

February 2, 2006

Minutes of the Meeting of the Open Space Advisory Committee  
Town of West Boylston, Massachusetts

ATTENDANCE:      President/Chair:      Robert Tashjian, V.M.D.  
Cheryl Lekstrom, MDOA  
George Beaman, Land Trust  
Thomas Halpin, M.D.  
Barbara Wyatt  
Betsy Demallie  
Robert Shover, Full Time Farmer  
Maryellen Brown, Acting Secretary

AGENDA:      Community Preservation Act / Agricultural Commission

Commencing at 7:04 P.M.

Dr. Tashjian welcomes all attendees.

Cheryl Lekstrom reviews all the aspects of the formation of an Agricultural Commission and how this may be a benefit to the Town of West Boylston. Key points made were that the formation of such a commission will:

- Provide town representation of the farming community;
- Create agricultural awareness within the Town;
- Encourage agricultural endeavors;
- Encourage the preservation of land for agricultural purposes;
- Promote economic support to the farming community;
- Education/conflict resolution re: farming activities;
- Assist in the reduction of complaints connected to farming activities, i.e., smells, sounds, tractors, etc., HOWEVER, this does not provide free legal support in those matters resulting from poor or unacceptable farming practices;
- Incentives include: municipal grants (Smart Growth), "AgCom101" encouraging a diversity in farming activities.

Examples given include Dartmouth which established an Ag Comm. in 1988, and Amherst

An Ag Comm. would be ad-hoc/steering primarily comprised of farmers. The process would include the obtaining of a warrant from the Town, promoting support for an Ag Comm. within the community, including a citizens' petition, and other such publicity. Its budget would be determined by vote.

RT noted that it is also important that open space be included in the Ag Comm.'s agenda along with farming issues, since this would provide more opportunity for the Land Trust to become involved.

CL mentions community gardens as an offshoot of Ag Comms, since farming can have many definitions, and this is one of them. The definition of “farming” must be kept loose to embrace a variety of activities connected to agriculture, i.e., beekeeping, nurseries, etc.

GB stated that an Ag Comm. would attract apartment dwellers who do not usually consider themselves a part of the agricultural community. He also mentions the fact that many farms are sold as a result of the owners inability to keep them running, an Ag Comm. would be able to assist owners in keeping them or finding new owners who wish to continue farming the land. Also raises community awareness and helps the farming community to establish a liaison with the town community so that problems may be avoided or solved expeditiously.

CL stated that any group can form an Ag Comm. by way of petition or the sponsorship of the Board of Selectmen, thereby obtaining a warrant. The primary attraction for the town citizenry is this can be done and maintained at NO COST TO THE TAXPAYER. A Town may also pass a “Right to Farm” by-law. After a vote, an ad hoc committee makes recommendations, advertises positions on the commission, interviews prospective members, the selection of board appointments. Then any liaison of the Ag Comm. may make a recommendation to adopt a local “right to farm” by law, the summary of which is that farmers often are unaware of their rights, and that the community is made aware that theirs is a town which values agriculture, and that prospective community members are made aware of this fact so to decrease farming complaints. This could provide opportunity for a farmers’ market, provide conflict resolution for farming complaints, and form a collaboration with the Town Boards, promote environmental stewardship and raise money for farmland preservation. Alternatively the Commission could remind the town each year of its “Right to Farm” bylaw which would further raise community awareness.

RT raises the issue of 61AE wherein 5 or more acres is acceptable for horses, but not for farming. This would lead to too many horses in a small area, causing a ban on the animal. How can this be avoided?

CL “Right to Farm” bylaw does not fall under 61AE rules. This matter would be specified in the town warrant, indicating specific restrictions on acreage, etc. Otherwise can only be dealt with at a state level. Commissions can however enforce more restrictions, definitions, and regulations on a town level. Funding comes from Smart Growth, which assists farms due to the sharp decrease in present and future farming. The town of Amherst created incentive for an Ag Comm., since politics don’t matter in this regard, since the laws protect farms regardless of politics, and that no money from taxes is involved, but the commission is only as good as the people on it. Takes time for credibility and trust to develop. CL states that if including backyard farmers, and people with many horses, these will usually become problematic to their neighbors. More development is needed so there is more understanding of the farming community. The definition of farming must be changed so that people understand how inclusive it is.

Betsy noted that an Ag Comm. could encourage community gardening and farm stands, etc. and has potential for more. Anything to bring back farming, preserves the old town image, and maintenance of the historical roots is welcomed.

CL states that when developers pressure farmers to sell land, the land trust can lend them money and since the Ag Comm. is non regulatory, they are able to help farmers without state interference.

All members present support the formation of an Agricultural Commission. It is moved that a coalition be formed to begin the process. Just need willing people, since no one will oppose the formation of the Comm.

RT stated that a committee would be needed to get momentum in the town.

GB stated that the Land Trust could help with the organization and skills but would need the interest of farmers else be perceived as a “tree hugger.”

7:42 P.M. – Tom Halpin enters.

The above was summarized for TH so he was brought up to speed. The meeting continued:

TH asks if the Town Manager would appoint the Ag Comm.

CL stated that ad hoc farmers must draft the warrant specifying the number of members, their duties, etc.

TH suggested specifically identifying the farms in town.

CL stated that the definition of farms/farming must be fine tuned by the ad hoc committee.

GB stated an Ag Comm. would help protect open space by working together with the Land Trust. The formation of an Ag Comm. is a no brainer, cannot imagine any opposition. It is a wonderful thing to start.

Betsy stated that people who are ignorant of farming practices could become more aware through an Ag Comm. which would benefit the agricultural community.

RT stated that he believed that Mike Packer would be interested in the Ag Comm., that we must keep going in order to get momentum behind it.

8:01 P.M. – Barbara Wyatt enters.

GB commented about the Community Preservation Act handout. Stated the Land Trust supports the Act, it does not have an effect unless it is added to the ballot. Notes that we are trying to get it on the ballot for the 11/7/06 general state election so that the Town may vote on the Act. Stressed that the Town must be aware of the Act so they vote on it.

Betsy stated that there was a great presentation done in Grafton, reviewing it may be helpful to West Boylston.

GB stated that other towns do provide good examples to follow.

Betsy suggested that if the session were taped then it could be presented to the voters.

GB stated that this could be used to line up to form the committee before the 3/15/06 Board of Selectmen meeting so that a proposal could be presented at that time. Other town groups would be interested in this, but they must be cultivated. Emphasis on the fact that playing fields and such are considered open space to help get a group active. Must be proactive in setting a meeting date to decide on specifics. The Beaman Library has a room available on 02/22/06, could have a meeting there on that date at 6:30 PM, but must firm this up in the next 2 days.

Betsy stated that it is important to make the elderly community aware of the meeting and interested in it.

RT added that the Town Wide Planning Committee will be on board. Library is the best place for meeting since more centrally located than Town Hall.

GB states the meeting should be open to all individuals and organizations.

Betsy stated that the town groups should be approached prior to meeting to cultivate support.

TH stated that if it were not done expeditiously, it would not make it onto the Town Warrant for the May 2006 meeting. There should be an informational meeting on 02/21/06 and then on to the meeting of the Board of Selectmen.

GB stated that if want to accomplish by November a recommendation must be created so there is a definite plan to propose to the Board of Selectmen.

TH stated that a date certain for the second meeting would be set in the course of the meeting on 02/21/06. Suggested the 1<sup>st</sup> Tuesday of March for second meeting, or alternatively, on the 21<sup>st</sup> or 27<sup>th</sup>.

BW stated that the meeting emphasize the financial benefits to the town

It was agreed that a notice for the meeting be placed in the Banner, Cable Television or the Community Channel.

WHEREBY the meeting concluded at 8:42 PM.

---

Maryellen Brown, Acting Secretary

