

Thurston County Agriculture Advisory Committee

January 18, 2024

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a5frE7it8hs>

Attendees:

Members present: Gary Kline; Glenn Schorno; Chris Doleman; Celeste Winter (Acting Chair); Jennifer Coleman; Marguerite Afledtt (TCD ;Ex/O); Ashley Arai (TC); Kevin Jensen (TC Community Program Manager) Stephen Bramwell (WSU ext. Ex/O)

Via Zoom: Pat Labine; Stella Waxwing; Nathan Heay (Youth Ex./O); Jake Yancy

Guests: Warren Neff; Joe Hannah; Marcie Cleaver; Aimee Richardson (TCD); Donnie Wilcox

Celeste Winther called the meeting to order at 7 PM.

Robert moved to have Celeste chair. Chris seconded. Motion passed unanimously.

Robert moved to approve the agenda. Glenn seconded. Motion passed unanimously.

Robert moved to approve the minutes from November. Stella seconded. Motion passed.

1. Public Comment:

Joe Hanna explained the LTA hearing mainly focused on agritourism and some use changes. He stated the October recommendation was sent to the county commissioners. Joe explained the definition of agriculture is in state statute and the county's definition doesn't match. It's problematic. Line-item changes seemed to be positive. He encouraged people to look at the line-item edits. The hearing was focused on the problem of owners of long-term Ag. ground having businesses unrelated to agriculture as the primary source of income.

Greg stated the code amendments didn't get discussed enough because the LTA proposed expansion took all the attention. It has all been delayed.

Warren Neth spoke of the TCD agroforestry in action series. February 7th is the online webinar. On February 10th Alley Cropping Systems will be demonstrated at his farm.

2. The issue of a scribe was discussed. Greg mentioned it takes a few hours to do. Robert recalled minutes being done by county staff but became controversial. Stephen explained how minutes of a meeting became political in the past. He mentioned a job classification change at CPED could address the issue.

Glenn agreed to be a scribe for this meeting. Greg agreed to take February. Robert volunteered for March. Jennifer volunteered for April. Stella volunteered for May. Gary agreed for June and Celeste for September. Other months were tabled.

The agenda was paused, and introductions of the members and guest were made.

3. Nominations for officers were accepted for Chair, V. Chair, and By-laws officer after some discussion on procedure.

Robert nominated Celeste for chair. Greg seconded the nomination. Pat nominated Jake for vice chair. Celeste seconded. Glenn nominated Greg for vice chair. Chris seconded. Gary nominated Robert for bylaws officer. Chris seconded.

5. The vacant position was discussed. Donnie Wilcox introduced himself. He lives in Thurston County. He is the CFO for Wilcox Farms. He also purchases feed for the farm and is very familiar with regenerative agriculture. Glenn reiterated Donnie's valuable input being from a fifth-generation farm. Wilcox Farms produce organic, free range, and cage free eggs.

Robert brought up the question of Wilcox Farms being in Pierce County and wanted to refer to the county commissioners as well as see the application.

Joe withdrew his application. Warren is still interested in becoming a member of the committee.

Robert motioned that we recommend Warren and wait until we can review Donnie's application.

Gary questioned the timing of the decision. Greg had the same question due to lack of notice of the open position. Greg recommended pausing. There was no second. The motion was withdrawn. Robert made a motion to review and decide at the next meeting. Jennifer seconded. Motion carried.

6. Robert explained the Johnson Rd. large lot development of 85 acres to be divided into five lots. There are critical areas. The land is currently being used for livestock. Part of the land is forested. Adult children want to live on the property. Glenn has spoken with the current owner. The children being able to live on the property will sustain its current use. The current owners are 80+ years of age. Gary questioned the role of the committee and asked if there were any formal procedures for making such recommendations. Robert explained past green sheets and their review. Celeste mentioned the project is in its comment period. Greg explained it was not explicit in our bylaws to recommend changing people's land use. The focus should be on policy and not individual projects. Celeste recommended treating it as a case study rather than focusing on individual decisions. Ashley thought reports on land use changes would help study trends. Robert agreed. Greg agreed that understanding how policy works is great data. Chris explained monumental decisions farmers must make regarding use changes and how people are quick to make recommendations on his family's future without any contact or background information from the owners. Gary stated the subject is time consuming and belongs in a

subcommittee to come up with a recommendation that may conclude we shouldn't be in this at all.

7. A 60 acre forested large lot to be split into two parcels was discussed. No one knew much about the property.

8. The Doleman property was discussed. Robert stated we should be concerned.

Chris explained the dairy is 400 acres. There has been a request for a zoning change from RR 1/5 to RI. The family has stopped farming it already. The family ran a dairy farm for 55 years. It is unsustainable due to feed and labor costs. The land is not prime farmland. The decision for the highest and best use is housing or something better suited. The family believes the best use is rural industrial as it fits well in the environment. It has a rail that runs through it as well as an exit nearby. Greg explained most people don't understand agriculture. Most farmers do not have a 401K or retirement plan. They rely on their land as an investment and retirement plan. Chris agreed. We invest our money in our land and business rather than a traditional retirement plan. Greg asked the question Why would you work so hard to have your retirement stripped away? Warren agreed Rural Industrial versus rural residential 1/5 is a good decision.

Jake stated that rail helps the value of the farm and that there have been dairy heifers on the farm. Chris stated it's not profitable and heifers are being liquidated. No cows are milking. Jake said no conservation easements have been sold. Chris stated the zoning change to rural industrial would bring conservation uses into effect. It's a win/win. The land is not prime farmland. Conservation easements would imply Ag. operations would continue. It wouldn't pencil out doing so. Grass only grows well because of the dairy manure. The lagoon is no longer certified. Jake stated he has grazing acres nearby and it's been productive for him. Jake stated significant profit would be made selling as RR 1/5. Jake questioned it being lost production forever. Chris disagreed because it is not viable as a dairy farm. Jake believes a beef operation is viable. There are three operations nearby. Glenn asked what the current rent per acre for pasturing cattle is. Jake replied \$200 per acre per year. Jake then stated selling a conservation easement would allow you to further reduce those rates.

Jake made a motion to write a letter of non-support to the county commissioners and have a letter of discerning opinion as well. Jennifer seconded Jake's motion. Chris said this is not the place of the committee to make this recommendation. Greg agreed. There is no basis for this. Gary said he didn't understand what we are supposed to be doing. Ashley advised there is a process to hear feedback individually or from the committee. Jake explained historical processes of the committee giving direct feedback to the county. He explained his opinion that the committee has a responsibility to tour those properties, survey the properties, and allow owners to testify to the committee. He believes this is what this committee is designed for. Glenn explained the historical and competitive nature of the dairy business, that we should congratulate the family for farming so long and voiced his discontent with the motion.

The motion failed.

Glenn made a motion to support the zoning change. Greg stated we shouldn't be writing a letter of any kind, for or against. Glenn withdrew the motion.

9. Sub-committee status tabled until next meeting.

10. Greg spoke about the October 19th recommendation of the committee to pause LTA changes until compensation could be addressed but continue with code amendments. His understanding was that no letter was received by the commissioners. Ashley downs or commissioners have no recollection of the letter. Ashley Ari said to email her and she'd make sure it got to the commissioners. Greg wants to make sure our work is not done in vain. Greg made a motion that the committee members receive copies of each recommendation letter sent to commissioners. The motion passed unanimously.

11. Robert made a motion to approve adding two ex officio members to the bylaws. These included the Thurston County agricultural program manager and youth member. Glenn seconded. The motion passed unanimously.

12. Kevin explained he is no longer a committee member. He is the new Thurston County agricultural program manager. He worked at the state for 10 years and hopes to fill Ashley's role and keep the committee aware of what's happening at the county.

4. Celeste explained she is nominated for chair, Jake and Greg for vice chair, and Robert for bylaws compliance officer.

Robert was renominated as bylaws compliance officer. He was voted in unanimously. Jake was renominated as vice chair with a vote of four to three with three abstaining. Celeste was nominated as chair unanimously.

13. The Thurston County project update was given by Ashley Ari and Kevin Jensen. LTA zoning piece is still tabled. A new mapping person was just hired. Don't expect a lot of movement until May or June. Thanks to those who showed up at the public hearing. There's a follow up briefing on February 5th on ag. code changes. They may be adopted on February 20th. They are working on a grant for the working lands conservation strategy. There is a focus on finding money for conserving working lands. There have been discussions regarding work plans that align with what the Planning Commission will be addressing in order for this group to give impactful input.

14. Stephen explained an upcoming soil conference. It is sponsored through WSU NRCS and WSDA. There are good speakers lined up regarding soil health. The conference is at Puyallup extension center on February 8th.

There is also the southwest Washington grazing school conference April 18th through the 21st at the skookumchuck Grange.

15. Marguerite from Thurston conservation district introduced a new employee named Aimee Richardson. She will be a new planner for the district. They are moving next to HD Fowler on February 5th.

Pat made a motion to adjourn the meeting. Robert seconded. The vote was unanimous. The meeting was adjourned.