm operations,” and “Protect and preserve the soils and other natural resources of the Town for future generations” (Goal 1 Agriculture, Objectives 3 and 5). Relatedly, the town also aims to “Foster a local economy that is sustainable” by “maintaining farming as a viable source of income” (Goal 12 Economic Development, Objective 1).

The economics of farming are increasingly challenging, especially for farmers as small as we are.¹ We rented our tillable acres to a corn and soybean farmer for the first year after we bought our farm at the rate of \$100 per acre (\$1400). The small size of our tillable field makes it impossible for us to purchase equipment to row crop the field ourselves. Even with equipment to till the field, we could expect to gross less than \$15,000 per year (assuming 170 bushels of corn per acre and \$6 per bushel); the net would be far less after subtracting fuel, seed, fertilizer, and pesticide costs.

When mature, our existing 230 apple trees will yield 14,000 bottles of cider which will wholesale at \$5 per bottle. Even after expenses, our field will be able to provide a viable

¹ The U.S. Department of Agriculture estimates the median farm income in 2020 to be a loss of - \$1,198. For small “residence farms” like ours the USDA estimates an average net loss of - \$2,334. U.S. Department of Agriculture, “Farm Household Income Estimates,” <https://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/farm-economy/farm-household-well-being/farm-household-income-estimates/>

source of income as an cider apple orchard. The proposed orchard house and farm stay will support our apple business in several ways. First, our orchard will take 7-10 years to mature. Rental income from the house will provide a source of income while we continue to plant trees and while we wait for those we have planted to mature. Secondly, the house rental will provide a source of income during lean years when late frosts damage the apple crop. Thirdly, we anticipate marketing and sales opportunities for our apples, flowers, vegetables and honey that will inevitably result from bringing visitors from outside the region to our farm rental.

The proposed house and conditional use contributes to a visually appealing community

We have designed the house to fit into agricultural landscape where it is located. The unpainted cedar and metal roof design of the house takes inspiration from the tobacco barn that stood on our farm prior to our purchase of it and that remain standing on other farms all along Washington Road. In addition to patterning the geometry and materials of the building after traditional agricultural buildings, we have chosen to locate the house well back from Washington road to minimize its visual impact on passersby. When the apple orchard is mature, the house will be completely screened from view.

The proposed house and conditional use protects farmland from future inappropriate use and/or development.

By building this house at the eastern margin of our field, we seek to protect the remaining acres from future development. This house will make use of the last remaining residential development opportunity on the property; therefore, no other house can be built on our farm. The presence of the septic field and well in the far eastern border of our field all but assures that the location we have chosen for this house will remain the only site of development for generations into the future. Even if the house is expanded, remodeled, or torn down and rebuilt, the new owners of the house and farm would in all likelihood site a home in the place we have chosen.

One objection to the site might be the necessity of a driveway across the field. Far from preventing agricultural use of our fourteen-acre field, however, this driveway will support our apple orchard. In addition to providing access to the house, the driveway will provide off-road access to the middle of our orchard for agricultural machinery during harvest times. The driveway does not present a unique barrier to row cropping our fourteen-acre field because it is unlikely that anyone will remove the valuable apple trees we have planted to return the field to a conventional corn and soybean rotation.

Developing this small portion of our field as a tourist and transient lodging rental home provides the financial support necessary for us (and any future owner of the farm) to continue to work the fourteen tillable acres in a way that is financially sustainable and environmentally sensitive. In short, the orchard and the house that support it preserve the rural character of our corner of Washington Road and Highway 51 by preempting and foreclosing other inappropriate, less desirable, or less sustainable conditional uses.