

Farm or factory: Will Schartner's mall-sized greenhouse change RI town's rural character?

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EXETER — Tim Schartner walks a field his family has worked for a century, part of the landmark farm that served as a gateway into South County's bucolic region for generations of Rhode Islanders traveling down Route 2.

But it's not corn or peppers sprouting from the ground around him this year; it's hundreds of knee-high white metal stanchions, each beam support cemented in place and aligned with laser precision covering 1 million square feet of ground.

That's the size of the Warwick Mall.

Schartner intends to enclose the 25 acres in glass and grow two-story-tall tomato plants year-round in a marinade of water and nutrients, absent dirt. Agricultural scientists say the hydroponic greenhouse method is the future fix to the world's food demands. And Schartner says it's how he plans to save the remaining 225 acres of the farm from development.

But his intentions have grown into a big hot potato.

Some local opponents say the immense project is more a commercial and manufacturing enterprise than farming, and that it doesn't comply with Exeter's comprehensive plan and threatens the town's rural nature.



“No one ever imagined a facility of that size,” says Megan Cotter, who chairs the town's Democratic committee.

Worse, says Frank DiGregorio, a former member of the Town Council and the Planning Board, the Schartners are taking advantage of Exeter's antiquated zoning regulations that consider all greenhouses temporary structures that are tax-exempt and need no permit to build.

"The town got caught with its pants down, and they're trying to take advantage of it," says DiGregorio. "This is not a temporary structure. "

Would zoning change lead to 'clear-cutting' of Exeter's trees?

Further, the town's Republican leadership seems uninterested in regulatory oversight, says DiGregorio. "This is a Republican town, and Republicans do not believe in regulation. They believe anybody can do whatever they want with their property. Well, something of this scope and magnitude impacts other people living in this town, too."

The Town Council is holding public hearings now on a new zoning amendment that would allow agricultural projects like Schartner's to have a solar-powered energy system "by right" without going through a permit process.

If approved, "the clear cutting [of trees] that will ensue will be very alarming," says Cotter. "One of the perks of living in Exeter is you are surrounded with beautiful forests and nature. And it would be sad if that disappeared."



Council President Daniel Patterson — who attended Schartner’s groundbreaking ceremony in June — says 170 people gathered at a public hearing on the zoning amendment earlier this month, and opinion seemed "split right down the middle, pro and con.”

Another hearing is scheduled for next month.

Schartner’s company, Rhode Island Grows LLC, says on its website it has intentions of expanding to 1,000 acres. DiGregorio wonders if that’s all meant for Exeter.

“That would literally destroy us as a community,” he says.

Says Schartner: “There will be other places. Not all in Exeter.”

Moving ahead with greenhouse construction

Questions seem to be sprouting like weeds as Schartner moves ahead with construction of his facility that, once completed, will produce 15 million pounds of beefsteak tomatoes a year — 42,000 pounds a day — picked before breakfast and sold in markets around the Northeast by supper.

During a tour of the site, Schartner explains that he's moving forward now because he doesn't need local permission to build the glass structure; despite its gargantuan size, it meets the definition of a greenhouse, he says.

Even though the stanchions are cemented in place, "you can pull them right out with a backhoe and have your field."

There will be no poured concrete floor underneath, just dirt. "The field is not destroyed."

Unless the zoning amendment is approved, he'll still need local approval for the 13-acre solar-panel field he plans to use to power about 30% of the project. It will be built in a field; no clear-cutting. "We think we'll get it," he said.

Schartner says he submitted his plan for the agricultural project three years ago to town officials as an alternative to a housing development.

"When I went to the town, it was about me with a means to save Schartner Farms."

'Farm was one generation from not making it'

For decades, passing motorists stopped for fresh produce, homemade jams and strawberry-rhubarb pies. Patrons picked berries and children enjoyed autumn afternoons bouncing along on hay rides and exploring pumpkin patches.

But the farm never rebounded from a 2015 fire that destroyed its popular two-story market.

“This farm was one generation from not making it, not making it through succession,” says Schartner. “It needed something to leverage us into the next generation.”

Schartner looked to Madison, Maine, a farming town of 4,500 in the heart of the Pine Tree State.



In 2006, a company there, Backyard Farms, using greenhouse technology perfected in the Netherlands, opened its first 20-acre greenhouse. It has expanded to 42 acres, one of the largest examples of “controlled environment agriculture “ in the Northeast.

“It’s agriculture, even though it’s newfangled,” says Madison Town Manager Tim Curtis. “We’re an agricultural area, and the people like the idea of all these jobs. So, for the most part, it was very well received, and it seems, looking back now, it has been a really positive experience and they’ve been good partners with the town.”

Schartner traveled to the Netherlands and eventually landed an agreement with the company Havecon to design and erect his greenhouse. Havecon had built a 70-acre greenhouse in Oneida, New York.

Schartner says he sought loans for the \$60-million project (including \$9.1 million from the state's Clean Water State Revolving Fund) and has an agreement with Sunset produce company to purchase all the tomatoes he grows for 10 years.

His 25-acre operation will be able to produce the annual equivalent of 1,200 acres of traditionally grown tomatoes, while using less than 5% of the water and employing some 80 people year-round.

“For the value of this greenhouse and what it can produce, it's actually the only agriculture that can compete with encroaching commercial development,” he says.

“Yeah, we could give up and just make a ton of money in homes — I can live in Bermuda — or I can be a good steward and keep my family in agriculture another four or five generations.”

Neighbors and DEM support greenhouse

Schartner says he's received support from his neighbors, who tell him what he's proposing is better than a subdivision.

Brian Hallene, whose family has owned the adjacent farm for generations, says, “It's complicated. People are very leery about what's going in. It's still agriculture, but it's not what people think.”

What seems clear, though, is, “it's not 45 houses going in there.”

The project is supported by the Department of Environmental Management.

Ken Ayars, chief of DEM's agriculture division, says the Schartner project is an important, incremental step toward Rhode Island securing fresh, local food sources for the future.

"I take the 30,000-foot view," Ayars says, explaining that when he was born in 1960, about 3 billion humans roamed the earth. By the time he turns 80 in 20 years, he'll be sharing the world with 9 billion others.

"Never in history has the planet experienced that kind of rapid growth," he says. "And all of them must eat."

Ensuring a local food supply

Food security isn't just a challenge of the future.

In the immediate aftermath of Superstorm Sandy in 2012, New England found itself with only a three-day supply of food because so much of the region's food comes from thousands of miles away, says John Kirby, dean of the University of Rhode Island's College of the Environment and Life Sciences.

And during the COVID-19 pandemic last year, Ayars says, Rhode Islanders faced some bare produce shelves for the same reason: The trucks weren't coming.

Couple that with people wanting to avoid crowded places like supermarkets, says Ayars, and "one of the things we saw was an intense interest in local sources of food, and that dynamic still remains very, very strong."

"It proved to us the value of supporting local agriculture and fisheries, because in times of crises, that is where the public went."

Ayars says controlled environment agriculture "may change the look of our state from an agricultural aesthetic. But agriculture is constantly changing. This is what the Schartner family wants to do. We respect and

support that. It doesn't mean they don't have to follow the rules of the road, but agriculture needs to change to meet the needs of the population, a very rapidly growing population. The role of farming is to feed people. That's the bottom line."

'The people of the town deserve transparency'

Schartner's critics, such as Cotter and DiGregorio, say they support the new technology in farming — just not to this scale, at what they say is a cost of prime farmland. They ask: Why can't it go in an industrial location like Quonset Point, since it doesn't require dirt?

Perhaps, Cotter says, this project is better than a subdivision. But there's been so little discussion so far before town leaders that the public isn't getting much chance to have their questions answered.

"I think the people of the town deserve transparency," she says.

Schartner says the 25-acre greenhouse he's proposing "is the smallest size that is viable" for his farm.

He, too, wants to preserve Exeter's rural character, he says, which is why he's keeping the fields along Route 2 reserved for traditional farming — the kind of farming people like to see, the open space they appreciate as they drive by.

"Part of a charm of a farm is the vista," he says. "It is a huge value to the farm and to the community. But if you can take 25 acres to save 225 more and keep the vistas, why wouldn't you? That's how agriculture is going to compete with commercial development."

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