

Colchester Agriculture Commission Minutes
Monday, February 23, 2015, 7:00 P.M.
Town Hall Break Room

Attending: C.Bourque (Chair), D.Wasniewski, A.Zimmerman, C.Csere (Alternate),
L.Curtis (Alternate)

Absent: O.Duksa, D.Rosenblatt

Also Attending: M.Gostkiewicz

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COLCHESTER, CT
2015 FEB 24 PM 1:06
M. Zimmerman
TOWN CLERK

1. Call to Order:

Meeting was called to order by Chairman C.Bourque at 7:15 P.M.

2. Additions and/or changes to Agenda:

None.

3. Approve minutes of the Agriculture Commission on December 15, 2014:

MOTION: A. Zimmerman moved to approve the minutes of the December 15, 2014 Agriculture Commission Meeting as submitted. C. Csere seconded.

VOTE: Approved, with L.Curtis Abstaining due to her absence at the December meeting.

4. Citizens comments:

None.

5. Chair Report:

C.Bourque reported on a variety of circumstances which, unfortunately, make small farming in CT fiscally challenging, if not unsustainable. The good news is that there is an increased awareness of the nutritional advantages of "eating local" and great public support for Farmers' Markets, CSA's and also an increased interest by young farmers to get on this bandwagon. The bad news is that most of these ventures are proving to be financially unsustainable over the long term without heavy subsidization. These subsidies can come in a number of forms, such as from grants of State and Federal funds or the volunteer labor of many in supporting roles.

A case in point is that the Coventry Farmer's Market--one of the largest, most visible, and well-attended in CT--has announced that this very popular venture will be discontinued after the end of its 2015 season in October. The specific reason given for this is that three of the Board Members are retiring and it has become more and more difficult to recruit the 25 volunteers required to set up and break down the infrastructure required to support the logistics of using the Nathan Hale Homestead site for this purpose every Saturday for the market's season of operation. Without the necessary free labor to provide the support services,

the Board Members who run this market have concluded that it isn't possible to continue as currently structured in this unsustainable way.

Another point of discussion is about the perceived success of the State of CT Farmland Preservation Programs. Indeed, as Mr. Bourque pointed out, much high quality farmland has been permanently kept out of development thanks to these farmland preservation programs, subsidized by our CT tax dollars. However that preservation effort has largely ended up rebounding to the benefit of large and already financially successful farming businesses in our state such as the "Farmer's Cow" dairy farm consortium and others. Lands so preserved are usually snapped up and leased in bulk by these "big agriculture" entities and are not readily available as smaller and more affordable plots to younger individuals who may be interested in trying to making a livelihood by farming the land.

Other unprotected farmland properties with good productive soils remain under threat of being bought by new owners who may not have an interest in seeing the land they just purchased used for agricultural purposes. This occurred here in Colchester with the farmland that Susan Mitchell had leased and was financing by using a Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) business model to grow organic produce and sell it locally. The acreage for her farm was sold to another owner who did not honor her lease going forward, and she has yet been able to find another suitable and affordable piece of land in town to continue to farm using this business model.

Small farming operations in CT are unable to take advantage of the economies of scale. They also necessarily require subsidies of one sort or another to survive. Usually the economics of a small farming operation requires that the farmer (or another family member) have a day job to support the agricultural enterprise undertaken. One of the concerns is that if people cannot make a comfortable living wage on their smaller farms they will eventually turn to more affordable avenues of commerce to support themselves and their families. In such cases the agricultural component of their efforts may, of economic necessity, revert to more of a hobby model which provides food just for their own family and friends, to use just one example. The CT minimum wage is far from a "living wage". For a young farmer who may want to try to support a family by this means, and there is no guarantee that even a minimum wage can result from these labors. It is definitely a huge challenge for the next generation of farmers.

A. Zimmerman asked, "What can the Colchester Agriculture Commission do about all this?" Commission Members brainstormed a number of potential avenues where we could make specific recommendations. Ideas considered included supporting existing groups such as the New London County Farm Fresh initiatives to bring locally grown produce into school cafeterias; promoting student managed and operated vegetable gardens at our schools; advocating for agricultural education to be "baked in" to the curriculum and core values and vision of our Board of Education; generally raising awareness of agriculture and nutrition topics such as where our foods come from into the early educational exposures of the students; supporting the concept of applying for federal grants to get federal "Food Corps" interns into our schools to jump-start the setting up of sustainable ag and nutrition programs.

MOTION: L. Curtis moved that "The Agriculture Commission recommend that agriculture and nutrition be a component of the curriculum and core values at all grade levels in the Colchester School System's strategic plan." C. Csers seconded.

VOTE: Unanimously APPROVED.

Chairman Bourque plans to attend a Board of Education meeting to deliver this recommendation from the Agriculture Commission personally during one of the upcoming strategic planning sessions where the BoE has indicated that they want to hear input from the public.

6. Town Bonding for Open Space Preservation

L. Curtis summarized current efforts by the Colchester Land trust to advocate before the Board of Finance for the long term civic desirability for the Town to becoming more serious about funding the preservation of strategic farmland and open space within our borders. In both the current and proposed new versions of Colchester's Plan of Conservation and Development, there is a stated principle that "Preservation of Open Space" is desirable. Specifically there is a stated goal to "Budget municipal funds to acquire open space through bonding or annual appropriations to the budget."

As a result of the budget constraints of recent cycles, this has been done in only a token way. There has been just a \$5,000 annual line item approved for open space preservation in recent year's Town budgets. This amount of money is obviously insufficient to achieve this goal of the POCD in any serious way, except for the practical necessity of complying in the most minimum manner with the state's requirement that Towns have some money allocated for these purposes to allow them to qualify for state grant funding, when available and appropriate, to achieve these ends.

As a practical matter in challenging economic circumstances, it is generally recognized that it is impossible increase the allocation of land preservation funds by any meaningful amount as a line item in the annual Town budget. Yet the need and goal remains. One solution to this dilemma is for the Town's citizens to vote YES in a referendum to pre-authorize municipal bonding of a pool of money large enough to create a meaningful source of future financing. Such an authorization would have almost no financial impact upon taxpayers until compelling strategic land preservation opportunities arise and the money would be appropriated efficiently and tax effectively to achieve these goals for the long term civic fiscal benefit.

MOTION: A.Zimmerman moved that "The Agriculture Commission recommend that the Town of Colchester finance their farmland and open space preservation fund thru a one million dollar (\$1,000,000) municipal bond." C.Csere seconded.

There was no further discussion.

VOTE: Unanimously APPROVED.

7. Spring Presentation Discussion:

C.Bourque reported that the Town of Franklin Agriculture Commission has requested that the Colchester Ag Commission co-sponsor an Farm Labor Seminar to be held in Lebanon on March 25 where topics to be discussed will include farm labor wages, source of jobs, insurance, etc. Our responsibility would be to publicize this event in our own community and promote attendance at it. This is planned to a regional effort including many other towns around us participating in the effort.

MOTION: D.Wasniewski moved that **"The Agriculture Commission co-sponsor a Farm Labor Seminar in Lebanon on Wednesday, March 25 from 6 to 8 PM jointly with the Franklin Agriculture Commission."** A. Zimmerman seconded.

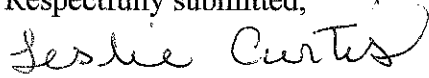
There was no further discussion.

VOTE: Unanimously APPROVED.

9. Adjournment:

A.Zimmerman moved to adjourn the meeting at 8:33 P.M. and D.Wasniewski seconded. All were in favor; motion carried.

Respectfully submitted,



Leslie Curtis
Alternate, Agriculture Commission