

Colchester Agriculture Commission
Minutes of Meeting
Monday, April 16, 2012 - 7:00 P.M.
Town Hall, Room 3

NANCY A. BRAY
TOWN CLERK

Nancy A. Bray

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COLCHESTER, CT
2012 APR 17 PM 3:44

Attending: L.Curtis, E.Gillman, A.Savitsky, J.Savitsky, D.Wasniewski

Absent: J.Becker, A.Lyons

Liaisons attending: S.Soby (Board of Selectmen); C.Bourque (New London County Farm Bureau); A.Turner (Town Planner)

Also attending were R.Coyle and J.Ford (Board of Selectmen); D. Wray; the real estate agent for the Slembeck farm sale; and several others who did not identify themselves.

1. Call to Order:

Meeting was called to order by Chairman E.Gillman at 7:06 P.M. (Note: J.Savitsky arrived at 7:09 and L.Curtis arrived at 7:10.)

2. Approve Minutes of the Special Meeting of the Agricultural Commission on April 3, 2012:

Chairman Gillman read aloud the minutes of the previous special meeting. A.Savitsky moved that the minutes be approved as read. D.Wasniewski seconded. Motion carried.

4. Citizen's Comments:

D.Wray explained that there had been some revisions to the order of the agenda but that the copies of the agenda that were printed out for participants in this meeting inadvertently did not reflect the changed order of business. Because of the pressing need for discussions about the Farmland Ranking System and issues relating to the Slembeck Farm purchase, these items had been moved up in the agenda to precede the review of old business action and review items.

6a) Discussion and possible action on draft of Colchester Farmland Preservation Ranking Criteria (attached to the agenda):

In addition to the draft of one possible model for a farmland preservation ranking criteria based on a Pennsylvania formula which were part of the agenda, several other models were also introduced and discussed. These included, among others, a copy of the current ranking criteria for the town of Lebanon, CT, and another one (more complex) for Northampton County, MA .

This discussion was open for input by citizens and liaison members present at the meeting as well as the commission members. Many opinions were expressed regarding the desirability of having more or fewer degrees of specificity and mathematical ranking schemes in the resulting document which will govern the selection criteria for farm preservation in Colchester. The state requires the Town to have a ranking plan for its farmland in order to be

eligible for future grants to preserve our farms, and this document needs to be part of the submission to the state by May 28, 2012.

It was clear, with such a wide diversity of opinion on these points, that a consensus could not be reached during the short duration of this meeting for the format and exact wording of this necessary ranking system document.

MOTION: L. Curtis moved "That the chairman appoint a subcommittee consisting of two (2) commission members and other interested volunteers to distill a farmland ranking system appropriate to the Town of Colchester to meet the May 28, 2012 deadline for submission to the state's Pilot Program for Community Farms Preservation."

A.Savitsky seconded this motion. MOTION UNANIMOUSLY APPROVED.

J.Savitsky (Alternate Commission Member) and Chairman E.Gillman volunteered to serve in this capacity on the subcommittee as the representatives of the Agricultural Commission. C.Bourque and A.Turner indicated their willingness to participate in the process. The other commission members and alternate member will be kept informed, as appropriate, individually by Chairman Gillman as this work progresses. However it is important F.O.I. protocol that if they have comments on this subject, they should make them known to the Chairman. They are not allowed to participate directly in the meetings and group deliberations of this subcommittee.

The Town needs to compile a complete inventory of all its farmlands, forests, and other agricultural properties along with open space for other purposes. It is believed that the existing town GIS system can probably be utilized to this end along with the Tax Assessors Data (including but, not limited to the 490A and 490F information), DEP Criteria for Wetlands, NRCS Soils of Local Importance study, along with an overlay of properties which currently have easements on them. These separate data sources need to be coordinated and overlaid to provide the Town with this critical information. Once a ranking system is established, there needs to be a comprehensive database of lands to evaluate using the ranking criteria in a systematic manner.

6b. Discussion and Possible Action on Other Issues in reference to the Slembek Farm Bonding:

A variety of concerns regarding the upcoming bonding referendum for the Slembek Farm were raised by both commission members and others present at this meeting. Several speakers (including E.Gillman, D.Wasniewski, L.Curtis, R.Coyle, J.Ford, C.Bourque and S.Soby) stressed various aspects of the need to act with the utmost prudence in this matter since this is the first working farmland that the town has attempted to preserve. The concerns expressed included the following:

That the legal language of the bonding referendum is such to insure that the town will have flexibility to ultimately re-sell the land to another farmer after it is purchased and appropriate conservation easements have been attached to the property. The CT Farmland Trust was cited for its opinion that the track record of towns trying to manage municipally owned farmland is not generally very good, and that ultimately the best way to preserve farms for the future is to keep them under the ownership of farmers.

That an independent third party assessment of this farm's value under the current market conditions be performed and made public before the closing of this sale.

That none of the actions in the course of the Town's (admirable) attempt to preserve this farm will have any unintended consequences that could set bad precedent for future such transactions. Protocol should be guided by the best practices advocated by groups such as the CT Farmland Trust with vast and varied experience in farmland preservation in our state.

The Town Planner spoke about his vision of the ultimate good that this farmland preservation will provide if we act upon this opportunity. He said that without preserving this land from future development threats, he could realistically foresee that as many as thirty houses might be built upon this land in the future. He believes that failure to properly preserve this farm could be ultimately to the serious detriment of the agricultural character of the town's "central corridor" in which this particular parcel of farmland occupies such a strategic location.

The Selectmen present strongly urged Chairman Gillman to send a formal letter to the Board of Selectmen outlining the principles of preservation for the Slembeck Farm that were agreed upon by the Agriculture Commission at its Special Meeting on April 3. This letter should be sent in time to include it in the agenda of the next scheduled meeting of the Selectmen on Thursday, April 19, 2012. E.Gillman agreed to document these principles for the Board of Selectmen as requested.

The hope was expressed that the owners of this farmland will cooperate with with the Town by whatever means necessary to insure that this transaction proceeds in such a manner as to optimize their expected outcome and also insure that excellent precedents will be set for the future of more such farmland preservation efforts in Colchester.

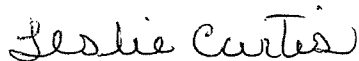
6c, etc. Motion to Table the Remaining Agenda Items:

Because of lack of time, the chair requested a motion to table the remaining items in the revised agenda—from item 6c up to to Adjournment. D. Wasniewski so moved and A. Savitsky seconded. Motion was approved unanimously.

7. Adjournment:

D. Wasniewski moved to adjourn the meeting at 8:45 P.M. A.Savitsky seconded. Unanimously approved.

Respectfully submitted,



Leslie Curtis
Secretary