

Agricultural Resources Committee (ARC)

Minutes of January 27, 2009

12:00 – 2:00 PM

Whidbey Island Bank, Friday Harbor

ARC Members Present: Peggy Bill, Neal Foley, Todd Goldsmith, Bruce Gregory, Eliza Habegger, Sara Jones, Kji McIntyre, Hawk Pingree, Tom Schultz, Jim Sesby, Mark Tompkins

ARC Members Absent: Jane Burton Bell, Peter Corning, Ralph Hahn, Madden Surbaugh

Friends Present: Richard Anderson, Vicki Heater (Public Health), Susan Key (SJI Conservation District), Jana Marks (FRIENDS)

ARC Staff Present: Eliza Buck

MINUTES

Jim Sesby moved to approve the December 11, 2008 minutes. Bruce Gregory seconded. Motion unanimously approved.

Public Comment: Jana Marks of FRIENDS of the San Juans announced that she is working on the Sustainable San Juans event that will take place on April 18, 2009. There will be three tracks: food, home and business.

OLD BUSINESS

Update on Public Benefit Rating System for AG Lands in Open Space Program – Tim Clark sent out a written update. Julie Thompson in the Community Development & Planning is working on the language. After the AOS audit, the Assessor thinks that more than half of current participants will not qualify.

Update on SJC Land Bank Lease of King Sisters property – Eliza Habegger reported that they received six applications. They selected Rob Waldron and Jere Lord to farm the property. The lease is for 5 years and renewable for 5 year increments. They are going to grow hay and sheep. They plan to branch out to berries or perennial crops in a few years. Council members will be given a tour of the King Sisters property on February 24, 2009 at 12:30 PM.

A couple on Orcas who have 35 acres with a Land Bank conversation easement on it, are interested in keeping their land in agriculture. Eliza H. asked the ARC if they would help them brainstorm options.

Update on Farmer Enrichment – Tom Schultz announced that WSU Extension Ag program is coordinating a farmer-chef connection event, which will take place February 7, 2009. The subcommittee identified the need to write regular articles for local media about farms and farming in the county to help increase public awareness.

Tom told the committee about a new farm tour venture on San Juan Island. Naoni Zervas of Hillside B&B will be offering familiarization tours the first weekend in April. To sign up, call 378-4730.

Update on Regulations – Eliza B. announced that the subcommittee will be meeting with Claudia Coles, WSDA Food Safety Program Manager, on Friday, February 6, 2009. She's bringing Keren LaCourse who is the new NW Regional Inspectors Supervisor (replacing Scott Fox). They will discuss egg handling, dairy inspections and other scale-appropriate based issues.

Todd Goldsmith reported that the CAO review committee completed the first rough draft of the fish and wildlife section, minus any shoreline habitat. The County is facing budget issues and the facilitator and public note taker have lost funding. The coordinator may also be let go. There will be a large number of properties that will be non-conforming of the new 150' buffer on type F (fish bearing) streams and a 100' buffer from N (non-fish bearing) streams.

Results of Experience Food Project workshop at the Friday Harbor High School: researcher Vicki Sontag shared data tracking the islands food system, and Chef Tom French is trying to source local food products and create linkages between distributors, buyers and producers. Check out their website www.experiencefoodproject.org

NEW BUSINESS

Water rights on AG Resource Lands – Vicki Heater

The Water Resources Management Committee (WRMC) involvement was initiated by a development proposal to run water from Crow Valley to Dolphin Bay. Community members asked the County Council to deny a franchise for this waterline. Gene Knapp went to the WRMC to discuss the decision. He told the committee that he wanted to reserve water on agricultural resource lands for agricultural uses. The WRMC is exploring how this might be achieved. There have been provisions made for municipal water but not specifically for agriculture. A legal decision by the State Court of Appeals II compelled the Department of Ecology to honor a 5,000 gallons a day exemption of ground water use for agriculture.

Vicki spoke to state water officials and they said that the state would not get involved in reserving water for agricultural use, but that it could be enacted at the county level. In terms of conservation measures, the county already requires meters for all new wells and all new community water systems. There is no easy way to monitor water usage in the county because of all the unmetered exempt wells.

Note: Landowners need to apply for a water right in order to irrigate with surface water including from ponds. Department of Ecology is currently working on water rights for Orcas and San Juan islands. Now is the time to apply.

The County has worked out a catchment policy for domestic use but not for irrigation, which requires a water rights. The County allows it by code for domestic use to get home builders to add catchment. They did an analysis and found that there is a net gain to groundwater recharge if water catchment is used with septic systems.

Vicki asked the ARC to partner with the WRMC to draft the language on county water policy. The committee agreed to review any drafts of material.

National Animal Information Service (NAIS) follow up: there is a court order to suspend any action on the NAIS program. We will continue to track developments.

Danna Kinsey led a group process to gather information for the 2008 Annual and 2009 1st Quarterly Report. Question: How has the ARC encouraged agriculture?

- Conducted surveys to determine AG priorities, needs and resources

- Development of Ag Guild
- ICL program off the ground and running
- Ag mapping
- Strengthened Dog Ordinance
- Working with government regulatory agencies to lessen regulatory burden on farmers without compromising food safety
- Protected Ag lands from water transfer
- FarmLink workshops and program development
- Send research, grant and opportunities information to farmers
- Workshops for farmers and farmland owners on preservation options
- Newspaper articles to educate public about agriculture in the county
- Land Bank public ag land lease
- Support for NABC and visa versa
- Collaboration throughout county and region
- Provided a forum for farmers to advocate for regulatory changes

Is agriculture better off now than 5 years ago?

Yes.

- Farmers have more connection to county officials and to one another
- IGFC – Mobile Slaughter Unit
- Farmer-Chef connection
- ICL local product branding program
- Farm-to-Cafeteria programs
- County Fair – Ag tent
- Partnerships with County, WSU Extension, NABC, Water Committee, EDC, Health Dept.

The ARC represents an economic industry and is represented by local producers.

ARC members prioritized the most important activities of the committee:

1. Established the ICL program
2. Established the AG Guild
3. Advises the Council on water, AG, and ‘No Net Loss’
4. Economic benefits to county from AG
5. Collaborate with other groups
6. Work with Assessor on Open Space program

Future work of the ARC:

- Get more community involvement
- Increase internet presence
- Develop more cooperative opportunities (i.e., shared equipment, cheese plant, poultry processing)
- Encourage organizations to open kitchen facilities for commercial uses
- Assist concentric buying
- Assist NABC’s Puget Sound Food Network
- Promote ICL and increase visibility
- Assist agritourism opportunities

NEXT MEETING

Date, time and place of February ARC meeting to be announced. Eliza B. will send out a Doodle scheduler to help determine the best day and time for committee members.