

Agricultural and Farmland Protection Board Meeting
June 17, 2020
Meeting Minutes

Ag Board members present via conference call / TEAMS meeting: E. Ruscher, P. Ruskiewicz, M. Simpson, D. Smith, S. Soons, A. Sorensen, M. Ullrich, J. Wright.

Guests present via conference call / TEAMS meeting: K. Apostolides – OC Farm Market Coordinator, D. DeWan –Senator Metzger’s Office, J. MacLeod – OC Planning, K. Morris – OC Planning, A. Reed – OC Legislative Office, M. Sweeton – Warwick Supervisor.

Call to order – 7:10 pm.

May Minutes

J. Wright moved to accept the May minutes as presented, D. Smith seconded, unanimously approved.

Summary of Accounts

J. MacLeod stated that there were no new expenditures from the Ag Board’s 2020 budget. A. Sorensen stated that clarification is needed by the County about the rollovers from 2018 and 2019. He will update the Ag Board with this information once he gets the needed clarification. General discussion ensued. J. Wright moved to accept the summary of accounts as presented, D. Smith seconded, unanimously approved.

Inquiries & Correspondence

The Ag Board received a letter from the New York State Department of Ag & Markets for a final NOI for the proposed IPPsolar, Maple Crest I Solar Farm project. This project consists of a 7.5 MW solar array facility located in the Town of Deerpark. General Discussion ensued. No action taken.

The Ag Board also received an NOI Lead Agency Request for the Storm King Arts Center Master Plan from the Town of Cornwall Planning Board. General discussion ensued. No action taken.

Old Business

Eight Year Agricultural District Review

Discussion ensued about the Eight Year Agricultural District Review. A. Sorensen stated that the methodology for this review it to use the GIS mapping program to identify parcels that are already in the Ag Districts. J. MacLeod and K. Morris have been evaluating maps on a parcel by parcel basis to identify parcels that the County would recommend removing from the Ag Districts. The overwhelming majority of these parcels are in residential subdivisions. He noted that paper lots that were subdivided but have not been developed are being kept in the Ag Districts. He noted that there are some parcels that it is not clear if they should stay in the Ag District or not. Those parcels are labelled as “Review” in the maps so the municipalities can review the specific parcels for their recommendation. He noted that the parcels outlined in green are the ones that are recommended to be removed from the Ag District and the parcels outlined in red are the ones that are recommended to be added to the Ag District. He noted that parcels that are getting an ag exemption that are not already in the Ag District are being recommended to be added to the district. A Reed stated that any

parcels that are being recommended to be added will need an application from the owners to get included in the Ag District.

A. Sorensen and K. Morris noted that all of the parcels that are in Ag District 2 will now be part of Ag District 1. Thus, these property owners will need to be notified about the change of district. Thus, there will need to be several types of letters for the property owners to notify them about the proposed changes. These letters will be sent out in July.

A. Reed stated that the County has received correspondences from several municipalities about the changes they are proposing to the Ag Districts. These municipalities include the Village of Warwick, the Town of Palm Tree, and the Town of Crawford. J. MacLeod stated that she also received a list of proposed changes from the Town of Wawayanda. However, this list was very short, with only about two dozen properties. Thus, she has had to review the Town of Wawayanda for a more thorough review.

E. Ruscher stated that noted that some discrepancies might exist because when the parcels changed, there is a change in the parcel number. For example, if a parcel is subdivided, then the lot number could change (i.e. the parcel could go from 1-1-1 to 1-1-1.1 and 1-1-1.2). He noted that when the parcel number changed in the RPS system, these parcels were not always flagged as being in the Ag District when the changes were entered in the system.

E. Ruscher also stated that the Ag Board and the Planning Department should be aware that there are two codes for ag exemptions. One is applicable for a 5-year period of time and the other one is applicable for an 8-year period of time. The period of time is determined based on whether or not a parcel is in the Ag District. He stated that it is beneficial for the farmers to have their property in the Ag District because that has a more positive financial impact. He will provide the Ag Board and A. Reed with a write up about the difference between the 5-year and 8-year ag exemptions. No further action taken at this time.

Ag Plan Implementation Update / Farmers Markets' Update

Discussion turned to the Ag Plan implementation update / farmers markets' update. K. Apostolides stated that there is no update about the Ag Plan Implementation at this time because it has been difficult getting the information from the respective sources of information. However, she might be able to have an update for the next Ag Board meeting.

K. Apostolides stated that she has been focusing a lot of her energy of the farmers markets. She has been updating the farmers' market coordinators with the new rules related to COVID-19 and social distancing. People are following the social distancing rules for the most part. The people that are not following the rules are told to follow them so the farmers markets do not get shut down. As a result, most people that were not following the rules quickly start following the rules. K. Apostolides did not that the layout of the Goshen farmers market was not conducive to social distancing the first week it was operating. A. Reed stated that the layout is better for social distancing now. She said that since it is at the Government Center now, there is more room for the vendors to spread out, too.

She noted that the farmer's markets have reported that people are buying more products at the farmers' markets than in previous years. K. Apostolides also noted that the Montgomery farmers' market is having trouble getting vendors.

K. Apostolides stated that there are three locations that are interested in opening new farmers markets. There is a proposed farmers' market at The Armory, in Newburgh. M. Ullrich stated that she is not sure that this would work in this location. This location provides free food through Cornell

Cooperative Extension two days earlier, thus people might not be as inclined to pay for food when they can get it for free on a different day. Otisville is also proposing a farmers' market. K. Apostolides does not think this is a viable option because she does not think that enough people would attend a farmers' market in Otisville. However, she recommended the County offering a bus from Otisville to the Middletown farmers' market, since it is only about 10 minutes away. A. Sorensen stated that he will talk to Rob Parrington to see if the County can arrange such transportation. No further action at this time.

New Business

COVID-19 Impacts on Housing & Farmland

Discussion then ensued about the anticipated impacts of COVID-19 on housing and farmland. A. Sorensen stated that historically farmland has been converted for single family housing after major events that cause people from New York City to flee the city. This could be seen after 9/11 and other major events. He expects that there will be a dramatic increase of people from the city looking to buy housing outside of the city as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result, there will be an increase in development pressure on agricultural land. He believes that the first parcels that will be built on are the ones in the paper subdivisions. After that, he believes that there will be pressure on other agricultural land that has not been subdivided already. Thus, he would like to ensure that more of these subdivisions will be conservation subdivisions, where there are smaller residential lots and where some of the farmland is preserved. He also mentioned using PDRs to help protect agricultural land. These ideas should be forwarded to the municipal Planning Boards. K. Morris mentioned potentially having educational sessions to educate boards about conservation subdivisions, possibly this fall or next spring.

A. Reed asked what the current housing inventory is that is available for sale. A. Sorensen stated that he has not specific number about how many housing units are available for sale right now, but he will look into it. He stated that the realtors that he have spoken to have indicated that the housing that is available for sale is moving quickly. General discussion ensued. No further action at this time.

Public Officials Meeting

Discussion then turned to a potential public officials meeting. K. Apostolides stated that she wanted to see if the Ag Board members are interested in having a public officials meeting, like it has in past years. She mentioned maybe having a virtual meeting or having something ready to go once larger meetings are allowed / post-COVID. M. Ullrich stated that this meeting has been held at Cornell Cooperative Extension (CCE) in past years. If the State is still open for business and the space is available, then CCE may be able to provide their meeting room again. A. Reed mentioned that potential alternative meeting spaces could be the Orange County Legislative Chambers or the Emergency Center's Auditorium, since these spaces are bigger and allow people to spread out more. M. Ullrich expressed concern about these potential meeting spaces since they are not conducive to a round-table style meeting, unlike the space at CCE. K. Apostolides stated that she will bring up the potential for a public officials' meeting at the Ag Plan Implementation Committee meeting next week. J. Wright recommended writing a letter asking if the public officials would be interested in attending such a meeting at this time, given the complications created by COVID-19. The Ag Board members agreed with having such a letter written. No further action taken at this time.

Other Business

Large Scale Solar Installations

M. Ullrich stated that she is concerned about a recent development with the developers of large-scale solar installations. She stated that she has been getting a lot of calls regarding how to raise sheep to graze under solar panels. However, she stated that 90% of the light that normally makes it to the ground to allow grass to grow is blocked by the solar panels. Therefore, there is not enough grass for sheep to graze on. She is concerned that these companies might be trying to get tax exemptions for agricultural activity when this is not really an agricultural activity. A. Sorensen stated that maybe the County could work to ensure that the tax is based on the primary use of the lot and not allow secondary uses to obtain tax breaks. M. Ullrich stated that she doesn't want the farmers to be tricked into something that is not helpful to their farms. General discussion ensued. No action taken at this time.

Worker Housing in Wawayanda

S. Soons stated that the Town of Wawayanda has recently been giving her brother trouble about the tax rate for his farm worker housing, which is located in the Ag District. She just wants the Ag Board to be aware of this, as she is not sure if other farmers are facing the same problems. The Ag Board members agreed that this issue probably results from the recent loss of revenue as a result of the restrictions that have been put in place to address the pandemic. General discussion ensued. No action taken at this time.

Meeting adjourned: 8:19 pm.