When farmers want to expand their pasture for cattle most of them look to their neighbors to lease additional pasture. But Paul de la Bruere of Highgate took a longer view – literally.

As a certified organic dairyman, Paul must adhere to strict rules in the feeding and care of his herd. In February the USDA codified its position regarding the number of days organic dairies must pasture their animals. The regulations now mandate a minimum of 120 days of forage. The rule applies to all fifty states and makes no allowance for those subject to months of heavy snows.

The new rule struck Paul hard. He knew his thirty-one acre farm along the Canadian border couldn’t come close to providing enough pasture for his seventy-five milkers and an assortment of hungry young heifers and calves.

So Paul called Reed and Anna von Gal. Paul had rented their farm a decade earlier, before buying his place in Highgate, his hometown. The von Gals own 125 acres on Old Stage Road in Essex—more than forty miles south, about a forty-five minute drive.

Paul remembered von Gals’ gently sloped, pasture-rich acreage with its iconic multi-story cow barn. The distance was a concern, but it didn’t deter him.

When Paul drove down to look the barn over, he realized he would be taking on a Herculean task, given the short amount of time he had to get it done.

The barn had dozens of broken windows and thick cobwebs inside. The water system to the barn needed work. Trees and thick brush had grown up all along the foundation and completely blocked some doors. Miles of new fencing would also have to be constructed before he could even think about moving his herd. His memory was dead right about one thing—the von Gal property has rich grassland, and the 800-gallon stainless steel bulk tank was right where he’d left it.

But there was also the question of the neighbors. When Paul worked the farm in the late 90s, there weren’t nearly as many big homes and condos surrounding the farm as there are now. Reestablishing a dairy farm would create manure smell, flies, and an occasional moo or two. Would the neighbors accept him or fight him?

Paul with son Dominic, aged twenty-one, a student at the New England Institute of Art, who helped out on the farm while home from college.
Paul, a devout Roman Catholic, who was raised on a dairy farm but spent a few years in a monastery before returning to farming, prayed for guidance. Then, he went to work.

He got help building about two miles of fence from Essex resident, Jonathan Wrench. Barn windows were replaced, weed trees and brush cut, and calf pens built.

In May, Paul’s mix of Holstein, Ayrshire, and Jerseys were loaded into trailers and moved to Old Stage Road. It took a full day to move them all.

The result has been a profitable one. The cows have grown fat and happy on the von Gals’ grass and are producing quality milk. A seven percent milk check cut that had been applied to organic producers earlier was also lifted this summer. That helped too, he says.

Paul is pleased with what he believes was an answer to his prayers.

Every other day a tanker backs up to the milk house and sucks about two tons of organically-produced milk from the stainless steel bulk tank. Most is made into yogurt at Stonyfield Farms in New Hampshire.

“Are the cows healthier farming this way?” he is asked.

“I was always losing cows and having to buy replacements before,” Paul says. “I don’t do that any more. In fact, now I have cows to sell. So, I guess that says something.”

As for the calves, newborns are confined together in large pens bedded deeply in hay and sawdust beside open windows streaming fresh air and sun. There are no plastic calf huts and ropes or chains around their necks, nor are they isolated from one another as in conventional dairying.

When the youngsters are able to eat grass and hay, they are moved to small pastures butted right up against the big barn, and they remain together. “It’s good because they learn early about fencing,” Paul says, “and are easier to handle.”
Paul hired Jasan Matthews, an experienced dairyman whose father runs the only year-round dairy farm left in Essex, as his primary assistant. Jasan is deaf, so Paul communicates with Jasan by posting written instructions inside the barn and through hand gestures. While not official “signing,” the men clearly understand one another.

Paul also gets help from Nelson LaChattelle Jr. of Highgate. Paul and his assistants benefit from a mobile home von Gal has set up on the property, a short walk from the barn. It provides a comfortable home away from home where Paul can track milk production, shower, sleep, pay bills, and relax in the evenings.

Paul is thrilled to be putting the land to good use again, having the support of his suburban neighbors and to be farming organically. “To take a farm that is sitting idle and bring it back to life is a big deal— especially in Chittenden County,” he believes.

Paul says he joined the Vermont Farm Bureau when he was shopping for insurance some years back. “The agent told me I could save some money,” he says. He also likes the discount on oil and propane.

Like any good farmer, Paul has a wish list of improvements in mind for the Essex operation in 2011. He will divide the pastures into a series of small grazing areas off both sides of the wide center lane leading from the milking barn and number them.

“That way I can just point and show Jasan I want the cows in say, ‘21’ and he will know where to put them,” Paul says. Grazing the animals on smaller tracts will result in more efficient grazing.

He also intends to run water lines through the land. Currently, the milkers must be brought up from the pasture and watered from troughs twice a day. The same is done with the separate herd of heifers and dry cows. “We had a number of 90 degree days this summer. It is important the cows are able to get to water,” Paul says.

While it is clear there is work to be done, Paul is pleased with his progress. Revitalizing an old dairy farm, especially in the middle of the worst economic downturn since the Depression, is unusual. To do so in a bustling urban area in one of the state’s most populated regions is even more remarkable.

Paul’s concern his operation might meet with resistance from the neighbors has dissipated too. In August Paul held...
an open house with wine and cheese and invited the neighbors to visit. “Many of them told me they were happy to see the cows here instead of buildings,” he says. The party went so well, he is planning to host another open house next year and maybe add a hayride.

“Come October, the grass will stop growing and I will have to move them back.” Paul says. “If I have to feed hay, I might as well do it in Highgate.”

But for now, this Farm Bureau member is pleased to have taken a small step to reverse the trend of disappearing dairy farms in Chittenden County and to have secured a good future for his own farm at the same time.

Paul allows Jasan to board a few of his cows separately from the organic herd. Nelson helping out in the dairy barn. Paul and Jasan lead the mix of Holstein, Ayrshire, and Jerseys from the watering trough back down to pasture.