

City of Keene
New Hampshire

AGRICULTURAL COMMISSION
MEETING MINUTES

Thursday, January 21, 2016

3:30 PM

2nd Floor Conference Room

Members Present:

Councilor Carl Jacobs, Chair
Alan Bettler
Alison Welsh
Kathy Harrington
Charles Daloz
Mark Florenz, Alternate

Staff Present:

Michele Chalice, Planning

Members Not Present:

Sarah Wilton
Marcia Duffy

1) Call to Order

Chair Jacobs called the meeting to order at 3:33 PM. Roll call was conducted.

2) Approve November 19, 2015 Minutes

Mr. Bettler made a motion to approve the minutes of November 19, 2015, which was seconded by Mr. Daloz, and passed by a vote of 5 to 0. Ms. Welsh had briefly stepped out of the room.

3) Eloise Clark, President, Friends of Open Space – Invitation to Tuesday, April 12, 2016 Gathering/Poster Session at 7 to 8:30 at the Recreation Center

Eloise Clark stated that she is the Vice President of Friends of Open Space. She continued that she is here to invite the Agricultural Commission to a fair for City groups involved with open space and conservation in Keene. She read the invitation out loud, stating that the event is Tuesday, April 12, 2016, from 7:00 to 8:30 PM at the Recreation Center. The two objectives are 1) for various departments, boards, committees, and commissions to mingle in an informal setting, and 2) for the public to learn about these groups' work and perhaps decide to participate. She listed other City groups that have signed on and asked if the Agricultural Commission will co-sponsor as well. Co-sponsoring entails spreading the word, and attending with a simple display or poster. She spoke of the value of networking.

Chair Jacobs asked if co-sponsoring means lending their name. Ms. Clark replied yes, and the Friends will take care of the other details.

Chair Jacobs asked for members' thoughts.

Ms. Welsh made a motion for the Agricultural Commission to co-sponsor the gathering/poster session on April 12, 2016. Mr. Bettler seconded the motion. Chair Jacobs stated that they would have to talk about what they would do for a table. Brief discussion ensued. The motion passed by unanimous vote.

Mr. Florenz asked for a brief explanation of the Friends' work. Ms. Clark explained that they host educational programs, neighborhood meetings, etc., to talk about/push towards conservation

easements. They meet on the first Wednesday of each month and welcome new people. Commission members asked more questions, which Ms. Clark answered.

4) City Parcels/Former Hay Field Leases – Review & Discussion of Potential Future Uses

Chair Jacobs stated that most commission members visited the Bent Court site today. He continued that they have spoken with Parks, Recreation, and Facilities Director Andy Bohannon about it, who is acting as an agent for the Public Works Department. The Public Works Department is responsible for this site because it was acquired due to its potential to be a well site. They talked about the criteria the Public Works Department established regarding the well, and what can and cannot happen there. He continued that they concluded that although some rent would be nice, having the site mowed is a bigger priority than money, so if someone wants to mow it for hay without paying the City, that would be of value. Access is an issue – the previous person who had been mowing it had his own bridge there and took it with him when he left. Mr. Bohannon is willing to look for people to mow the site for hay, at a minimum fee or no fee.

Discussion ensued. Ms. Welsh noted that the previous lessee did not do anything to amend the soil and the commission had a concern about soil depletion. Mr. Florenz stated that there is a desire to keep the parcel open in the short term for potential longer term uses. The difficulties of access and whether or not it can be fertilized limits its use for agriculture, so they are focusing on getting it mowed for as little cost as possible using agricultural best practices. There may be other ways to accomplish the goal, given the challenges, such as brush-hogging every other year and planting pollinators. They agree on not spending City money on this.

Ms. Chalice reported that this well site is a little more nebulous than any other well site in the city, because it is a *future* well site with no well yet, nor a specific diameter expected.

Mr. Daloz stated that basically they cannot do anything that affects the quality of the water unless it improves it, which limits current agricultural technology quite a bit. Ms. Chalice replied that they cannot do anything that infiltrates.

Mr. Florenz questioned whether federal dollars would be available to keep the space open and provide habitat. He continued that that would be the only other cost effective way.

Chair Jacobs made a motion to confirm the commission's discussion at the site that the best course of action now is to put it out for hay lease and that the income is a secondary consideration to the maintenance and improvement of the field/mowing.

Brief discussion ensued about the access issue. Ms. Harrington asked if the City has a timeline for when they plan to put a well here. Ms. Chalice replied that she did not hear the Public Works Department speak to that. Chair Jacobs stated that there may be a need for more water at some point so the City just wants to protect as potential site (and two or three more) just in case.

Ms. Harrington asked, if there is no one to manage this open space, will there potentially be a cost to the City to do so? Chair Jacobs replied yes. Ms. Harrington replied that she would encourage a free lease or for the City to put a bridge in and lease for a low fee. She continued that she encourages a short/year-to-year lease so they are able to manage the changing relationship based on the well, based on the cost, based on the hay, and so on and so forth.

Mr. Florenz stated that it means either spending, say, \$50,000 for a permanent bridge, or about \$1,000 for a bridge that keeps getting washed out. He continued that both are problems.

Mr. Florenz seconded the motion.

Mr. Bettler and Chair Jacobs spoke of the bridge/access being the determining factor for what can happen at the site.

The motion passed by unanimous vote.

Amanda Littleton reported that federal funds cannot be utilized on municipal land unless the municipality has a lease with an independent land manager. She continued that the City could lease the site to a non-governmental person and that person could apply to contract with the USDA and get funding to help improve the quality of the land. Chair Jacobs asked if a bridge would qualify for funding. Ms. Littleton replied that she does not think so. She continued that the Cheshire County Conservation District (CCCD) rents skidder bridges but they are temporary and expensive to move with logging trucks. Skidder bridges cost a few thousand dollars. She gave more information about these bridges. She continued that maybe the City would share the cost with a lessee if the lease had a longer term and the lessee was thus more invested. Chair Jacobs suggested that she have a conversation with Mr. Bohannon. Discussion continued.

5) Amanda Littleton, District Manager – Presentation of the Cheshire County Conservation District’s Activities, Overview of 2015

Ms. Littleton gave a slideshow presentation, an overview of the CCCD’s work in 2015, skipping over the parts not related to agriculture. She spoke about the CCCD’s mission to promote responsible use of natural resources, and their ongoing grants in the area. They look at how farmers improve soil health, teach classes to farmers, hold demonstrations on farms, host educational workshops, and so on and so forth. She gave examples, and spoke of how no-till farming is recommended.

Mr. Daloz asked if the CCCD has data on improving water quality. Ms. Littleton replied that there is data on how no-till methods can improve water quality. She continued that tilling means breaking up soil aggregates/killing the life system in the soil that makes it healthy. No-till means incorporating different seeds without exposing and hurting the soil, and it allows better infiltration and less soil loss in storms.

Chair Jacobs replied that no-till in the Midwest means lots of chemicals and pesticides. He asked if that is what the CCCD is talking about. Ms. Littleton replied yes, to a degree, although you can still do no-till organically. She continued that many folks use the controversial glyphosate/Round-Up. Brief discussion ensued. Ms. Welsh asked if this is a philosophy of the CCCD. Ms. Littleton replied that it is a common farming philosophy and practice. She continued that the CCCD is not a regulatory entity so they do not say how to farm – they give education and options. Chair Jacobs shared his observations of the negative effects of no-till that he saw in the Midwest. Ms. Littleton spoke more about no-till methods in this area, and showed equipment that is used to kill cover crops that become green manure that you can plant right into, which is an option for organic farmers. She showed and explained a tool that tests soil compaction levels, and equipment that helps with subsurface compaction, and a wood ash and lime spreader. She gave information about these items, which the CCCD rents to farmers.

Mr. Florenz asked if this is more cost effective than spreading conventional lime. Ms. Littleton replied sometimes; the price fluctuates. Chair Jacobs asked if it would be a problem in a watershed. Ms. Littleton replied that if the conditions are good, it should not be – just do not spread wood ash when the ground is frozen and it runs off. They have not heard any concerns about it from any municipalities. Discussion continued.

Ms. Littleton showed photos of skidder bridges, which the CCCD rents, and gave information about them and spoke of the benefits. They prevent people from driving through streams, work well, and save loggers time and money because they do not need permits from the New Hampshire Department of Environmental Services (NHDES) if they are bank to bank over the water. Ms. Harrington asked if they are used to transfer herds across streams. Ms. Littleton replied that the CCCD has not heard that, maybe because they charge by the month. She continued that some farms are interested in learning to build their own.

Ms. Littleton continued that the CCCD works with the City and community to do an annual river clean up. Another project this year was partnering with others to help remove a dam from a pond in Fitzwilliam that NHDES noted had poor quality water that created issues such as preventing wildlife's natural movement. They removed the dam and revegetated the area. It was a huge project.

Ms. Littleton continued that the CCCD assists farmers who are having issues with nutrient management (farmyard run-off, milk house run-off, etc.) to get grants to help them create better catchment systems (as one example). Most of the time the farms want to fix this but it is extremely expensive.

Ms. Littleton spoke of the CCCD's efforts to improve wildlife, including educating folks about native pollinators. She continued that many people do not realize what they are and that they are being lost due to numerous issues, like diseases in mice and burdens from pesticides. Ms. Chalice replied that Mr. Bohannon has worked with the CCCD before on this and wants to seed properties to attract pollinators, but cost is the prohibitive factor and he is looking for grants. Ms. Littleton replied that the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) will pay private land owners but not municipalities. Ms. Chalice asked if a municipality could lease with a private person. Ms. Littleton replied yes, if they are farmers or forest land owners.

Ms. Welsh stated that there are some companies that will donate seeds for pollinators. She continued that she will look through her list and send it to her to disperse. Ms. Littleton stated that municipalities can apply for Moose Plate funds for this/for on-the-ground projects that improve resources, which pollinators are. She continued that grants for under \$5,000 are more likely to be approved. She can share the pollinator grant application with them.

Ms. Littleton spoke more about pollinators, and about how a lot of pollinator habitat can be created just by working with native vegetation like goldenrod, asters, clover, and other weeds. Simply leaving/allowing for weedy pastures and "messy edges" is very helpful. Leaving open, native meadows and planting additional clover is an affordable method of increasing pollinator habitat. Chair Jacobs asked what clover seed costs. Ms. Littleton replied that she will look it up and email him; it is very cheap. Discussion continued regarding how this method requires minimal management, too.

Ms. Littleton reported on the CCCD's inventory of pollinators in the region. They surveyed four sites and found about 400 bees of 50 different species. There is a huge diversity. They are learning more about it to help with management in the future.

She showed and explained a garden they put in at Franklin Pierce College, which will be great for the Environmental Science faculty to use for education. The pollinator plants grew very quickly, both here and at a section they planted at the Country Club in Keene.

Ms. Littleton gave information about the logistics of and sales of Monadnock Menus, an aggregation and distribution center for farmers, now in its third year. It takes complications out for wholesale food producers. She encouraged the Agricultural commission to spread the word to get more chefs, restaurant owners, food service directors, etc., involved. Discussion ensued about possible local restaurants that might be interested, and who already is involved. Ms. Harrington suggested they solicit testimonials from people to show others how well it works. Ms. Littleton stated that they need to grow the sales in order to make it sustainable for when the grant goes away. They are on target with their business plan but need new buyers. Mr. Daloz asked if the supply is sufficient. Ms. Littleton replied yes, and it includes farmers in Windham County in Vermont.

Ms. Harrington left at 4:32 PM.

Ms. Littleton reported on the CCCD's Farm to School efforts. She asked the commission to help spread the word (via soon-to-be produced flyers and promotional materials) about the program that doubles EBT customers' dollars at farm stands and Farmer's Market. The more service agencies know about this, the better. Discussion ensued about how to spread the word. Ms. Littleton asked anyone with a connection to a local agency such as Monadnock Family Services or Home Healthcare, Hospice, and Community Services to spread the word. Ms. Chalice asked Ms. Littleton to get her promotional materials to give to the City's Human Services Department. Ms. Welsh spoke about meetings she goes to in which other agencies are at the table. Ms. Littleton replied that that would be really helpful.

Ms. Littleton continued that the CCCD works with Monadnock Locavores to get scholarships for about 25 to 30 children to attend local farm camps in the summer. They also act as a liaison between the County and Antioch University New England.

Chair Jacobs and the commission thanked Ms. Littleton for her presentation. Ms. Chalice asked if she should get the Moose Plate grant information from Ms. Littleton. The commission replied yes.

6) Continued – "New Considerations for the Keene Agricultural Commission"

Chair Jacobs noted that the meeting has gone over time. Discussion ensued about the agenda and the commission decided to leave this for next month.

7) New or Other Business

Mr. Daloz stated that they need to talk about what to do at the gathering hosted by Friends of Open Space.

Chair Jacobs reported that the City is asking its various committees and boards to make an annual report about what they are doing, and he will give the Agricultural Commission's report to the Planning, Licenses, and Development Committee on January 27th at 7:00 PM. They will

talk about the community gardens work, this inventory and interest in agriculture, the farmer's market, etc., and how they define agriculture not very restrictively. The presentations are five or ten minutes long. He encourages others to attend if they are able.

8) Adjournment

Hearing no further business, Chair Jacobs adjourned the meeting at 4:43 PM.

Respectfully submitted by,
Britta Reida, Minute Taker