



Agricultural Commission

Remote Meeting Minutes

November 21, 2023

5:00 - 6:00 PM

1. The meeting came to order at 5:05 PM
2. Present: Lucy McKain, Eric Piper, Sherrill Rosoff
3. Guests: Holly Fowler, Northbound Ventures, and Tony Beattie, Selectman.
4. Approval of minutes for 1/24/23 (these are working notes); 2/15/23, 4/27/23, and 6/27/23. Motion to approve: Lucy McKain, seconded by Eric Piper. Motion passed.
5. Eric Piper provided a quick update on Christmas in the Country, December 3rd.
6. The meeting then proceeded to discuss the MDAR Scope of Work, Key Performance Indicators, and narrative being prepared by Holly Fowler, recapping the Phase 2 proposal approved by the Planning Board last March, 2023.

Lucy began by asking about Growing Places/Local Food Works as a board member from that organization had reached out to Ag Commission members this Fall. Lucy's question was about joining forces with Growing Places. She's sold to them this Fall, naming her own price. Holly responded by saying it makes sense for us to review what's on the table right now in Pepperell and then, as part of Phase 2, reaching out to Growing Places. Eric stated we are looking for potential partners and what kind of arrangements we can develop and that would be part of Phase 2. We're looking to fill each others' gaps, using the infrastructure already there or being developed so we aren't being redundant. Holly agreed, noting that our work is not about competition, but consideration of a constellation of local/regional effort. Phase 2 may end up being nurturing and formalizing relationships rather than building infrastructure such as a cross-docking facility or other distribution support.

Holly asked the group to affirm our objective which she described as follows: the Commission is dedicated to the viability and sustainability of local farmers but also understanding we're operating in a region. Specifically, we want to find new markets channels for growers to sell their goods at prices that cover their costs of production, with a profit. These new market channels can include any format and any infrastructure but should also take into account values the Commission supports such as fair wages, and sustainability. The group concurred. Holly also noted that in Phase 2, there is a caveat: that if we see a viable future for building some kind of infrastructure, we will move forward with a business plan. In Phase 2 we will talk to folks who said yes, and get "nitty-gritty" about specifics. She recognized that there

is skepticism about what kind of management structure might be entailed and this would be part of Phase 2's investigation. We might end up brokering relationships with NH Food Alliance, Boston Food Hub or Growing Places if volume is an issue for Pepperell farmers who may want to aggregate to achieve sufficient volume to sell to another entity. She noted that in the MDAR material, that MDAR will reimburse the town at completion so that the Planning Board will front the money. Eric stated that was his understanding.

Finally, Holly noted that there are strong regional food connections north of us (Hardwick to Brattleboro) and south of us (Providence to Boston) but the connections in between are still emerging. What we are trying to do is determine how we can fit into this emerging picture. Others may have created the pathways for us to connect to and we'll know that after Phase 2.

Conversation ensued between Tony Beattie and Holly regarding EPA initiatives around climate change and the role that agriculture can play. There's a great deal of money being made available and could be a source of future funding for us. Holly said it was conceivable that we might identify something in Phase 2 that might speak to the EPA's goals but that she is shy about changing the current approved Phase 2 proposal without clear justification to the Planning Board.

Lucy noted that Phase 2 includes the commercial kitchen. Holly responded by saying that she thinks the Fitz Collaborative will move ahead putting in a commercial kitchen that primarily serves food entrepreneurs making self baked goods, but not to farmers wanting to do value added - because those farmers that are interested in value added are either already doing it on their farms or looking to do so, like Charlie Tully. In terms of Growing Places, they're building a processing facility similar to what exists in western Mass but there's still the aggregation piece. Their consumer CSA raises a small red flag for her as this might compete with Upswing Farm CSA business plan - and she doesn't want to see Growing Places cannibalize a Pepperell farmer. We distribute correctly rather than going after each others spaces.

Tony Beattie asked Holly whether MDAR has a regional infrastructure development plan? Do they have a map that indicates what is needed where? Holly agreed that that's a key question. At this time, many people are pushing for redevelopment of small and medium size infrastructure to assist small and medium size farms that can't compete inside a larger distribution system for retail and institutional entities. While we are simultaneously pushing for the above, we don't actually know what our existing capacity is and what additional capacity is needed. She hasn't seen a strategy from MDAR that they want this analysis and nurture certain infrastructure in certain places. It may be happening informally through their grant approvals. She believes the question we should be asking is: are we clear about MDAR's mission and how they show up in our lives?

Eric noted that Andrew MacLean raised the question of future funding sources should infrastructure be required; however, Phase 2 may reveal that there may not be a lot of infrastructure needed.

Motion to adjourn by Eric Piper and seconded by Lucy McKain. Meeting adjourned at 5:50 PM.