



Agricultural Advisory Board

Remote Meeting Minutes

January 14, 2021

6:30 - 8:00 PM

Attending: Lucy McKain, Ken Hartlage, David Sears, Sherrill Rosoff

Guests: Deborah Fountain, Mark Mathews, Stephen Themelis, Tony Beattie, Paula Terassi, Robert Blood, Brittany Overshiner

Meeting came to order at 6:30 PM.

Ken Hartlage motioned to approve minutes of 7/15/20; 9/3/20; 10/29/20. Lucy McKain seconded. Approved unanimously.

Sherrill Rosoff announced that the town will be retrofitting its street lights this year and that there will be a demo of five lighting manufacturers' lights on Main Street next month.

Sherrill Rosoff then introduced Deborah Fountain, the Master Plan Implementation Team's (MPIT) liaison person with the Agricultural Advisory Board.

Deborah Fountain gave a brief overview of the Master Plan and noted that the Ag Board has 10 recommendations from the Master Plan assigned to it. Deb's role is to facilitate, aid and assist the Ag Board in any way she can and will be attending as many of our meetings as possible.

MPIT is a three person team: Mark Mathews, Chuck Walkovitch and Deb Fountain. Chuck Walkovitch is the team leader and linking member to the Planning Board (which has final responsibility for implementing the Master Plan.)

MPIT is required to track and report the status of the Master Plan's recommendations quarterly to the town in an effort to provide visibility, accountability and transparency.

MPIT asked the Ag Board to determine budget recommendations for the next two years out; set our priorities and goals as to how when we want to implement these recommendations. Deb will assist Sherrill with the Ag Board's status reports being current.

Deb Fountain then talked about the Eisenhower Priority Matrix which are attached to these minutes. Sherrill Rosoff then presented the AG Board's priority matrix for the 1st and 2nd priorities (Quick Wins and longer term planning projects). She also reviewed the common recommendations shared with EDaC and discussed how the two committee chairs had delegated which committee would take the lead. Sherrill noted that the Ag Board is stepping back from the Peter Fitz Collaborative (commercial kitchen) but would be available to the PFC as needed. Mark Mathews noted that there is strong interest from both EDaC and the SelectBoard regarding development of a local Food Hub.

The Eisenhower Priority Matrix is attached to the minutes.

The Ag Board's Priority Matrix is attached to the minutes.

Sherrill Rosoff noted that the budget figure given to the town came from a proposal presented to the Ag Board by Northbound Ventures.

The Northbound Ventures Proposal is attached to the minutes.

Ken Hartlage noted that the intent with the proposal is to pursue promoting, supporting and growing agricultural businesses within Pepperell and what we discussed with Northbound Ventures (Holly Fowler) is leveraging their expertise in getting a better grip on what Pepperell's Agricultural business looks like today. We want to build a profile by surveying and talking with farmers and producers as to where they want to take their business - and what are the market opportunities and/or infrastructure they use or need to expand their business. We want to get an understanding of that. Converting the Ag Board to a Commission can facilitate that.

Tony Beattie asked if this proposal was intended to be regional or local?

Ken Hartlage: Because we had to get a budget number in quickly, this budget is for 12-15 interviews. The number could grow could and maybe we could budget for more but what this is really representing is getting budget number in because we had to and can get us a baseline, a starting point.

Sherrill Rosoff noted that there is urgency regarding conversion of Ag Board to an Ag Commission because we have to go to the Selectboard (and maybe the town administrator and town counsel) to gain its approval in order to be on the Spring town warrant. There also needs to be 45 days for public comment, and public posting.

The meeting was then turned over the Chris Chisholm and Ashley Davies from MDAR who administer the APR program.

The link for the presentation is here: <https://town.pepperell.ma.us/DocumentCenter/View/5815/Town-of-Pepperell-APR-Presentation>.

A pdf file of the presentation is attached.

The last fifteen minutes were open to questions from attendees.

Steve Themelis: Can 61A and 61B be co-mingled? Can you have farming, forestry and recreational open space on one large parcel?

A: You can have various chapters on different portions of your property (you have to have 10 acres to qualify for 61B, and you need to have a cutting plan.) Initially when applying for APR, we require 1/3

open active agricultural land and as long as you have 50% prime soil, and that might mean there's forest land in that mix, your land would be valued at 10-20K per acre (for the forest land as well) and you do have allowances to do forestry, and clear additional land. If you're under Ch. 61B for forest at the outset, and 61A for open land, and then you clear cut the forests and bring that to agriculture, you can switch that land to 61A which has a better tax rate.

Tony Beattie: Do you require that a farm have a farm plan under NRCS at the time of the consideration of the sale?

A: We do not. If you have highly erodible land, you do have to get a plan for that. NRCS would do a site walk.

Tony Beattie: In reviewing the literature, it seems that the State has recognized that APR sometimes needs additional help. Are there preferences given for some of the grant and subsidy programs over farms that are not APR?

A: Yes, we have actually funded a few new grant programs (indistinguishable) and AIP funding if you want to change commodities to allow you to grow your business. These are specifically for APR programs.

Tony Beattie: We've struggled with a farm in town that wanted to combine a camp and equine stabling; the Dover amendment stated that you could have a related activity that supported the agriculture activity. Is APR congruent with the Dover amendment and Right to Farm?

A: We do allow for activities that are ancillary such as a rodeo and we do have a few examples of small farm based or forestry based programs as educational components in home schooling programs.

Tony Beattie: It sounds as if these related activities are allowed by permission under APR, rather than by right under a Right to Farm/Dover amendment.

Ken Hartlage: Do easements on agricultural land present any issues with getting the COA, or adding an easement? Thinking about rights of passage across agricultural land...

A: We generally recommend that easements have to be done before the APR closing; can't put easements on once that's in place.

KH: Doesn't encumber or prohibit it if the easement is already there?

A: No.

Sherrill Rosoff: What is your definition of a farmer?

A: If somebody has a viable business plan, we'll consider them a farmer. We have had some borderline cases (ex. one in Lunenburg). We want to be sure that they can be viable as farmers; we have a few courses to encourage young people and people wanting to change their careers and they can use these courses to develop a business plan. If there's a succession plan in place, (working with next generation of family, or farm manager) that really helps.

Tony Beattie: Regarding funding for APR purchases - federal and state - what does the budget look like in the Covid environment?

A: Currently funding is in a good place, and we're hoping to bring in more federal dollars. More money is being put into the (agricultural) sector due to climate change measures at the State level. Governor Baker and the people around him are very much interested in food security and protecting farm land.

Tony Beattie: With climate change and state policies, do you anticipate APR funding growing? Capturing more farms?

A: Yes. We're piloting a project next year to change some of the APR policies to work toward capturing more farms into APR.

Tony Beattie: Can farms get paid for sequestering carbon in our soils, and better access to solar power as income streams for our farms - how can we help to get these policy changes made? Who can we talk to and lobby?

A: We just had an RFR for the Ag Soil Health program and I believe the contract should be awarded soon (hasn't been released yet) but its a statewide program that's going to provide incentives to farmers to implement regenerative agricultural practices. That's a start and once that's going hopefully its a step further with carbon sequestration.

American Farmland Trust (AFT) is working with Mass NRCS to identify locally important soils. Once those are identified it means more farmers will be eligible for USDA/NCRS funding. (Indistinguishable) going to local towns to get information on those local soils - not sure how quickly that will happen.

TB: Is that AG Healthy Soils legislation or is it different?

A: AFT and NRCS is working independently but it will tie in to the Ag Soils health Program. The locally important soils program has always been a part of the farm bill but NRCS hasn't gotten it going before, and now with this new interest in health soils, now will implement it. Also there are pilot programs - 11 going on right now - to increase use of dual use solar - (farming underneath solar) - want to expand on that. Not cemented into the ground so can be removed easily.

Local assessors tend to pull you out of 61A if you put in solar, MDAR is working on that with the DOR to solve that glitch.

Contact information for Chris and Ashley are included at the end of the presentation.

ST: Does MDAR have any program for establishing Food Hubs in the area?

A: We're not involved in it, but do know that a Food Hub was created recently as part of MDAR's food safety program (Boston Gleaners: <https://www.bostonareagleaners.org/volunteer.html>) but there is money there.

Meeting adjourned at 7:58 PM.