

Agricultural and Farmland Protection Board Meeting
July 22, 2020
Meeting Minutes

Ag Board members present via conference call / TEAMS meeting: J. Hoeffner, L. DeBuck, 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, J. MacLeod – OC Planning, K. Morris – OC Planning.

Call to order – 7:13 pm.

June Minutes

J. Wright moved to accept the June minutes as presented, P. Ruskiewicz seconded, unanimously approved.

Summary of Accounts

General discussion ensued about the summary of accounts. J. Wright moved to accept the summary of accounts as presented, M. Simpson seconded, unanimously approved.

Inquiries & Correspondence

J. MacLeod stated that the Ag Board did not receive any inquiries or correspondences since the last meeting. No action taken.

Old Business

Eight Year Agricultural District Review

Discussion ensued about the Eight Year Agricultural District Review. A. Sorensen stated that the Planning Department reviewed over 14,000 parcels to determine which parcels to recommend for addition to or removal from the Ag Districts. The review resulted in the proposed removal of about 8,000 parcels containing an approximate 13 percent reduction in total Ag District acreage. He said that the Planning Department worked to produce the Agricultural District Report for the Ag Board to review. He noted that the proposed updated Ag District and the related report will give the County a more accurate benchmark for agriculture in the County. Within the report there is a countywide map showing the parcels being proposed for addition (blue), for removal (red), and continuation (green) in the Ag Districts. He noted that some of the parcels that are proposed to be added are receiving an Ag Exemption, but are not currently within a County Agricultural District. Furthermore, Agricultural Districts 1 and 2 are being consolidated into Agricultural District 1.

A. Sorensen stated that during the Orange County Planning Department's evaluation of the Agricultural Districts, the Planning Department noticed a major conversion of agricultural land to single family residential lots. He stated that the Planning Department will encourage cluster subdivisions going forward to help reduce the impact of residential development on farmland. K. Morris stated that the County is expecting an increase in development pressure related to COVID-19 as people move out of New York City and areas that are more populated than Orange County. Although the paper subdivisions (unbuilt subdivisions) are most likely to be built out first with residential lots, she said that the proposed Ag Districts are still including these paper subdivision if they are currently being farmed.

The Ag Board members asked if property owners need to fill out an application to be added to the Ag District during the Eight Year Ag District Review. A. Sorensen stated that he does not think so, but that he will check with Antoinette Reed. He asked the Ag Board members if they had any other questions.

E. Ruscher stated that the Agricultural District Report reads well. J. Hoeffner and J. Wright both agreed that the report was well written. A. Sorensen asked the Ag Board if it would be willing to defer the report to the County Legislature, with minor technical amendments to the acreage and related table. He noted that this report needs to get to the Legislature. J. Wright moved to approve the draft Agricultural District Report with the completion of needed minor technical changes and to forward the report to the Orange County Legislature, L. DeBuck seconded, unanimously approved.

The Ag Board members agreed to hold the August Ag Board meeting so it can get a revised Ag District Report and to update the approval of the report, if needed. 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 the Ag Plan Implementation update is being postponed until the August Ag Board meeting. However, she is updating the Ag Board about this year's farmers markets.

She noted that there have been several positive things related to the farmers markets this year. K. Apostolides also stated that the Village of Walden has a tiny farmers market and is looking to expand their farmers market. She stated that Montgomery is also running a farmers market now. There has also been an effort to publicize the farmers markets with the State to make the public aware of "farm market week." Furthermore, some farm markets have been participating in the "Give Back NY" program, where farm market customers and/or vendors can donate fresh produce to local food pantries by dropping the food at a designated spot at some markets. Also, Healthy Orange has been working with the Middletown and Newburgh farmers markets to help the food insecure population get farmers market vouchers to help pay for food at the farmers markets. There has also been an effort from HVADC to link farmers to food pantries to help provide food to people who need the food.

However, K. Apostolides stated that there have also been some challenges that the farmers markets in Orange County have been facing. For example, she mentioned that the SNAP program is a mess this year. However, the Middletown Farmers Market has finally gotten the SNAP program working at its market. Furthermore, K. Apostolides noticed that there have been some issues with people not wearing their masks at the farmers markets. Thus, she has planned an advisory meeting regarding the rules related to COVID-19 and how they impact farmers markets. She said that she is also putting together a reminder regarding the safety guidelines to reduce the spread of COVID-19. She noted that it is not okay for people to only use face shields. They must wear a face mask to minimize the transmission of COVID-19. General discussion ensued. No action taken at this time.

Public Officials Meeting

Discussion then ensued about the proposed public officials meeting. K. Apostolides stated that she has worked to try to determine a target date for the public officials meeting by contacting these officials to find out when they are available. The meeting is tentatively set for the week of September 14. She mentioned that the meeting will most likely be held at the Cornell Cooperative Extension (CCE) park in Otisville since it is an outdoor location that would be able to meet the necessary social distancing requirements to help minimize the transmission of COVID-19.

K. Apostolides said that she wants any comments on the white paper and to know if the Ag Board members have any additional issues that it wants addressed. K. Morris stated that she will send out a white paper to the attending politicians prior to the meeting. However, she noted that the Ag Board needs to freshen up the topics and ensure that all of the issues that are in the white paper are still valid. She mentioned that the document needs some rewording to keep the politicians engaged. The Ag Board members agreed to have the Ag Plan Implementation Committee review this document.

Some Ag Board members asked if there are any topics related to the current pandemic that should be addressed during this meeting. M. Ullrich stated that farm worker housing needs have not been impacted by COVID at this time. However, she questioned if there is enough testing and PPE (personal protection equipment) available for farm workers. She also noted that COVID-19 has shown the cracks in the food system. The question is how to get these cracks fixed. A. Sorensen stated that there is a need for more resiliency planning for food distribution. M. Simpson stated that a topic to consider is the food pricing during COVID-19, as the prices went up a lot. S. Soons stated that the unemployment response to COVID-19 was an issue for her farm because she had kids that were 16 or 17 that were still dependents of their parents claiming unemployment. She offered the jobs back to them, but the kids did not want the jobs. M. Ullrich stated that childcare was a big issue for ag workers, too. General discussion continued. No further action taken at this time.

Other Business

August Meeting

The Ag Board members agreed to hold the August Ag Board meeting in case any additional discussions are necessary about the Eight Year Ag District Review.

New York State Fair and Orange County Fair

M. Ullrich stated that the New York State Fair and the Orange County Fair will not be operating this summer due to the pandemic. She stated that Cornell Cooperative Extension will have animal shows for the kids, but these shows will not be open to the public. General discussion ensued. No action taken.

Emergency Feeding Program

M. Ullrich stated that New York State has an emergency feeding program that will help people who are food insecure in New York State. This state has allocated \$25 million to buy New York products to feed New York residents who need the food. However, she mentioned that there is a lack of refrigeration to distribute the perishables. General discussion ensued. No action taken.

Ag Board Member

The Ag Board members discussed the inactivity of an Ag Board member, who has missed many meetings. The Ag Board members agreed to write a letter to Phil Johnson about his participation and to give him a friendly reminder that he needs to participate in the meetings to remain on the Board. The Ag Board said that if he cannot attend the meetings, he needs to tell the Board. They noted that he is welcome to attend anytime he wants to, even if he is not on the Board. General discussion ensued. No further action taken at this time.

Meeting adjourned: 8:23 pm.