

San Juan County Agricultural Resources Committee

Minutes of the ARC • WSU Extension Conf. Room/TeleConference • June 7, 2006

Committee Members Present

Jane Burton-Bell, SJI, Farmers' Market, Secretary Pro Tem
Todd Goldsmith, Lopez, FarmerProducer
Bruce Gregory, SJI, FarmerProducer
Eliza Habegger, San Juan County Land Bank
Bill Hamilton, San Juan County Conservation District
Sara Jones, Lopez, FarmerProducer
Rena Patty, Orcas, FamerProducer
Susan Robins, SJI, FarmerProducer,
Tom Schultz, WSU Extension
John Steward, Orcas, FarmerProducer
Madden Surbaugh, SJI, Chef/Restaurateur
Mark Tompkins, San Juan County Health & Community Services

Committee Members Absent

Ken Akoplantz, Lopez, FarmerProducer
Peter Corning, SJI, FarmerProducer
Ralph Hahn, SJI Economic Development Council
Jim Lawrence, SJI, FarmerProducer
Julie Miller, Orcas, Famers' Market
Rebecca Moore, Waldron, FarmerProducer
Katheryn Quackenbush, SJI Grange

Staff and Recorder—Sandy Strehlou

Members of the Public and other Guests—None

The meeting was called to order at 12:06 PM. There were no public comments.

Introduction of new member and ARC admin coordinator

Susan introduced Sandy Strehlou, recently hired ARC administrative coordinator.

Approval of the Minutes

Moved by Bill Hamilton and seconded by Bruce Gregory to approve the minutes of the May 4, 2004 meeting as written. The motion was passed unanimously.

NAIS

Susan Robins began the discussion with an update on the ARC NAIS letter.

- Robins crafted a “hybrid” letter based on the Grange version and original ARC version and submitted it via email to the ARC for comment. Several ARC members responded with comments. These comments have been incorporated into the revised NAIS letter. Robins suggested that the letter be released with the list of recipients. One minor correction was identified in the second paragraph.
- Jane Burton-Bell mentioned recent a House of Representatives vote to halt (possibly temporarily) the NAIS implementation. The Senate has yet to vote on this action. Burton-Bell suggested the moratorium on the bill is a good opportunity to communicate the ARC position on the issue.
- Todd Goldsmith pointed out a typo in the second paragraph of the letter. Robins will correct it before mailing via U.S.P.S.
- Madden Surbaugh moved to approve the motion to send the letter with one correction and the list of recipients. Bill Hamilton seconded the motion. The motion passed unanimously.
- Robins added that this action will require follow-up. She offered to work with BOCC Kevin Ranker for additional political support.

Agricultural Land Designation/De-Designation Guidelines

Bill Hamilton provided a subcommittee update. [see handout]

- The subcommittee hasn’t yet convened because Hamilton started the effort by doing background research on the issue. First, there is some tax relief for agricultural resource designation. The assessed value of farm land is not based on the “highest and best usage”, since farm designation renders un-cultivated land essentially valueless. Therefore the assessed value would be lower, and would provide a financial benefit to the property owner.
- Hamilton: The land use element of the County’s comprehensive plan identifies two criteria for determining an agricultural designation: acreage (ten acres or more) and soil class.
- Hamilton: The handout outlines nine criteria for re-designating agricultural resource land to another designation. To meet the criteria, the re-designation application must show (see handout for more detail):
- Hamilton: Another handout document, a letter from the Friends of the San Juans to the SJC Planning Commission presented a case for setting a difficult standard for de-designation. They argue that the “current use” of the property is insufficient to make a case for “significantly changed circumstances” under the allowable de-designation criteria.
- Goldsmith asked if all nine criteria had to be met to qualify for de-designation. Hamilton responded affirmatively.
- Burton-Bell added that she believes the Growth Management Hearing Board must also approve a de-designation. Hamilton agreed that they make it tough, and that the burden of proof is on the local government.

- Goldsmith asked if the process would require the County to send all requests through the GMA Hearing Board. Hamilton replied that only the de-designations that they support would go to the GMA.
- Hamilton: Pages 8-14 through 8-19 are documents from the Dept. of Ecology that refer to wetlands management. He has the CD with the full 300-page standards.
- Hamilton: The next document in packet is a letter from *Skagitonians to Preserve Farmland* that was sent to the Skagit County Planning Officer. This model is similar to the Land Bank, and has been being considered there since 2004.
- Robins added that there are many more penalties for de-designation than there are incentives for retaining or converting land to agriculture. Both are good ideas.
- Hamilton added that both can include the transfer of development rights as a strategy, and that the public is more receptive to incentives than regulatory provisions.
- Robins suggested that the Skagitonian's language and goals could be adapted for use here.
- Tom Schultz noted that the 10 acre threshold may not always be applicable, since it is possible to successfully farm smaller acreage commercially, particularly with specialty crops. Robins concurred. Schultz: There are other programs which let you prove you are doing commercial agriculture on less land; green houses are one example.
- Goldsmith: Gross income/acre thresholds create another big hurdle. Robins responded that this depends on the crop, but added that coupling these kinds of threshold requirements is not always justified.
- Hamilton added that raised beds and niche products are being viably produced using raised beds, which reduces the relevancy of soil classifications as well.
- Burton-Bell: Early GMA discussions made these threshold criteria inseparably linked due to the connections made between agricultural resources and forest lands. This is where she feels the resistance to promoting flexibility will come.
- Robins reported that the Skagitonians are very interested in collaborating with the ARC on these issues.
- Goldsmith offered the caution that there have been decisions in the Court of Appeals where arguments for the "right to farm" have latitude for the types of allowable activity/impact. Taking the position that the acreage size should be decreased might create new opposition to our goals by neighboring residential properties. Bruce Gregory noted that one court case concerned the change of use from one crop to another. Goldsmith added that in an Orcas case, the would-be farm was a strategy to utilize a wetland.
- Robins suggested that the ARC position language could make distinctions for designation on land less than 10 acres.

- Hamilton: The next step will be to now convene the subcommittee. He will send the handouts to all who did not attend today's meeting, and to those who teleconferenced from Orcas and Lopez.
- Robins closed the discussion by recommending that the subcommittee first focus on broad goals, then review them looking for potential conflicts.

Land Bank Meeting

Robins began this topic by referencing the Land Bank meeting that was recently attended by ARC members Robins, Burton-Bell, Peter Corning and Schultz.

- Robins felt the meeting was very productive, even though it did not produce definitive agreements.
- Eliza Habegger agreed that it was a positive meeting. The Land Bank (LB) has been re-thinking what its role should be in farm-management of its holdings. The LB has always recognized its mission to include preserving open space, however they have less experience in preserving and managing agricultural land easements. They are looking to other similar organizations to find models; there is a group on Salt Spring Island. The LB has questions about buying agricultural land outright and leasing it for cultivation. How long can they legally lease land? They are doing research into this and other questions. The ARC subcommittee can help the LB identify the questions and develop program policies.
- Robins said she has had discussions with Diane Kamionka of Agricultural Ventures Group regarding farmer-to-farmer loans with low interest rates. One question of new farm development under these programs is who pays for the necessary infrastructure development? The lessee? The loan source? Groups like the LB don't want to get involved with land development, but this is an issue that will have to be resolved in order to make farmland leases viable options.
- Hebegger: Most of the LB farmland preservation projects on SJI have involved easements, not property purchases outright or leases.
- Schultz noted that easements keep the land open, but don't guarantee that it will continue to be farmed. Hebegger agreed. Schultz offered that in the future, easements could be tweaked to encourage active farm use.
- Hebegger added that she thought the Skagitonian's plan for "no net loss" of agricultural land to de-designation might be a good model here. This could be a vehicle for strengthening the LB's work in farmland preservation.
- Gregory remembered that the first LB Director put a big emphasis on "view corridor" preservation. The problem he sees is that lots of farmland is not part of recognized view corridors.
- Hebegger responded by pointing out that views are just one part of the benefits they look at when weighing which properties to protect. On the other hand, the LB recognizes that the public's perception of the properties they select does have an impact on the ability to ensure that

there will always be enough public support to win continuance of the program.

- Gregory: We need to use contemporary issues to convince the public that land preservation is about more than views.
- Goldsmith: A potential ten-year sunset of the LB's role on and control of an easement should not end in the event that the LB ceases to be sanctioned. Hebegger agreed that there are other options. Goldsmith suggested that two-tiered leases might be means around lease length restrictions that the LB may face.

Farmer Survey [handout: survey results spreadsheet]

Sara Jones, Julie Miller and Tom Schultz make up this subcommittee. They reported:

- Schultz: Sixty-seven out of 225 surveys were returned. Of those not returned, many full-time farmers failed to respond, as well as some ARC members. Others found parts of the survey not applicable. In spite of this, the subcommittee have been compiling findings. It will take about another month to finish with what they received so far.
- Jones: More surveys would be better, even if securing them would require a more labor-intensive effort. She thinks more effort should be made because the results of the current data analysis does not correspond with anecdotal information collected from past meetings and one-on-one conversations with farmers.
- Jones added that although they would like more time, it is crucial that those who have already made the effort to contribute believe the effort will lead to something productive. Goldsmith echoed the need to complete it and distribute the results.
- Jones suggested a press release to disseminate the results, but requested 2-3 more weeks to try to get more information. The vote was unanimous in favor of her recommendation.
- Robins stressed that the release should be worded to stress that the results will influence the work of the ARC in the coming year.

Website

Robins made this progress report:

- Rex Doan has the site designed and accessible to the ARC, though not quite ready to launch. Robins suggested that the ARC members put together a gift of farm products to thank him.
- Sandy Strehlou and Goldsmith will meet with Rex to receive training on site management. Strehlou will be managing the updates.

- Robins and Hamilton will review documents already collected by the ARC for possible posting on the site. The NAIS letter was one suggestion, along with the original NAIS regulation language.
- ARC members are asked to suggest web links from the ARC site to those of other related organizations. These suggestions should be forwarded to Strehlou.
- Burton-Bell: The SJI Grange has created a website; this link was recommended.
- Robins recommended also that upcoming agriculture-related events be posted.
- Goldsmith suggested that locally published articles on appropriate topics be posted as well. Robins recommended against this because authoritative source materials would be more valuable than newspaper articles.
- Patty recommended that the Committee develop a system of prioritizing what content is added to the site, since the ARC admin coordinator is only part time. Robins indicated that all material will be screened by Committee members before being posted by Strehlou—that such time-limit considerations should be taken into account.
- Robins recommended that all ARC members announce the website launch in their community circles, and that we write a press release.
- Surbaugh offered a link between the ARC site and the Steps site.
- Goldsmith recommended that the invoicing for the site, \$10 per month, occur quarterly or at year end. Since the billing is monthly and is required to be via monthly credit card charge, he is handling this on his personal account, and is amenable to continuing this arrangement.

ARC Program Budget

Goldsmith recommended that the \$3,000 budget for supplies and other program costs should be updated and approved at an upcoming meeting. He will work with Robins on this and will distribute it via email.

Election of Officers

Robins reported that according to the ARC Bylaws, a new round of elections for officers needs to occur.

- Hamilton moved election of a slate of officers, identical to the officers currently seated (Susan Robins, for Chair, Todd Goldsmith, for Vice Chair). Burton Bell seconded the motion, and it passed unanimously. Officers have been reelected for a term ending May 2007.

Meeting Schedule

Robins recommended setting a regular date and time for ARC meetings. She also suggested that the next regularly scheduled meeting not take place until September.

- The group agreed to a schedule of monthly meetings to be held on the fourth Monday of each month, beginning at noon and ending at 2:00pm.
- Robins also recommended that some meetings should take place on other islands.
- Surbaugh suggested re-visiting the idea of meeting on the ferry. Strehlou will research schedules and report back on whether this will be a viable option.

Dog Ordinance

Robins reported that the County, under direction of Randy Gaylord, has not moved on this issue due to other more pressing workload issues.

- Hamilton reported that oversight and support of the ARC has not been assigned to a specific County department. He suggested that this might be a role for the Conservation District.
- Burton-Bell added that there are two critical periods during the year in which sheep/lambs are particularly vulnerable to dog attacks. May-June is one of those periods. She recommends that members listen for and document incidents that may happen before ordinance language can be introduced and adopted.
- Mark Tompkins reported that the draft ARC dog ordinance language was given to Gaylord, however other dog issues (not related to livestock) have surfaced, and have complicated the consideration of the ARC proposal and issues.
- Robins and Goldsmith will contact Gaylord within the week to urge movement on the County's part. Should the matter flounder at this level, Robins and Goldsmith will consider approaching Councilman Myhr.

Other Topics

- Hamilton announced that Ron Zee has been hired as the new Conservation District director. Hamilton will continue working full time for another month, then part time thereafter. However, he plans to stay on as a member of the ARC.
- Schultz announced that three candidates have applied for the open WSU Extension Agriculture Coordinator position. He will be reviewing and interviewing the candidates.
- Gregory announced that the Northwest Agriculture Business Center (NABC) has called for proposals for county-wide agriculture projects. They will consider supporting two projects in San Juan County. Two that are being considered are:
 1. Development of an additional livestock slaughtering/processing facility; and
 2. Establishment of a year-round farmers' market and retail store at the site of the SJI Grange-owned garage on Spring Street.

Next ARC Meeting

The next meeting of the ARC will be Monday, September 25, 2005, 12-2, via teleconference. Locations will be announced closer to the date of the meeting.

The meeting was adjourned at 1:55pm.