

# Thurston County Agriculture Advisory Committee

February 15, 2024

<https://youtu.be/HLmONiHBHG4>

Attendees:

Members present: Zoom only due to weather.

Via Zoom: Celeste Winter (Chair); Robert McIntosh; Glenn Schorno; Pat Labine; Jennifer Colvin; Chris Doleman; Stephen Bramwell (WSU ext. Ex/O); Jake Yancy; Nathan Heay (Youth Ex./O); Greg Schoenbachler; Marguerite Afledtt (TCD ;Ex/O).

Guests: Donnie Wilcox; Thurston County CPED (minutes); Nick George; Warren Neff; Loretta Seppanen;

Celeste Winther called the meeting to order at 7 PM.

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

Robert moved to approve the minutes from January. Greg seconded. Motion passed unanimously.

## 1. Public Comment:

Loretta brought up the USDA farm census results just out, taken every 5 years. Filled out by farms of all sizes, \$1,000 in gross revenue is the qualifying benchmark. She stated median sized farm in TC remained the same at 14 acres. She discussed TC farmland loss results and comparisons to other Western WA counties. She noted 4 kinds of lands that are included in loss figures where “woodlands” represented the largest loss of acreage. She suggested everyone take a look at it and Kevin may be discussing the results in a future meeting.

## 2. Review Open Applications for Vacant Position, Celeste Winther

### 1 Farmer Member Position Open

Donnie Wilcox - Wilcox Farms, 114-year-old farm, he's part of the 5<sup>th</sup> generation to farm. He has lots of involvement with farm advocacy, policy and related boards. They sell egg products all over Thurston County and buy feed and other agricultural supplies throughout the state.

Warren Neth – Cosmic Carrot Farm, is doing various types of alley crops. Participated in Sustainable Farms & Fields legislation and funding. Recently moved from Clark County where he was Executive Director of Slow Foods SW WA where he advocated for farmland preservation. Also has a consulting business that focuses on supporting our regional food system.

Nick George - State coordinator for the Partners of Fish and Wildlife program of USFWS who works with producers on agricultural viability and enhancing sensitive habitat. Specializes in

habitat restoration and partnerships with local communities. Involved in SW WA Grazing Association planning team. His wife is the owner and operator of Spotted Frog Farm for about two years, he regularly helps out and they produce and sell pasture raised organic eggs and sell regionally to wholesale and retail markets.

Discussion ensued with the candidates and members. Questions about farm locations and what the committee rules are around farm location. Robert stated the bylaws are ambiguous and left to interpretation. Celeste read some definition from the Thurston County website, Robert read the bylaws. Robert stated this question was raised at a previous meeting where Ashley A. said she didn't think the commissioners would care about a question that complicated. Celeste said she hopes the commissioners review our recordings and watch our determinations but what we had for qualifications was fine. Pat raised her past suggestion of recommending all three candidates to the BOCC and let the commissioners decide. Robert agreed with her.

Chris asked the candidates to quantify the scale of their operations. Discussion ensued between the candidates and members on their operational scale. Robert commented on the importance of having representation from large and small farms. Pat pointed out our mandate is to represent the Ag community. Loretta referenced USDA census results of farm acreage. Chris discussed the lack of large farm representation on the committee. Glenn agreed and further discussed how in the big picture of agriculture, all farms in Thurston County are small farms, including the ones the committee considers large. Jake made a motion to move on to item 3 with internal discussion and voting on candidates, Chris seconded. Motion passed unanimously.

### 3. Recommendation for Vacant Position, Celeste Winther

Celeste called for recommendations or nominations for the vacant position. Greg suggested not to do nominations but rather for everyone to state a vote by candidate's name where the popular vote wins. Celeste agreed. Pat suggested ranking candidates by 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> choice. Robert stated that's ranked choice voting where there must be a system for how to rank the second and third choices against the first choice. He wasn't sure the committee had that system. Chris agreed with Robert.

Robert made a motion to recommend all three and leave the choice to the BOCC. Pat seconded. Robert withdrew his motion.

Jake made a motion that each voting member of the committee is allowed one minute to discuss their vote and then their vote is made. No second.

Robert restated his motion to recommend all three and leave the choice to the BOCC. Pat seconded. Greg stated that's a nice idea but the committee is to advise the Commission. To pass on the ability to advise is not doing the job if the committee is not selecting as a group. Glenn agreed. Jake agreed and restated our job is to be advisors to the county and the committee should know more from this process to make the selection. Robert read part of Article 2 of the bylaws. Robert clarified his motion as to say, when forwarding the three names to the board to

say all three candidates were found to be qualified. Individual vote was called. Motion failed 5-2.

Jake made a motion that the members vote independently on the three candidates so each member can only vote for their primary candidate. Chris seconded. Discussion continued about individual candidate qualifications. Motion passed unanimously.

Celeste called individual committee members to state their candidate's name. Donnie won the popular vote for recommendation by 4 votes to him, 2 votes to Nick and 2 abstentions.

#### 4. Review Subcommittee Status and Strategies for Addressing Loss of County Farmland & Farmers, Robert McIntosh

Robert stated the original committee members were himself, Marcy Cleaver, Gary, Ashley A. and Kevin. Committee member changes has created voids and he wanted to confirm who on the original list still wants to be on and if any other committee members want to join, committee member numbers is limited to not make a quorum. Glenn and Jennifer asked to join. Robert said he would send out an e-mail to everyone with a list of issues that have surfaced and proposed meeting dates.

#### 5. Farm Tour for BOCC, Jennifer Colvin

Jennifer said the BOCC would like to tour farms in the county. She wants to know if the committee is interested in organizing and giving ideas around how it can be done. Committee discussion ensued. Jake noted the TCCD does this yearly with the BOCC and legislative partners, typically in the fall. Marguerite confirmed they did it in the fall over 2 days, one in north county and one in south county. Greg recommended piggybacking this with TCCD if it worked but to definitely do it independently if timing with TCCD did not work. Chris further supported the idea and stated the importance of educating the commissioners about ag. Glenn recommended the turf farm (Country Green), Sterino Farms and Shilter Family Farm. Chris agreed and also recommended Plowman Dairy Farms. Jennifer agreed to work with Marguerite to get more details.

#### 6. Pause on Long Term Ag Zoning Letter, Robert McIntosh

Robert wanted to clarify if the voted recommendation letter from the committee to pause LTA rezoning efforts until the funding to compensate property owners for loss of development rights was established, ever reached the BOCC. Greg said he brought this up and had previously confirmed with two commissioners and Ashley D. that it did not get sent to the commissioners until it was brought up at a recent ag committee meeting. Stephen said he would follow up with both Ashleys to find out what happened. Celeste asked for further confirmation the letter went out and that she would like to see it as well. Jake stated it got held up in the process of our communications going through Ashley D.

#### 7. "Green Sheet" 3626 63rd Ave SW Tenino – Proposal to Divide, Robert McIntosh

Celeste noted an address typo, it is on 163<sup>rd</sup> Ave. SW, not 63<sup>rd</sup>. Jake had information on this property and explained its general characteristics to his knowledge. Robert raised the question if the green sheets could be used to help demonstrate the need for compensation to landowners for development rights where proposed developments have cause of concern for the loss of ag lands. He asked if the committee could write letters to the commissioners about specific green sheets to suggest purchase of development rights as a better direction than allowing the development. Greg reiterated his belief, as stated in past meetings, that the committee should not be spending their time on individual projects but rather focusing on policies that support agriculture and in turn preserve agriculture. He said knowing about the green sheets offers good examples for supporting why policy changes are needed or not. He cited his statements from past meetings where there were concerns about not having a direct process or directive in place for the committee to make these recommendations. He said it is out of the scope of the committee. Celeste reiterated the utility Robert described of being nonspecific with the committee's recommendation of approval or non-approval but using these as examples of the need to compensate landowners for development rights in lieu of the need to curb farmland loss. Jake agreed with Celeste but also thought it to be in the committee's purview and one of the sole/big purposes of the committee is to provide recommendations on these projects. He recommended writing a letter of nonsupport of this development while agreeing to include Robert's comments as a reason for nonsupport along with the other reasons he previously detailed. Robert asked if Jake drafted a letter and inserted the appropriate language about the need for landowner compensation, would the committee be willing to send it out?

Jake made a motion to write a letter of nonsupport for the reasons Robert stated. Jake also noted that if passed, a letter of dissent can also be written. Robert seconded. Jennifer asked for clarification on the proposal for this property. She wanted to know if the property owner was seeking an exception to be made for something that wasn't normally allowed, a change of zoning. Glenn doubted that as the reason and questioned if the current zoning was 1/5. Jake thought the general area was zoned 1/5 but said this had been in agriculture. Glenn asserted it was not zoned agriculture. Jennifer raised her question again if this is an allowed use within their current zoning. Robert wasn't sure but thought they were seeking approval for a large lot subdivision. Jennifer wanted to clarify that the committee's nonsupport of this project was not taking something away from the property owner that they currently had. Robert agreed this was not taking anything away that they currently had. Chris asked if the property is currently producing any agricultural goods for the county. Celeste thought it was currently used for grazing and Jake added detail that he was reasonably certain to be accurate. Jake stated there may be an element where the committee would be recommending taking away something they are allowed to do but justified the action. Stephen stated commenting on these projects is worthwhile but questioned if recommendation by the committee was appropriate if it's on something that is already allowable. He further outlined how the county has never had a good alternative for people who want to exercise their zoning rights. He mentioned the county should

be further on purchase of development rights and transfer of development rights which could be another option for some. He felt the more the committee comments, the more likely these kinds of options will be.

Greg thought the committee was making a lot of speculation on this by not knowing for certain the zoning and other specifics in general. Greg stated that getting a permit to do something does not mean it's not allowed in that zoning and that even special use permits are allowed and part of certain zoning. These require different layers of approvals, not a change in zoning. Greg stated he didn't know if the property was attempting rezoning, special use or what and said others on the committee didn't seem to know either. Greg thought for the committee to make a recommendation on a project like this without that knowledge was reckless and outside of the committee purview. He also mentioned the committee had not heard from the landowners on this which has been a point of the committee to allow the landowners to speak with the committee like Chris did at the prior meeting about his project. He reiterated his belief for the committee to make a recommendation to support or not support any individual project with this kind of uncertainty and lack of information was inappropriate. Celeste commented on the role of the committee stated in the bylaws for the group to be tasked with advising issues that affect agriculture. She thought this was one of those but not necessarily with opposed or approval comments, but for the opportunity to demonstrate the issues in the county around agricultural land loss. Greg contested there's not enough information to make the determination if this is a problem for agriculture but agreed if we had good information on the lands being converted, it would be useful as a real-world example. Donnie questioned if it's right to advise on whether or not the county should allow it. It's more of a matter if it's legal or not and if it's done by the rules they should be able to do it. He also noted the value of hearing about these every month to try and figure out why and then think about policy recommendations. He stated it seems really inappropriate for the committee to be "the peanut gallery" jumping in and trying to mess with someone's private transaction. Glenn said he agrees 110%.

Jennifer thought that knowing about these green sheets is a good educational experience for understanding and highlighting the issue of farmland loss in general but maybe not getting into the specifics of individual properties. Chris agreed to not use these to target individual property owners but use them to inform commissioners or the county on how to preserve in the future. He said transferring these properties to other farmers is the goal, it should not be to save the farmland. The goal should be to make farming profitable for the county. He continued, finding policies or making policies that can make it advantageous to be farmers in Thurston County will prevent the loss of farmland happening; farmers don't want to sell their farmland unless they have to. Finding policies within the county that make farming more profitable will preserve farmland and allow a farmer to sell not to a developer but to another farmer because farmland is valuable as farmland. The reason it's not valuable as farmland and it's getting converted is because farming is not valuable. He continues the committee has to find a way to make farming valuable within the county. Jake called for the vote. Motion passed 4 yes, 3 no and 1 abstention.

Jake mentioned if anybody wanted to write a letter of dissent it would be attached and sent with the letter he writes. Greg volunteered to write the letter of dissent and requested a copy of Jake's letter.

#### 8. Project Updates, Ashley Arai

Passed

#### 9. WSU Extension Update, Stephen Bramwell

Stephen talked about how the previous discussion of ag issues and ag profitability are things they're trying to work on. This year they're helping at WSU with the Growers Cooperative in the SW Washington Food Hub. Working on getting product to JBLM and help to augment the DuPont farmers market are two efforts. A couple new Evergreen interns will help with the Growers Cooperative and the Food Hub to staff that booth and get Thurston County product to Dupont. A new product, Ranch Boxes, might be added. Steven talked about upcoming Grazing Association workshops with dates TBD. The grazing school is the 18th to the 21st for the second year in a row. Registrations are growing. Things they do on the technology and productivity side are to support profitability of growers which is important. There is funding that augments funds the TCCD has and NRCS has to do fertility improvements on farmland throughout the county. There's funding to focus specifically on pastures and hay fields that will be worked on; some includes fertility improvement, some can include seeding applications. Thurston County has a lot of land proportionally in pastureland. This funding is coming through a partnership with JBLM. DOD is highly invested in agriculture viability for open space buffering of its installations.

#### 10. Thurston Conservation District Update, Sarah Moorehead

Margarete said she put the Thurston conservation newsletter into the chat and they have an annual local working group meeting February 21st at 5:30. All local producers are encouraged to come where Kitsap, Mason, Pierce and King county producers will join. Last Agro Forestry In Action will be this Saturday on a farm in Yelm where a shelter belt will be planted and also some civil pasture. TCCD has moved and is now next to HD Fowler on Tilly Court SE in suite 152. Spring coming means renting out the semi-new 8 foot working with no till drill and a new manure spreader is coming; that will make 2, one small and one midsized manure spreaders. A successful WSDA grant will go towards a new poultry processing unit to accommodate large bird producers, geese or turkeys. It's to be purchased no later than June this year.

Donnie raised the question, especially during a legislative session, why the committee is not talking about legislation that impacts Thurston County agriculture. He talked about a current bill to lower the cost of organic certification for small farms. These things are very relevant to the county.

Celeste stated that in the time she's been on the committee it's been made aware of certain bills that may impact agriculture but never commented or testified on them. She thought this was a question for the county if it's within the committee's purview. Donnie thought focusing

on policy and providing expertise on effects of these policies was time better spent than focusing on individual projects. Robert reviewed the bylaws and stated the committee is not to take a position but can advise the county of committee opinion for the county to support a bill or initiative. Greg agreed with Donnie that we should be looking at broader legislation that affects agriculture in Thurston County. Glenn agreed with Donnie and was appreciative of his experience in this arena. He also pointed out that this can help the committee to advise the county, give members more knowledge on the topics and members are able to testify as an individual on these matters.

Pat cordially complimented Celeste on her handling of these meetings. Jake reiterated Roberts statements on board function with legislative action. Glenn asked Loretta about the census and how Woodlands was the highest category of farmland loss.

Robert made a motion to adjourn the meeting. Pat seconded. Motion pass unopposed. The meeting was adjourned.