



Agricultural Commission with the Board of Health

Remote Meeting Minutes

3/2/2022

7:00 - 9:00 PM

Meeting came to order at 7:04 PM

Approval of Ag Commission minutes of 2/2/22 minutes: Brittany Overshiner motions, Lucy McKain seconded. Minutes approved.

Marge LaFleur opened the meeting for the Board of Health as this is an informational session between the two committees.

Attending: Board of Health: Marge LaFleur, Stephen Themelis, Renee D'Agento
Agricultural Commission: Sherrill Rosoff, Lucy McKain, Brittany Overshiner, Eric Piper, David Sears.

Guests: Holly Fowler, Northbound Ventures, Shon Rainford, Worcester Regional Food Hub.

The meeting began with a discussion of the Stakeholder Engagement Process and concerns about decision making processes.

Brittany Overshiner (BO): I am very concerned. My business relies on direct to consumer sales and increasing those sales locally is part of my plan. I feel very threatened by the idea of an additional person retailing local food especially when I can't figure out who will be the decision maker, who establishes values, etc. and I feel I need to pump the brakes. There are so many people who want to buy local, but no one has thought this through - the definition of local could be many things. Can't imagine selling at a price point that doesn't work for my business and budget. A lot of my farmland is not prime and hasn't been fertilized in a decade (re: increasing capacity to meet demand). We moved into a community that has a lot of access to local food already and she doesn't want to distract from that. This is being pushed through really fast...

Holly Fowler (HF) : I want to take a minute to recalibrate us and will look to Shon as my counterpart as the market demand we're doing is input in and Shon's is the output. Part of the concern is that we haven't an idea of what this will look like - some folks have in mind Kearsarge with its local retail and food hub, and Shon has a food hub that looks like something different. This doesn't have a set form yet, and ultimately that should be determined by what we learn

through the stakeholder process. We have another counterpart which is the Collaborative and we have some work to do about better communicating about who is making what decisions. In short, we need a business plan that is customized to this community.

We need to establish how Shon intends to take into account the Stakeholder engagement to customize a business plan for this community based on the input. Who is going to make decisions, when and how, and at what point do we establish the criteria? What is the process going to be and whose responsibility will it be to get that done?

Shon Rainford (SR): Brittany, some of your questions - you were looking at our "food to go" boxes and a couple of the items didn't have the sources on them. So, reached out to our sales manager - we always want to be transparent so this was human error, we knew we were going to get carrots but we weren't sure of the source. They are not coming from New Jersey, I can promise you that. We try to source everything in Massachusetts with a very few exceptions: we buy oats from Maine, and some butter from New York...

BO: What you're doing is great - but my question is really taking a model like yours and putting it here in Pepperell.

SR: I'm trying to suggest a context for this town. Sara does the buying, and farmers tell me their prices and then we put a mark-up on it. We try to support small farms and try not to go to the Pioneer Valley if we can help it. We want to buy within Worcester County. Pepperell is not the primary target for the Worcester Regional Food Hub; the Fitz may want produce to occupy some of the space but he thinks its lightly processed food in the kitchen that's the way to go. That's not to say that produce won't be in the proposal if people push for it.

HF: Let's unpack a little bit of this. I'm going to hand you a packet of information - kitchen (community and/or value-added kitchen) - and then food hub related services - aggregation, distribution, and all those are specified in the survey. So if I come to you at the end of this and say: 50% of farmers are interested in the kitchen for value added products; and 20% want the kitchen as a community kitchen - so the fit-out of the kitchen will accommodate the farmers with their lightly processed food. But if everyone in the survey says our intended markets are for wholesale and we're not interested in retail or not interested in something else - then will that be considered as part of what happens to the space? We need to determine that for this project.

What is the information loop here? Is there an iterative process built into the business plan development for folks to review it so that the business plan and operational plan reflects what we said?

So when Shon said a farmer's market, that may be threatening. And are you going to be the operator of this space or is that TBD? We do not need to jump to what the solution might look like.

SR: That's TBD (re: being operator of the space) I'm writing a business plan (hired by the Fitz) to show a plan that is managed by the Fitz. I'm also putting in a couple options if the Food Hub is managing the space, or renting the space from the Fitz and just running its own operation.

HF: And the So people could be in charge of different spaces? So it could be farmer's cooperative or different operating models - people could be in charge of different spaces?

SR: correct.

BO: I don't want to be backed into a corner of participating in a farmer's market at the Fitz; it's hard to do a farmers market...

HF: what data in the farmer's survey leads you to believe that a farmer's market is in the mix?

SR: Really the kitchen is the hard part; a food hub is really moving food from one location to another - that's all easy. The kitchen is the hard part and where the most potential is for farmers, the community, and so on. And I would hope that this is about Pepperell farmers as against Sysco food - (large food distributors, Walmart, etc.) - what I sell as retail in the city of Worcester (20x larger than the population of Pepperell) is such a small part of what we sell. It's the large institutions and so he sees this as let's get some of this local food and get it to Lowell...They're only selling retail because of the pandemic but it has helped the farmers they work with and those in the kitchen. I thought it would last only two weeks and here we are two years later. Have pushed hundreds of thousands of dollars through that retail channel and he didn't do it because it was fun...

HF: I do think we have a process point here that we need to build in an iterative process as we go forward - especially once the business plan is drafted. I'd like to share highlights of what we're hearing in the survey to support this conversation

Lucy McKain (LM): I'm hearing Shon say that we can run the space the way he does in Worcester - all the food can go wholesale, so who are the decision makers here as to where the food is to go? Who makes those policy decisions? Shouldn't the Ag commission be part of that or should we narrow it down to one group, or is it the manager?

SR: I think you're going to have to figure out the relationship between the stakeholders - bc right now it's not clear.

HF: has to be a conversation between the PC and the Ag Commission to make sure that the two scopes of work of the two different groups align. Not sure of the steps across the entire process is clear as to what decisions are made and by whom...and if there are questions, but how do they get addressed?

LM: does the Ag Commission need to put their foot in the door?

HF: I can say to Shon: do not propose a retail - this can be a very clear message as he puts together the business and operation plan. The operating model might be that the farmers are interested in an ownership stake so it could be a cooperative and that would be part of the early draft. Then would turn back to the farmers and ask if that's right - and then build a plan to look at whether this would make money and, if not, have to look at something else. So who is making a decision about go and no go? Really need to talk to Noah and Craig about this..

Sherrill Rosoff (SLR): I have talked to Craig about scheduling a joint meeting but have not yet gotten a response. We've met with the Fitz Collaborative before, so it's time to get everybody in the room. We've been down to see Shon multiple times and Shon has been up to see the kitchen multiple times but I don't know who from the Fitz has been down to see Worcester. I'll find out when would be a good time to meet with the Fitz.

SR: I would suggest sooner rather than later.

SLR: I will send an email out right now.

HF: Shon, do you think that the information we're gathering is useful to the business plan?

SR: yes, absolutely. He's coming from what works in Worcester and Pepperell is different from that - he's looking north and east for the sale of food in WRFH - but even the kitchen is a different clientele... he has to get working on it now because he's under a deadline.

HF: so you're backing into it as to what a business would look like - and that is going to get married to what he hears from us, and how overlapping the Venn diagram is or isn't.

Eric Piper (EP): would be good to get input from other food hubs and how they've wrestled with these questions... so we don't want to cannibalize our farmers businesses so we must figure out what doesn't put farms in the race to the bottom.

HF: Completely correct that there are a lot of different models out there for food hubs - and might look different over the long term, but the overall mission has to be worked out between the Fitz Collaborative and AG; food hub is its own beast whatever it ends up being. It's not specified in the Master Plan what that would look like. So if we follow the order of operations the market demand analysis should reveal what would work for the stakeholders but it may not work for the business!

SLR: in my own mind as I was thinking of the Fitz location, I always assumed there was the possibility of creating synergies with neighboring large cities like Nashua, Lowell - which is one of the reasons I tried to stretch the contact list toward Dracut and Tyngsborough to figure out how we can touch those two large cities, and the southern NH farmers. So I was curious to learn if you see this as a difficult stretch?

BO: I don't know who needs to sell food in the area - but I know I'm not set up to sell wholesale - her business plan is set up as direct to consumer. Yeah, there are plenty of farms set up to sell wholesale, but a part of my model is connecting with consumers and making a local impact. We have payment plans so people can buy through our CSAs to make it easier and more affordable...

HF: this project would benefit the most from encouraging people to complete the survey, that will help our conversation so we don't default to the worst case scenario - so our job is getting more people to complete the survey. 23 people have completed the survey right now - but we need to promote to our networks. We have 5 responses to the kitchen survey - and do have a lot of farmer interest in the kitchen. High interest: Delivery, aggregation of extra product, crop planning to better anticipate what would be needed to have some guarantee (forward contracting?) and could be an operational piece, and then the commercial kitchen is the next highest, and then help with food certification and help with the value added product. Not so much of storage. Some are interested only in the kitchen, and some traditional aspects of what would be a wholesale food hub. More interested in wholesale institutional markets.

Is there a size of farm that should be in the food hub? Answer is that you need a combination of farm sizes throughout - but another important decision is around size...

Cooperative models are owner/operators - collectively all the members own the business entity. There would be bylaws and processes surrounding the decision making of the cooperative. A legal entity. Cabot is a cooperative, and maybe Ocean Spray. There can be small and large cooperatives...We do ask whether farmers would be interested in being part of the ownerships - 70% say maybe, 17% say yes - so there is curiosity about it. Would the town be open to it as the operating model??

Not really enough from the kitchen survey yet other than an interest in making things in jars...

BO: there was a question about whether farmers would you put more land into production? Are there a bunch of people with fallow land?

HF: 39% of the 23 said they have land they could put into production to meet increased demand. 22% say yes but I require more people to do it. Haven't cross referenced these responses with how many acres they have, or what they would be willing to sell to the food hub at what price points... still to come.

SLR: always been concerned about getting more input and its so important to have more survey responses. I personally see it for your benefit - the better the outcome will be (whatever that is) so the only outlet I have are other Ag Commissions and trying to solicit their interest and get ten or more surveys out of that process. Would love it if we had between 30 - 50 responses... that might be robust data for her.

HF: would be helpful - none of this is a guarantee, though. Still a lot to figure out... it's not that the food hub can only open with 30 - 50 responses, but it can't ever hurt to have more responses. Most of everyone has left their contact information and that's very positive.

Have done two mail chimp campaigns already. It's now on the town's website, and will be on the Pepperell Fresh website, has gone out to the Boston food system list twice, EMass craft twice, and several other list serves. It may help at this point to give the survey an end date to get more people to complete it.

SLR: Also posted on NextDoor to get more community interest and would also hope Noah and Craig would push it out to users of the Fitz. Have pushed it out on their Facebook page. We had a group conversation with Katelyn Porter, Three Rivers and Fresh Start; when I went up to Sweet Beet I heard all these conversations of how these food hubs are moving food around through a network of food hubs. So its becoming a larger network so there was curiosity about what we are doing in Pepperell...I'll write up notes from that visit and send it around - I put the visit into Google along with videos of the guy running Sweet Beet so you could see the baskets of produce with the identified farms. They're in year 3-4 and saw the video comments are really interesting and how they've fund raised, their financials, and their relationships with the other food hubs. That's in the shared google

HF: that is an interest - to what extent Pepperell's food hub would interact with these other food hubs. Different specializations that each food hubs that they're trying to capitalize on - all different models. So they work to their strengths through their diversity.

BO: the thing that would make me feel the best is knowing for sure that the research Holly is doing will be taken seriously, rather than an idea is pushed regardless of interest and demand. I can't tell who gets to make decisions and who's in charge and it's disconcerting.

LM: that concerns me, too. I suggest the Ag Commission has a meeting to talk before meeting with the Fitz Collaborative to hash this out ourselves so we all agree.

HF: it would be helpful if you have alignment as a group.

SR: when we started we only five users but now we have more than a 100 users flowing through the kitchen...Brittany, I hear you!

HF: technically across the platform we have 16 who are interested in the kitchen, and we have 21 with some interest in the food hub - more and more responses would be great. We will get what we get and once we have what we get, people will show up because they'll be curious and will be part of the conversation. I don't see a free iPad will help - would rather see survey takers who are seriously interested.

12/23 farms are farming 12 or fewer acres.

Margie La Fleur (MLF): I guess I could produce quite a lot in my space, but I understand what Brittany is saying and I'm trying to figure this out right now. What happens if you have 14 people selling the same thing, wouldn't that push the prices down. I see mushrooms coming up from RI and not sure how to compete.

HF: there's not a lot of overlap in terms of what people are interested in selling into the food hub - there's a variety of things represented - not necessarily looking to sell the same things into the hub - and some say that they grow enough that if there is a particular need, would be happy to grow that. Be concerned if there are just apples or squash they want to underlay. Seeing some interesting things...

SLR: maybe you want to ask Shon about the operation of the commercial kitchen, Margie.

SR: works with Mass wholesale inspectors, users are required to have a lot of certificates, and we have pre- and post operative cleaning and he has a variety of certifications that to operate the kitchen from initial PH testing, teach food safety.. it's the most important thing that we do - both in the manufacture and distributing of food.

MLF: would be the Nashoba Board of Health you'd be working with...you'll let us know when you're ready to talk to us.

SLR: Shon, can you give the BOH your assessment of the kitchen? I don't know if the BOH has been in the commercial kitchen and the equipment in there?

SR: ovens, ranges, steam kettle, separate dishwashing area, stainless tables, walk-in refrigerators - it's a fully functioning commercial kitchen; need systems so that there's no cross contamination. It's a great kitchen. We don't do any alcohol but we do Kambucha.

HF: I've learned what the farmers want to make and you have the equipment in the kitchen so they could walk into the kitchen tomorrow - and they know what they want to pay per hour.

LM: I was thinking of doing cheese but if the State's identifying places you can go to make cheese through co-packing....

HF: Is there anything else Shon and I can help with at this time? We'll close the surveys in two weeks and will talk further with Sherrill.

SLR: we definitely have to talk about getting together with the Fitz so will get a date from them and then figure out how the Ag Commission can get together before that.

MLF: closed the BOH meeting at 8:30.

Next agenda item: Right to Farm Bylaw

SLR: We have to the 18th to get to the Select Board so that it will on the Spring Town meeting warrant. Current bylaw was written in 2005, and it doesn't have mediation, notification in it. It has the old Advisory Board in it and doesn't conform to the State's model Right to Farm Bylaw. Would like to adopt the model right to farm bylaw at town meeting. Is there any tweaking people would like? You can make amendments from the floor if you would like to do that.

BO: I support adopting it without tweaking the language. It's been carefully established by the State and I would be careful about making any changes.

SLR: I agree - it's already baked in the oven. Town Counsel does review all the warrant articles. I also spoke to a neighbor up the road who makes signs and would love to have wayfarer signs to lead people to our farms and I think we could get him to make these signs for free. We need a design for them. We may have to go to the Select Board but we should think about it. I would love to do that. It's part of the Right to Farm notification and at the very least we should have them at 119, 111 and other areas.

LM: A suggested edit to the state's Right to Farm Bylaw would be the raising and GRAZING of livestock - the addition of grazing is an important regenerative practice...

EP/SLR: that would be a great amendment from the floor, but the MGL has the commercial piece to it and the base amount of income to be called a farm.

Need a motion to approve: Brittany: I motion to submit the state's Right to Farm bylaw to replace the 2005 right to farm as a warrant article for Spring Town Meeting; second: Lucy McKain. Motion passed unanimously.

SLR: Other piece of business is ARPA. ARPA is federal money and town is getting 3.6 million of ARPA - had open meetings about what to do with that. A good chunk of it is going toward the safety complex, which leaves a remaining 1.5 million. The SB probably leaning toward larger rather than smaller amounts. We don't have any money, and the Fitz has little money, too. I don't know where the stakeholder process is going to take us, but this town does not provide operating funds to its committees, boards, etc. but if the process leads us to cold storage, or co-cocking - but I'd like to submit a request for ARPA money around food infrastructure so that we have money for matching grant programs. Without money in our pocket, I don't want to be at the end of this process to ask for a reserve a money to be used for grant application to move this ball forward. The AG Commission could set up a tool lease program, for example; I just don't want to pass up an opportunity as I know the grants are out there. Maybe our request need to be specific but our message to the SB is here is a demonstration of the kind of money we can tap into but we'd like this money to improve the local food capacity for our town. Have talked to the town administrator and select Board about the impacts of Covid on the food supply chain and the impacts of climate change on national food production, and this is not the NE model which is a direct to consumer model through local sourced food.

BO: have been doing this for 12 years, long enough to know that there is a supply issue and not a distribution issue. I see that there are significant barriers to becoming a farmer and if we're asking for money is not for a food hub, I think we should be supporting new farms starting. I don't think a food hub erases barriers to entry - and this is the real problem. I love the idea of getting a pool of money, but I don't know how to ask without strings.

SLR: there are grants to address these barriers like the availability for land, and I totally get it that we shouldn't have a narrow "ask" but to demonstrate some of the things that federal money

will support. I could write something up and send it around for comments, but I'd like a proposal for \$100,000. I'm willing to go in any direction but I just want to get something into the Select Board. If we don't ask, we won't get anything. Send me your ideas. There are not strings with the ARPA money, and we're getting close to the end of this ask process and we have slide something in. There's not a hard deadline on this that I know of- but should have something by the middle of March. We're late, though.

BO: Would support a request for money to have to use toward matching grants - will send you some ideas on possible federal and state grants.

LM: welcoming Eric to our meetings. Tom hasn't given a letter of resignation yet - he's headed to Sarborough, Maine to Hannaford headquarters. Then there would be posted opening on the Ag Commission and Eric would need to fill out the form which can be found online.

SLR: have spoken about the idea of having an alternate as a good way of expanding our numbers on the Commission so it's something to discuss at another meeting.

Motion to adjourn: Lucy McKain; seconded by Brittany Overshiner.

Meeting adjourned at 9:05 PM.