

Berks Agricultural Resource Network organizes to support leading industry

LEESPORT --- A newly created non-profit organization has been formed in Berks County to assist the agricultural industry. Formerly known as the Berks Farm-City Council, the Berks Agricultural Resource Network (B.A.R.N.) will be expanding its original base and bringing in new advocates for the food and fiber industries of Berks County. Founding organizations include the Berks County Farm Bureau, Berks Pomona Grange, Berks Farm Women Society, and the various agencies that serve the farm community. These include the Penn State Extension Service, Berks County Conservation District, the Berks Agricultural Land Preservation Board (BCALPB), federal farm agencies, and the county agricultural coordinator.

Serving as the first president of B.A.R.N. is Tami Hildebrand, executive director of the BCALPB. "We are excited about the opportunities this new organization has in supporting the work that was initiated by the farm organizations and agricultural industries in the county under the former Farm-City Council. Our mission will be to provide a network to further educate the non-farm public about the importance of agriculture in their daily lives." Hildebrand added that key agribusinesses and members of the financial community are part of the new group.

"Scott Hauseman and Bill Hughes, two well-known names in agri-lending, are part of our executive team, serving as vice president and treasurer, respectively," said Hildebrand. "B.A.R.N.'s secretary is Sheila Miller who is the county's agricultural coordinator." This new team of officers will lead the organization into the New Year and assist in launching activities in 2009. Hildebrand noted that the group will continue to fine-tune its structure, while expanding its membership base. Along with the annual farm tour in the fall, Hildebrand said the group is planning to hold an annual meeting and other educational events, such as the Farmers Night at the Reading Phillies.

"Our goal is to promote the agricultural and related food industries in Berks County through economic development efforts, marketing, policy development, and education, recognizing that agriculture represents the entire food industry chain from farm to consumer," said Hildebrand. "We will be serving as an over-arching coordinator between the farm organizations and advocacy groups within Berks County, working to improve the economic viability of agriculture."

B.A.R.N. will be available to assist local governments with information that will help guide their efforts to support and preserve agriculture and its related economic infrastructure in their communities, she noted. "We want to recognize successful efforts to identify, protect, and preserve agriculture in Berks County," Hildebrand added. "We will work with agricultural organizations, local, state and national government officials to develop policies that promote agriculture and related industries."

A fifteen member board will encourage and support the development of regional networks, working with existing organizations that share an interest in the past, present

and future viability of Berks County's agricultural community. These board members will be elected to three-year terms at the annual meeting. Individuals interested in becoming a member of B.A.R.N. should contact Sheila Miller, secretary, at 610-898-5482. Affiliate memberships are also available for corporations and other organization wishing that promote and support Berks County's agricultural industry.

"B.A.R.N. will put together a farm team that will keep Berks County agriculture growing strong," concluded Hildebrand.