



Agricultural Commission

Remote Meeting Minutes

January 19, 2022

7:00 - 9:00 PM

The meeting came to order at 7:04 PM.

Attending: Brittany Overshiner, Tom Mirabilie, Lucy McKain, David Sears, Sherrill Rosoff

Guests: Holly Fowler, Tony Beattie, Marge LaFleur, Gene Jacobs, Noah Tremblay, Deb Fountain, Gene Jacobs, Eric Piper, Joyce Morrow, Jenny Gingras

Sherrill Rosoff made the following announcements:

a. The town is soliciting suggestions for ARPA fund allocations from all town boards, committees, commissions and private citizens. Please provide Sherrill and/or Lucy your suggestions for our Commissions funding requests for submission to the Select Board as soon as possible.

b. The Adaptive Reuse Overlay District (AROD) is now written as a a town wide overlay district that includes municipal, religious and historical buildings. Further iterations are likely but it will be an article on the Spring Town warrant. Due to MGL chapter 40A, section 3 the impact on our farms is negligible except for allowed uses that include assisted living/retirement communities within AROD.

c. Craig Hanson and Sherrill Rosoff were interviewed by the Lowell Sun regarding a shared kitchen and food hub at the Peter Fitzpatrick School.

d. Sherrill Rosoff has been asked to be a co-presenter with Al Averill (Farmland of Local Importance) at the upcoming MACC (Mass Association of Conservation Commissions) in March.

e. We need an inventory of land that the town leases to farmers as the Ag Commission can manage these lands to get them into production.

f. We need to schedule a joint meeting with the Peter Fitzpatrick Collaborative regarding the shared kitchen and food hub.

Sherrill Rosoff introduced Holly Fowler, CEO and founder of Northbound Ventures.

Holly Fowler: She learned about what Pepperell was thinking to do about 18 months ago and was happy to feed resources to the Ag Advisory Board during that time. The Board thought wholesale buyers were an opportunity space and wanted to find what it would take to sell wholesale and value added to local

farmers. She noted that lots of communities embark on this without consulting farmers and growers - who are the most important stakeholders. To avoid that error, the Board decided to talk to these stakeholders most concerned with a food hub rather than make decisions for them. By including a stakeholder engagement process we hope to gain the best ideas and most information to lend to this process.

The main objectives are: 1. supply side capacity for a food hub; identify any issues, and any necessary technical assistance that might be needed and 2.) identify demand side interest in a food hub, and potential volumes that might be needed. We want to find out how a food hub can assist local farmers in growing their business and possibly increase farm efficiency. It's not true that growth is an objective but farmers could recognize ways that their operations can be improved. So we want to determine readiness to engage, and how local production aligns with local demand.

There are various models available of food hub and all are on the table - it's the needs of the farming community that will dictate what will finally be done.

Gene Jonas: It will be hard to get farmers to respond to surveys - they might be a little leery at first but if they find out they'll get a good price for their products, they'll join up. What have you done that's similar to this?

HF: Two examples of similar projects: Vital Communities in the upper valley of NH. This was the 3rd iteration of food hub development and we were asked to assess the farmers readiness piece. Had limited survey response but great in person interviews. This is a food hub that was already expanding, identified process in place with a virtual market platform, cross docking opportunity. Wasn't a compelling story to build infrastructure but there was untapped resources that they could identify. Also worked with Coastal Foodshed as part of a food system assessment. Sensitive to how many asks have been made of farmers over the past two years so sometimes surveys are not always the way they want to communicate. She's happy to talk to farmers after hours in order for her to produce the best possible product for Pepperell; happy to talk by phone to a farmer at any time.

The work plan is organized into five parts which Holly Fowler reviewed. End of April is the target date to hand the inputs off to Shon Rainford.

Noah Tremblay: the Fitz Collaborative wants to service the needs of the town - will there be a local outreach?

HF: the design of the commercial kitchen survey is open to that as the kitchen use could be designed as a tiered system but it's definitely a question for the group as to how wide you want to throw the net.

Marge LaFleur: I know there will be some sort of collaboration with the Board of Health so that it can ask questions of the Agricultural Commission; its concerns will focus a lot on the commercial kitchen and food production.

HF: We're providing the inputs for Shon Rainford and he'll address space utilization, equipment, docking, staffing, operational hours - and the financial picture to operate the business. He'll estimate the volumes of demand for the kitchen and hub.

Lucy McKain: will you share options with us as we go through this project so that we can explore them and have a discussion with you?

HF: Happy to share examples with you about how they're working but we want to hear from farmers about what resonates with them - farmers want to customize. We want to be clear about our objectives to

the farmers - intentional about the language we use and doing things in stages. The informational session is important; it's informal and allows farmers to ask their questions - things could start to happen after they have a chance to talk. The Farmer list and survey will be public documents. In addition we need to identify potential buyers of a food hub and users of a commercial kitchen. We could use the town's website, list serves and Fitz Collaborative's website. You could help us identify the best methods for this outreach....Sherrill is co-pilot of this endeavor so reach out to her with your suggestions.

MLaF: Would anyone be coming in to the kitchen to do soaps or lotions - like goats milk lotions, or soaps? Is this part of this?

HF: Here's how we've asked about that. Typically we include a category in the commercial kitchen survey for non-edible food based products. UTEC's kitchen in Lowell had someone who was doing potpourri so they were drying food based products which were not to be consumed. Usually after the operational plan and financials you'll be making decisions about a user guide outlining who will be using the kitchen, but at this stage we include questions about.

NT: As a chemist, I was wondering about cross contamination in the kitchen and you deal with issues of transparency about what people are using.

HF: We ask what types of food products they handle (long list); ultimately there will be a staff monitoring the kitchen and you will manage the risk through the user agreement. This may feel onerous to a community user so you may create different options for users but, normally, you use the user agreement to mitigate this kind of risk. There are tons of resources about operating a commercial kitchen.

I want to give you a sneak peek at the Farmer Grower survey. My plan is to use the surveys in a google form; some folks may want it on paper, and we can accommodate a small number of these. The survey's intro paragraph should express the voice of the community but right now its stock language. The basic outline of the farmer grower survey is to ask farm profile questions up front. This is an important point: we are more likely to get responses if we don't ask for the name of the farmer but just know at the other side it won't be possible to trace back an answer to a farm. So may not know the names of a high profile user. There is a workaround in that we provide them an opportunity to indicate that they are a high profile user elsewhere in the survey.

BO: I understand why it's a challenge - I fill out surveys and say who I am because I don't care but sometimes I do hesitate. Optional is a good choice.

GJ: They don't want to be bugged further down the road and therefore don't want to give out their names so part of it is how much they trust who's giving the survey. If you ask them the purpose up front that will help so they understand and eases them into a response.

HF: The survey and informational session will give us the first picture of what's possible and if we share it back we can ask the farming community about what they think so the survey's results are not the end of the opportunity to learn more. I advise to make names optional and provide a chance to contact Sherrill. It's a balance of keeping it clear and concise but help people feel comfortable with doing it.

HF: There's a review period for everyone to provide inputs to the survey. Critical questions: are there idle acres to put into production? Is there an interest to increase production? Questions about growing practices; certifications, season extension strategies, types of food being grown or harvested, any added value production, onsite farm activities, services that might be associated with the food hub, current sales channels, any portion of product gleaned or composted, and any certifications used to market the product. Also questions about different types of services farmers would be willing to use, how far they're willing

to travel to participate in the food hub, any excess equipment or space to make the food hub network more efficient. We ask about usage (months), how much they might want to channel through the food hub, pricing and volume preferences, and some open ended questions at the end.

The commercial kitchen and potential buyer surveys will be developed after the Farmer Grower survey. However, the goal will be that all of the above survey instruments will be drafted and ready for review on Monday of next week. We have to make sure that the survey tools are where they need to be; and be ready to discuss at the informational session.

SR: I am working the restaurant and catering lists but I don't know how to do the institutional lists...

HF: I can definitely help with the institutional list, but I can't help with local group chats or lists to send out the surveys. We're looking for people whose networks are used by the people we are trying to reach. Could send out through the Tufts list serve; people read it and forward to their friends. We need to cascade to our networks once it's live.

BO: let's meet in two weeks to finalize the farmer draft. For me it's the Eastern Massachusetts Craft list serve - everybody will see it if its there.

GJ: The key to the survey is maximizing the responses. Will the food hub and shared kitchen support small and mid-size farmers?

NT: We want to understand what the commercial kitchen value proposition is, but we're also very keen to motivate synergy within the community.

GJ: I'm taking Sherrill up to see Kearsarge to see how it operates - and I hope that Pepperell can be part of that regional network and support the farmers.

Joyce Morrow: The commercial kitchen should definitely be open to Pepperell residents and for those growers who focus on livestock, how will the food hub work? Blood Farm has some regulatory issues, and Townsend has a poultry processor - so how will the food hub address slaughtering and licensing?

HF: the survey will asks some questions about processing but this is really an operational question.

Lucy: motion to adjourn, Brittany seconded.

Meeting adjourned at 9 PM.