

SHELBURNE FARMS

Strategic Plan 2017-2022

November 10, 2017

Introduction from the Strategic Planning Committee

Shelburne Farms is both a place and an idea. Author and longtime board member Julia Alvarez describes the powerful combination of the two:

No other place I know combines such stunning natural beauty with a quiet groundswell of visionary commitment to stewardship and planetary thinking and doing. The place reminds you of the things that are important: community, the future, young people. It stirs up a deep, sweet hope that we can create a sustainable, socially just world! It's more than a place, Shelburne Farms is a state of mind.

The Early Years of Shelburne Farms

Love of place was evident in Shelburne Farm's origins as a private agricultural estate. In 1886, William Seward Webb and Lila Vanderbilt Webb envisioned a model farm. They saw Shelburne Farms as a grand experiment, designed to demonstrate new techniques and practices in land use and farming. The Webbs planned the estate with the advice and assistance of some of the most creative planners in the country, including landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted, who designed Central Park, and architect Robert Henderson Robertson. By the turn of the century, Shelburne Farms was known as one of the foremost farms in the country.

Grand, visionary experiments take resources and drain resources and by the mid-twentieth century Shelburne Farms could no longer flourish through the largesse of a single family. By the 1950s Seward and Lila Webb's grandson Derick Webb had inherited the central portion of the original estate and had decided to stop maintaining the historic structures and invest instead in building a new dairy farm operation.

The Creation and Evolution of a Nonprofit Organization

The social and political upheavals of the 1960s, growing concern about global environmental degradation and limits to growth, increasing property taxes, and private development pressures further set the stage for change. In 1972 Shelburne Farms Resources was incorporated as an independent nonprofit education organization. The new organization, started by Derick Webb's children, spouses, and friends, had no assets – simply the purpose of enabling “the use of Shelburne Farms’ resources to serve human educational needs” and the hope that the Farm would one day make a significant contribution to global environmental protection. That same year Shelburne residents encouraged protection of Shelburne Farms and early program development by voting overwhelmingly in favor of property tax stabilization. Start-up activities included summer camps with vegetable production for the Shelburne and Burlington Farmers’ Markets, teacher workshops, school field trips, community gardens and canning center, and outdoor community cultural events. Early volunteers and community members, staff and board members, and generous supporters began the long process of revitalizing the farmland, forests, landscape and buildings as a campus and resource center to inspire learning about sustainability.

In 1984 Derick died and bequeathed the property to Shelburne Farms Resources. There was no endowment, the property suffered from decades of deferred maintenance, and had an annual cash flow shortfall of more than \$100,000 per year. Following the gift of the property the board's strategy was to implement a limited development plan to provide startup capital, while at the same time reaching out to

the community with a capital fundraising effort. The goals of the ensuing Centennial Campaign were to build education programs, open the property to the public, and to reverse the annual operating deficit. The first edition of *Project Seasons* was published, and the Welcome Center and walking trails opened in 1986. The Inn opened the following year. Seeing Shelburne Farms as an increasingly valuable resource, in 1989 Shelburne community members voted a second time to authorize the Select board to continue property tax relief. Important activities included developing the cheesemaking operation and on-site partnerships with OBread Bakery, Miskell Organics, Beeken Parsons Furniture Makers, Shelburne Vineyards, Outreach for Earth Stewardship, and Renaissance School.

The early 1990s saw increased program outreach and community access to the Farm. The Farm Barn was rehabilitated as the Farm's Education Center, including the McClure Center for School Programs. Community engagement with the property was greatly enhanced with the addition of the Children's Farmyard and an extended network of trails. In 1993, an organization-wide strategic planning process was initiated. It reaffirmed the vision of Shelburne Farms serving as both a resource and catalyst for the world's transition from the agricultural and industrial revolutions of the past 8,000 years of human history into the sustainability revolution of the twenty-first century. The plan called for education programs to focus on serving youth and educators, and continuing work on strengthening program support enterprises and organizational capacity.

In 1994, the Board responded to a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity presented by the Shelburne Museum to acquire the Southern Acres property, including 400 acres and the Breeding Barn Complex. The property transfer from the Museum to the Farm was also made possible by descendants of Watson and Electra Webb, neighbors, and benefactors. Seward and Lila had originally given the southern portion of Shelburne Farms to their oldest son Watson and his wife, Shelburne Museum founder Electra Havemeyer Webb, as a wedding gift in 1913.

Throughout the 1990s, organizations at home and abroad began to see Shelburne Farms as a partner with whom they could collaborate to deepen their own work and its impact. Shelburne Farms, and its programs were further strengthened through a culture of reciprocity. Collaborative projects allowed Shelburne Farms staff and board to practice new ideas, hone teaching methods, explore new frontiers, and identify common goals with organizations and people across the globe. Program outreach expanded during this chapter to include partners such as the National Park Service's Conservation Study Institute (CSI) and the Institute for Sustainable Communities (ISC). Work with CSI included starting the Forest for Every Classroom program and collaborating with the Park Service in Italy to adapt the Project Seasons program. Partnership projects with ISC started in Bulgaria, Poland, Romania, Russia and Ukraine and continued in Japan and China. In 2006, Shelburne Farms became a founding partner of the Farm-Based Education Network.

Shelburne Farms' partnerships were not limited to national and international work. In 2000, Vermont FEED (Food Education Everyday) was launched with NOFA Vermont and Foodworks. The Sustainable Schools Project was formed to support a statewide effort that resulted in the adoption of "sustainability" as an educational standard for Vermont's public schools.

Along with program development, projects to improve buildings, gardens, landscape, and infrastructure have been ongoing. A Land Stewardship Fund was started in 2000 with a \$1 million challenge gift to protect against commercial development around the approach and entrance to the Farm. Orchard Cove House was improved as a retreat center in 2012 to support the development of residential education programs.

Today, Shelburne Farms continues to share its resources – human, natural, agricultural, and cultural – to inspire people to build healthy communities locally and around the world. In 2016, the organization served more than 140,000 individuals through education and visitor programs on-site, in addition to

providing outreach programs and resources for many educators and schools. The Children's Farmyard, walking trails, and property tours see the largest number of guests. More than 300 volunteers engage with Shelburne Farms and more than 4,000 individuals make financial gifts to the Farm each year. The work of Shelburne Farms is currently and will continue to be amplified through the community that forms at the Farm, and through the collaborations and the collective impact of many networks.

2017-2022 – Building the Organization for the Future

Our committee, comprising both board and staff members, was appointed in the fall of 2016 to conduct a strategic planning process and recommend five-year goals and objectives to the full board by summer 2017. The process has emphatically reaffirmed a shared faith in Shelburne Farms' mission and practices. In meetings, in interviews, and through surveys, we heard consistently that people love and admire Shelburne Farms; they consider the programs and enterprises to be successful. We heard no call for dramatic change.

At the same time, the process has also clarified some important directions to pursue in the next five years.

- We heard there is a growing sense of urgency in relation to the mission of Shelburne Farms. Our various constituencies see a country and a globe that require more than ever the values and ideals of both the place and the organization.
- We heard that the issues of diversity, equity, inclusion, power and privilege demand a new level of attention.
- We heard that the distinction between “program” and “program support enterprises” that dates back to the strategic planning of the 1990's no longer serves the organization well; all staff wanted to see their work in direct relation to the mission of Shelburne Farms.
- We heard that a maturing organization must create sustainable conditions for its staff at all levels. Administrative structures, decision-making processes, and human resource policies must be reviewed in light of the increased complexity of operations.
- We heard some trepidation about the transition from the founding generation of executive leadership, which is not imminent but is in sight. A widely-shared hope for this Plan is that it will help the organization become ready for that transition when it occurs.

Put simply, this planning process became about two driving questions. The first was “How do we take a good thing and make it better?” It led us to Goal One, which calls for investment in personnel and residential capacity to expand the impact of our educational programs, and Goal Two, which focuses on the optimal relations among the parts of Shelburne Farms as a whole.

The second question was “How do we prepare ourselves for changes and opportunities we know Shelburne Farms will face in the next decade?” That question led us to Goal Three, which addresses multiple aspects of organizational capacity, cultural relevance, and financial health for Shelburne Farms in the years ahead.

Thus, this Plan is about both near-term operations and *readiness* – readiness for the upcoming Capital Campaign, for responding to future opportunities, including partnering with Meach Cove Farms, and for managing leadership transitions as they occur. This Plan is based on our shared sense of mission and our vision of how Shelburne Farms can make a difference in the world in the years leading up our 50th anniversary in 2022, and beyond.

Throughout the planning process the committee had animated conversations about how best to express our sense of purpose. The foundational mission language that follows is an updated version of the language we have used in the past. The section concludes with three statements of “What We Do,” because in the end what is most important to us about the place and the idea of Shelburne Farms is that they are translated into action.

The Strategic Planning Steering Committee - November 2017

Committee Members: Megan Camp, Ben Freeman, Will Jackson, Nan Jenks-Jay, Steve Johnson (Chair), Casey Murrow, Lisa Steele, Alec Webb, Kate Williams, and Vera Simon-Nobes. Committee Support: Marianne Balczuk and Erin Boyd. Consultants: David and Nancy Grant.