

Agricultural Resources Committee

Minutes of October 23, 2007

1:30 – 3:00 PM

Lopez Island Library

ARC Members Present: Jane Burton Bell, Peter Corning, Todd Goldsmith, Eliza Habegger, Katie Hover, Sara Jones, Jim Lawrence, Chris Lohman, Rebecca Moore, Madden Surbaugh, Mark Tompkins

ARC Members Absent: Christine Dahl-Sesby, Bruce Gregory, Danna Kinsey, Julie Miller, Tom Schultz, Ron Zee

Friends Present: Linda Degnan-Cobos, SJI Slow Food Convivium; Dean Dougherty, Preservation Trust; Bob Hart, Skagitonians to Preserve Farmland; Candace Jagel, WSU Extension; Bill Watson, SJC EDC

CD/ARC Staff Present: Eliza Buck

MINUTES

The minutes of the September 25, 2007 meeting were unanimously approved with a definition correction. Katie Hover moved to approve minutes and Sara Jones seconded the motion.

Agenda Change

Todd Goldsmith proposed to change the order of the agenda so that guest speaker Bob Hart could go first. Committee approved the change.

PUBLIC COMMENT

Linda Degnan-Cobos spoke to the ARC about the Slow Food Convivium that she and Maureen Marinkovich are starting on San Juan Island. The focus of the convivium is to bring slow foods into the schools. They are organizing a meeting on December 1 & 2, 2007 on San Juan Island and will bring Tom French as a guest speaker who brought local foods into institutions around Skagit County. To contact Linda email her at westboy@rockisland.com.

PRESENTATION

Presentation by Bob Hart, Vice-President of Skagitonians to Preserve Farmland.

Bob has an agritourism farm & nursery business - LaConner Flats – in Skagit Valley. His website is www.laconnerflats.com. He handed out a brochure.

Skagitonians to Preserve Farmland (SPF) is a non-profit, which was founded in 1989 to generate interest in preserving farmland in Skagit County. First six years no paid staff. Bob Rose was first executive director. Alan Rozema is now the new director.

SPF strategic plan was adopted in 2005 and is founded on four principles: 1. farm land protection; 2. economic viability of farming, 3. agriculture infrastructure, and 4. generating community support. They

conducted a survey in the county and 85% of the electorate wanted to do more to support farmland preservation so the Farmland Legacy Program was adopted.

SPF is focusing on farmland protection. They are working with the county to get transfer development rights program (TDR) underway. Montgomery County, Maryland is a good model has 160,000 acres protected by TDRs. Marin County, California has a unique program based on a gift from a donor. Lancaster, Pennsylvania is another example. Conservation easements and land purchase are two other mechanisms they use.

Festival of Family Farms and a harvest dinner are two ways that they fundraise. The SPF collaborates with many organizations such as the Western Washington Ag Programs, Nature Conservancy, others because it takes a lot of people to make programs possible.

SPF received a \$100K grant from Washington Women's Foundation to link farms to institutions. Tom French heads up this program, which tries to find institutions that will purchase directly from local farmers. Institutions can effectively buy from local large operations.

Veg Trials started at WSU Skagit Research Station and went for three years. After the program ended interested farmers and researchers continued to come out to LaConner Flats to do the veg trials. They test different varieties each year and use a structured rating system. The Seattle Culinary Academy comes one day a week in the summer to grow and learn about variety selections; they harvest and process them as well so they learn about production and quality. There is an 8-minute video on www.laconnerflats.com about the program.

Local food movement is a growing political issue with the rise of food contamination a la melamine in pet food.

Keeping farming profitable is the most important way to keep farmland in farming.

In-Farm-ation is a radio broadcast that carries information about Skagit Valley farming as a means to develop community awareness. They started with a grant (\$30K). Skagit Valley College is doing the broadcasting at 1460 [1630 correct call number] AM. Farmers provide input such as what's being harvested, planted, growing in the fields.

Skagit County Farmland Legacy Program was formed in 1996 by the County Commissioners and passed a tax to fund the program. About \$600K is collected annually. The staff of that program evaluates if the lands in the program are being stewarded correctly. That staff also evaluates properties held by other easement programs. SPF is working with Legacy program to do the assessments of the SPF lands while the SPF will do the marketing of the various easement programs.

The legislature formed the Office of Farmland Preservation this year and Hart is a farmer representative. There are 18 people on the task force. He would like to see a conservation futures matching funds program.

Skagit County has \$500 million of natural agricultural resource lands. Two-thirds of that is in development rights. There are three priority regions in the county. There are state tax benefits. SPF has

brought in estate planning people to talk about CPAs in the county to understand easement donations, etc.

LaConner Flats is an agritourism site with a lot of birdwatching opportunities. They have a restaurant, gardens, and other offerings. They also host regional meetings.

Transferred Development Rights (TDR) are removing the development rights on a property through a private transaction. The most significant one in the US is in Montgomery County, Maryland. They have a 160,000 acres piece protected through a TDR. The development rights were transferred from farmland to the metro area. Mt. Vernon has acquired 120 acres of farmland. They were spreading sewage sludge there. After 10 years of working on what to do with this land, the city and a couple of developers have created a TDR program to increase density in town by selling development rights on the farmland to the city sites. The big question is the receiving site where the density is increased. The developer must make money in order for it to work and the farmer also has to benefit.

SPF has a diversity of expertise on the board, which must also be at least 51% farmers. They have an annual membership drive. Businesses match donor gifts. Their biggest fundraising event is an annual harvest dinner that raises about \$100K annually. Local chefs prepare the meal from local products. They also apply for grants from various foundations such as Bullitt and Skinner. They have an executive director, a development director and an office assistant.

The viability of farming is dependent on farmers being able to make a living. Value added items, high value items, and unique, very high quality products are ways for farmers to be profitable.

Farmland Preservation

Eliza Habegger presented for the Farmland Preservation Subcommittee. They have not met since the last meeting. Eliza H. stated that the subcommittee has many new members and it seems a bit unwieldy. She suggested that they may need to go to project-based groups. Eliza B. told the committee that the subcommittee structure will be discussed at the November ARC meeting per Ron Zee's request.

The San Juan County Land Bank is looking at lease options of the Kings Sisters property in San Juan Valley on San Juan Island. They would like to form a task group made up of two commissioners, two ARC members, and Eliza H. as staff. Eliza invited those interested to volunteer. Jim Lawrence and Katie Hover volunteered. Todd asked the group to report on their criteria at the next ARC meeting.

Eliza B., Ron Z. and Bruce Gregory met with Charles Zalmanek to see how the Assessors office could work with the ARC to help protect farmland. Charles offered to send a notice to the SJICD when a property may go out of ag open space. Charles sent the SJICD a recent notice about a property on Stuart Island. Eliza B. shared a map of the property now in question, which is owned by the Mill Family Trust .

Todd recommended that the County Planning & Development Department might also need to be involved in this effort.

Marketing

Eliza Buck presented for the Marketing Subcommittee. The subcommittee met on 10/16. They spoke about expanding the Island Certified Local program by creating a category for producers and processors

of local foods. A survey and introductory letter are being drafted to send to producers and processors to help determine interest in this local branding project.

The subcommittee proposed that the ARC host a “summit” to bring together all parties interested in a San Juan Island Permanent Farmers’ Market. Minutes from the meeting were sent out to ARC earlier this week so members could learn more about this proposal. Committee agreed to go forward with the summit.

The San Juan Island Farmers Market Association has been working on a list of criteria for a permanent farmers market.

The list of stakeholders that the subcommittee came up with may not be complete so ARC members

Peter motioned that the ARC facilitate a permanent farmers market summit, and Jane seconded it.

Action Item: The ARC will host the “San Juan Island Permanent Farmer’s Market Summit: What are out needs? What is our vision?,” on December 3, 2007 from 1-4 PM.

The GMO Forum will be held on San Juan Island on November 17, 2007 from 2-4 PM at Mullis Senior Center. Guest speakers will be from WSU and The Campaign. The Humanities Washington grant that we wrote was not selected from the 60 applications for project grants. Only 20 were selected.

Regulation

Todd presented for the regulation subcommittee. The subcommittee hasn’t met since before summer recess. He suggested that the subcommittee should be project based since there are no current issues that the subcommittee is working on. Todd is representing the ARC on the SJC CAO committee.

A key State Supreme County decision was handed down in September about the protection of riparian buffers. It was a definition in the Growth Management Act saying that they must “protect” rather than “enhance” the riparian areas.

Todd is on the email list of the stakeholder group working with the Ruckelshaus Center on the study as mandated in SSB5248.

Coordinator’s Report

Eliza reported that the Washington Association of Conservation Districts held a regional meeting in Friday Harbor last week and they forwarded a resolution (2007-05) to create a statewide land trust specifically to protect agricultural or working lands. It will be voted on at the Annual Meeting at the end of November.

Todd told the committee that the ARC received an emergency appropriation of \$10K in September to fund the ARC Coordinator position for the remainder of the year. He also told the committee that the County Council identified agriculture as one of their top four priorities for 2008. County budget talks are taking place today. He asked committee members to be ready to show up at any future budget meetings if the ARC comes onto the agenda.

NEW BUSINESS

Peter Corning of Synergy Farm gave an update on chicken processing regulations. He referred folks back to the May 2007 meeting minutes. Synergy Farm was permitted by WSDA under the new food processing license. Scott Fox at WSDA is the person to contact. Slaughter and plucking can take place outdoors if there is a concrete pad and a temporary cover over it. Peter used an inexpensive Costco outdoor cover. The wastes must also be contained. No splashing onto the ground. Blood must go into a septic system or approved composting system. A WSDA inspector must be at each slaughter.

Todd revisited the discussion about the definition of agriculture. Katie Hover asked Bob Hart how the SPF defines agriculture. He offered an informal definition that agriculture tended to be the husbandry or production of crops and animals. Some areas have limitations on income. It has been a flexible term and dependent on the region in question.

ANNOUNCEMENTS

NEXT MEETING

Our next meeting will be **Tuesday, November 13** at the Skagit Valley College Community Room in Friday Harbor from **2-4 PM**.