

BOLTON MASTER PLANNING COMMITTEE
Minutes of Meeting
February 13, 2006 at 7:30 P.M.
Town Hall

Present: Margaret Campbell, Brad Reed, Mark Sullivan, Ken Swanton (Chair), Betsy Taylor-Kennedy (non-voting member), Nat Tipton (Town Planner)

1. Agricultural Commission & Right to Farm Bylaw Presentation

Presenter: Cheryl Lekstrom, Massachusetts Department of Agricultural Resources

Swanton welcomed Lekstrom and the audience. Lekstrom explained 49 communities in Massachusetts have passed agricultural commissions in Massachusetts, several of which were passed in the last year. As communities have made the gradual switch from rural to suburban landscapes, working agriculture entities have severely declined. Farmers often do not have the representation they once did in town government. Establishing an agricultural commission is one way to ensure that farming interests have a voice in town government. These commissions are not regulatory; rather it is solely advisory as they make recommendations to others Boards in Town. Towns can also earn points on their Commonwealth Capital Applications which can put the town in greater standing for receiving grants. The definition of farming is established locally and does not follow the Chapter 61A definition.

Right to Farm bylaws are another tool offered to communities who want to maintain or enhance agricultural activities in their communities. The bylaw does not offer farmers any new rights; rather it is designed to reduce nuisance complaints from abutting landowners by giving new land owners the option of signing a statement that they understand they are moving to a community that values agriculture. The members in the audience were generally supportive of the process.

Swanton mentioned the Master Plan Committee was considering recommending that farmers be taxed at a different rate than commercial entities, so that a split tax rate would not hurt farmers. Ken Nicewicz was not sure that this is legal, as it has not been authorized by the state legislature. Swanton also mentioned other committee priorities such as revising the FOSPRD bylaw so that half of the property is maintained as open space, and working to protect the six special farms in Bolton. Sullivan mentioned the Committee has also done an analysis indicating that commercial property ends up costing the town more in taxes than it receives, debunking the idea that increasing the commercial tax base would significantly decrease the average tax bill.