

Agricultural and Farmland Protection Board Meeting
September 16, 2020
Meeting Minutes

Ag Board members present via conference call / TEAMS meeting: E. Ruscher, P. Ruszkiewicz, 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 – 7:06 pm.

August Minutes

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

Summary of Accounts

General discussion ensued about the summary of accounts. A. Sorensen stated that there have been some adjustments to the Ag Board's budget. Although the budget had been cut earlier in the year, A. Sorensen was able to get some of it reinstated to pay for the mailings related to the Ag District Review. Therefore, the ledger shows that the Ag Board has a 2020 beginning balance of \$9500. This will cover the \$8803.35 printing and mailing through Camelot for the Ag District Review. There was a second bill related to the Ag District Review that will be paid for through other County resources. General discussion ensued. 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 received a letter and supporting information from the New York State Department of Ag & Markets regarding a final Notice of Intent (NOI) for the Orange County Water Authority (OCWA) "to undertake an action within an Agricultural District" for the Dwaar Kill – Pine Bush Water Supply Project in the Town of Crawford. This project "includes the development of three test production groundwater wells, the construction of a treatment building to provide sequestration and chlorination of the water supply, and installation of approximately 10,500 linear feet of ductile iron transmission main from the well field connecting to the existing Pine Bush water supply." This is near Searsville Road. There are two wells now and there will be one well as a backup. General discussion ensued. No action taken at this time.

New Business

Solar Installations

Discussion ensued about solar installations in Orange County. A. Sorensen stated that there have been a lot of solar installations proposed in Orange County and more are coming. He stated that there is one 20 MW solar installation proposed in the Town of Warwick that will use 120 acres. He spoke to Supervisor Mike Sweeton about this proposed project and Supervisor Sweeton indicated that he would rather have one large solar installation, rather than many small solar installations in his Town. The proposed project will have a transmission line run through the middle of the site.

The applicant should consider placing a conservation easement on the prime soils or the USDA 1-4 soils. It should also consider using sheep or other grazing livestock instead of mowing the site or using pesticides. A. Sorensen acknowledged that using grazing livestock would require a lot of leg work into having grazing animals since the animals would require water and protection from predators. He indicated that there is an agricultural integration plan that the County could use to help create its own guide to encourage the use of grazing animals at solar installations. He wanted to float this idea with the Ag Board. M. Ullrich stated that she is skeptical about this idea. She said that the property owner would still have to mow. She stated that she would rather see a sheep farmer add solar, not a solar company add sheep, because it would be more conducive to the farming. She also stated that she is concerned about the welfare of the farm animals if the solar company added sheep to their solar installation. M. Ullrich asked who would check on the animals and make sure they have enough water. A. Sorensen stated that he will share the plan he found with M. Ullrich to get her opinion on it. A. Sorensen stated that the County has recommended that large scale solar installations use grazing livestock to minimize the use of pesticides without being impactful. J. Wright stated that this is a big issue and stated that the Ag Board should get an expert to the meeting or have M. Ullrich draft guidelines regarding solar installations to get out to the Towns. A. Sorensen stated that he could talk to places that have done this. He noted that it will take a lot of work to make this feasible, though. M. Ullrich stated that she will reach out to other CCE offices to see if any place has used grazing livestock on solar installation sites successfully. The Ag Board members agreed that the large-scale solar installations are so new that no one knows what the long-term results are at this time. A. Sorensen stated that he will reach out to APA about this. He noted that he has looked into some solar projects using grazing livestock in Great Britain. He mentioned that maybe the County could come up with a model law to help the municipalities. General discussion ensued. No action taken at this time.

Old Business

Eight Year Agricultural District Review

Discussion turned to the Eight Year Agricultural District Review. A. Sorensen stated that 12,500 letters were sent out to property owners regarding the proposed removals, additions and district consolidations related to the Eight Year Agricultural District Review. A. Sorensen stated that there are approximately 8,000 parcels proposed to be removed. This is about 13% of the acreage in the Ag District.

The County Planning Department has received about 300 calls and emails in response to the letters. A lot of the calls and emails were from people who did not know they were in the Ag District and how the proposed changes would impact them. Most of the property owners that called were owners of residential lots and once they realized that their taxes and underlying zoning would not be impacted, they were okay with the proposed changes.

There were some property owners that did not agree with the County's proposed changes. The County has considered the property owners' requests and has indicated that properties proposed for removal are being left in the Ag District if the property owners want their property in. A. Sorensen stated that everyone that spoke at the public hearing has also received a letter acknowledging their concerns. He stated that the County will have a good base of where farmland is located within the County upon completion of this Ag District Review. General discussion ensued. No action taken at this time.

Farmers Market Update

Discussion then ensued about the farmers market update. K. Apostolides stated that the farmers markets have been doing better this year than they did in past years. She stated that the mask issues have been mostly resolved, too. Although there have been some protests at upstate farmers markets about the masks, that has not been a problem in Orange County. However, she said that SNAP has been challenging this year. General discussion ensued. No action taken.

Public Officials Meeting

Discussion then turned to the public officials meeting. K. Apostolides stated that this meeting occurred yesterday and it was really successful. She stated that there were 20+ attendees and that the Ag Board should keep doing this event in future years. This event was designed to tell the politicians about issues that are impacting Orange County farmers in order to get changes made to the laws. K. Apostolides stated that Jen Metzger wants to do more to help the farmers throughout the year. J. MacLeod will check to see if Jen Metzger is on the Ag Board mailing list. K. Apostolides stated that maybe the Ag Board could meet with more farmers to get different perspectives and get more ideas to help the farmers in the future. S. Soons stated that the Ag Board should get the word out sooner to get more participation. General discussion ensued. No action taken.

Other Business

Cornell Cooperative Extension Updates

M. Ullrich stated that Cornell Cooperative Extension (CCE) has a \$250,000 shortfall. As a result, there will be a staff reorganization. She hopes that producers will not see a reduction in services from CCE.

M. Ullrich stated that the Open House on the Farm will be a virtual event this year. It will be held in late October and include several farms. There are currently two sponsors for this event.

Meeting adjourned: 8:04 pm.