

Agricultural Resources Committee

Minutes of September 25, 2007

9:00 – 11:00 AM

Skagit Valley College, Friday Harbor

ARC Members Present: Peter Corning, Christine Dahl-Sesby, Eliza Habegger, Todd Goldsmith (via phone), Bruce Gregory, Sara Jones, Danna Kinsey, Jim Lawrence, Chris Lohman, Julie Miller, Tom Schultz, Madden Surbaugh, Mark Tomkins, Ron Zee

ARC Members Absent: Jane Burton-Bell, Ralph Hahn, Katie Hover (husband Paul Lacrampe sat in for Katie), Rebecca Moore

ARC Friends Present: Richard Anderson, Westcott Bay Cider; Jack Cory, Island Guardian; Candace Jagel, WSU Ag Program Coordinator; Sus Kellogg, San Juan Island; Paul Lacrampe, Lacrover Farm; Jana Marks, Friends of the San Juans; Cloud McCauley, San Juan Island; Bill Watson, EDC staff

Guests Present: Patricia Arnold and Janet Abbett, Department of Community, Trade & Economic Development, Housing Division

CD/ARC Staff Present: Eliza Buck, Steve Hussey

MINUTES

The minutes of the May 22, 2007 meeting were approved as written. Todd Goldsmith moved acceptance, and Jim Lawrence seconded the motion. Minutes were unanimously approved.

PUBLIC COMMENT

Sus Kellogg announced that she has presented a plan to the San Juan County Land Bank for a cooperative farm project on the King Sisters land. She would like to work with the ARC to make it a model farm project in the islands.

Bruce Gregory asked those present if they have seen the dog signs that Public Works is supposed to place around the islands based on Ordinance 19-2006. Very few signs have been identified. Members saw one on Lopez and one on San Juan Island. Ron Zee will follow up with the County Administrator to learn the status of the signs.

Definition of Farming in San Juan County

Ron introduced the idea to the committee that there would be a brief discussion for the next few ARC meetings to help define the term “farming in the San Juans.” Jim Lawrence offered an initial definition and opened the discussion by saying that farming means that the operation is meant to be profitable. He would like us to consider farming as “food and fiber” rather than exotic animals and horses.

Sus Kellogg and Cloud McCauley pointed out that some horse operations should be considered farms based on their profitability and management. Danna Kinsey stated that management issues are similar for horses and other large hooved animals. Bruce Gregory noted that plant nurseries are some of the biggest revenue generators in the state. Paul Lacrampe asked, “how do we not put ourselves in opposition to other island residents?” Jack Cory pointed out that there may be unforeseen consequences of trying to limit and define agriculture. If the definition gets too restrictive, you could lose categories. Bruce offered a definition of harvesting solar energy for profit. Ron Zee closed the discussion and offered to continue the discussion via email.

OLD BUSINESS

Ron welcomed new members Chris Lohman and Katie Hover (represented by her husband, Paul Lacrampe) to the committee, and asked the committee to think about whether they want to retain the same subcommittee structure or whether they want to organize by projects. Email discussion will follow with a decision needed by the November meeting.

Presentations were made by each of the subcommittees.

Regulation

Todd Goldsmith presented for the Regulation Subcommittee.

- Todd reported that the subcommittee has no chair person and did not meet in over the summer.
- Todd spoke with Mark Tompkins who confirmed that the Board of Health has adopted the recommended fee structure for farm stands. He thanked Mark.
- Todd attended the first two CAO meetings. It’s going to be a “slow schlogg” and lots of issues will be discussed. They are already talking about water use and the County recharge areas. One member wants to restrict water use. Todd will monitor carefully and keep the ARC informed upon.

Marketing

Tom Schultz presented for the Marketing Subcommittee.

- Marketing subcommittee has met twice over the summer.
- Priorities – permanent farmers market, farm to institution and food security.
- Working on certification program. Eleven members have signed up so far. Some members have said that customers have come in specifically because of the program.
- Subcommittee wants to expand program to create an island products certification. They want to develop a producer survey to find out about interest. Jim said that businesses attached to a collective label were more successful at a Whole Foods marketing meeting. Madden Surbaugh talked about the importance of branding the islands – selling the islands through our products. ARC encouraged subcommittee to pursue program.

Julie Miller urged the committee to take action on the land use fee for Village Green. She’s been appealing to the County Council, but she needs help. She asked the committee to send

a letter to the Council. Cloud McCauley is a member of the Parks Board and offered to look into the situation.

Preservation

Eliza Habegger and Sara Jones presented for the Preservation Subcommittee.

- The subcommittee has grown in numbers.
- They have been working on the Farmhold concept.
- Land Bank has written a draft land management plan for the King Sisters property. An unresolved issue is how much the Land Bank would contribute to farm infrastructure on those pieces to be leased.
- FarmLink programs on Orcas and Lopez were well attended. Mary Embleton of Cascade Harvest Coalition spoke to groups about the state FarmLink program. ARC will facilitate a local chapter of the program and try to serve as a resource to help link landowners and farmers. A couple on Orcas proposing a farm lease project in Olga. Sus Kellogg is proposing a collaborative project on King Sisters property. A couple on Lopez looking at a piece of property to lease to farmers. Eliza B. hopes to put templates and resources for FarmLink matches on ARC website.
- Eliza B. passed around a letter in support of Mike Halperin purchasing Sproul property on Lopez Island. A group met with Halperin at the property and gave him advice about needed infrastructure to make a farm lease viable. Bruce Gregory said that he had a conversation with Charles Zalmanek the County Assessor who is working to move people out of the ag-deferred tax status designation (farm & agriculture land) who are not working the land as agreed. There is a real possibility that many of these lands could go on the market and sold to developers.
- Bruce, Ron and Eliza will meet with Charles Zalmanek about how we might collaborate on ways to reduce the loss of ag deferred tax status lands (farm & agriculture land).
- Paul expressed concern about SJICD and ARC focusing resources on helping land buyers with farm leasing. He recommended that the county take the lead on these efforts. Sus, Sara and Tom aired their views that farmland preservation is a primary goal of the committee. ARC approved letter of support for Halperin.

Are we comfortable with the three subcommittee structure? Sara felt that subcommittee size should be small. Eliza H. recommended that the ARC organize under projects.

Coordinator's Report

- Written coordinator's report emailed and distributed at meeting.
- Showed committee new ARC banner.
- Requested new photos for website.

NEW BUSINESS

Presentations by Patricia Arnold and Janet Abbett, Washington State Community, Trade & Economic Development Housing Division

Pat lives in Klickitat County on a farm. Farm worker housing issues "near and dear" to Pat.

Klickitat County wrote their own definition of farmland of significance for the county comprehensive plan because a lot of their farmland does not meet the State's criteria for farmlands of commercial significance because they are too small.

Pat introduced herself as the “on-the-ground” person for farm working housing infrastructure loans and her supervisor Janet Abbett as the manager of all farm worker housing programs. Pat passed around photos of projects that they have funded so far and flyers about the program.

The program funds infrastructural improvements on farms in relation to migrant farm worker housing. The program began for the 2005-2007 biennium and they have secured funding for the next two years (2007-2009). The program funds loans for migrant farm worker housing related infrastructure only.

Pat defined “seasonal” workers as someone who lives near by and works on the farm for a short period. “Migrant” workers have a permanent residence at least 75 miles away, and live onsite during harvest.

Jim talked about how labor issues are unique in the islands due to a restricted labor pool, the use of interns, the high cost of living, small farm size, etc. Pat said she is here to visit island farms to learn specifically what the issues are and how their programs might assist island farmers. She has made appointments with farmers on Lopez, Orcas and San Juan islands.

Janet pointed out that CTED has other farm worker housing programs that can be applied to by the county or non-profit organizations such as home trusts. Pat's program is specifically for commercial operations. Cooperative housing is an option. RCW 70.114A Housing on a rural worksite is exempt from local zoning requirements. Permits come from the WA State Dept. of Health – Construction Review Services. The county has to sign off on set backs, and some counties do SEPA reviews. Pat works with the county agencies on behalf of the loan applicants.

The application process is at least six months maybe even a year. The loan is a “recoverable grant”, which means you are not making payments on the loan but you are committing to use the structure for migrant farm worker housing for at least 15 years. You must keep it licensed. At the end of the 15 period and you have complied the loan is forgiven. If you sell before that period the buyer must assume loan commitment or the seller must pay back loan. The loan can only cover 50% of the cost. No property tax exemptions. The structure is not allowed to be used for anything but farm worker housing. No sales taxes on building materials. Pat does site visits to make sure loan recipients are in compliance.

Most migrant farm worker housing closes for at least one month. The housing can be open year round but the same people cannot occupy it year round.

Any farmer can qualify as long as they have the funds to do the project (50%) but the worker must make at least \$3,000 annually from farm work but must be considered “low income”. The Dept. of Health is the permitting and enforcing agency. The loan prohibits student (intern) housing. Aquaculture is also not covered by the loan program because of the Dept. of Health definition of agriculture excludes it. Community based housing projects would allow aquaculture. Janet will send the ARC the various descriptions of agriculture defined by the various state agencies.

Sandy Bishop on Lopez Island will take Pat and Janet around the island on Thursday, Sept. 27. A sign up sheet went around the room for farmers to sign up for a site visit.

Janet mentioned that a cooperative project managed by a non-profit, low-income housing provider might be a solution for some of the issues faced by island farmers. The Housing Trust Fund is a possible source of funding.

Sara offered a picture of some labor needs in the islands. She gave Horse Drawn Farm on Lopez as an example. They hire 6 to 8 part time workers for the summer June – Sept. That is probably the largest in the islands. Laborers are shared between farms on the same island, but not between islands. Jim added that most farms are small and need labor a short spurts: “Everyone would need 5 people on Friday.” Sara gave another example of a farm on Orcas that has small cabins without kitchens and running water that can be used during the summer months.

Pat and Janet asked the ARC to consider what kinds of housing are needed and to get back to them about possible funding options.

ANNOUNCEMENTS

Sara has been talking to Lopez farmers about joining the ARC but with no luck. Shaw is another place that we can look for an ARC member. Mother Terese was mentioned. Carson and Samantha Springer were recommended. Eliza B. will follow up.

Candace Jagel announced a WSU master goat training workshop at Skagit Valley College on October 26, 27 & 28, 2007. Candace handed out flyers.

Richard Anderson would like the committee to focus on helping preserve farmers. Think about how to create farmers. Janet noted that the State Finance Commission has a beginning farmer program and she will send information to committee.

NEXT MEETING

The ARC will meet on **Tuesday, October 23, 2007** from **1:30 - 3:30 PM** at the Lopez Island Library. Guest speaker will be Bob Hart, Vice-President of Skagitonians to Preserve Farmland.