

Agricultural Advisory Committee Meeting
Tuesday, March 19, 2013 Minutes

Attendees: David Weitzer, David Heisler, Jane Evans, Woody Woodruff, Debbie Benson, Chuck Shuster, Linda Lewis, Paula Linthicum, Robert Beall, Ben Allnut, Drew Stabler, Charlotte Ruppert

Staff: Jeremy Criss

Guests: Jane Seigler

The meeting was called to order at 7:03PM.

Introductions

With no guests present, introductions were not necessary.

Meeting Minutes

The minutes from the last meeting were approved as written. (*Evans, Beall*)

Follow-up from the County Council Proclamation for National Agriculture Day

A quick update from the March 19th Proclamation for National Agriculture Day was given by Mr. Criss. The event, hosted by the County Council, was an opportunity for the agricultural community to reach out to attendees. All who attended agreed it was a good event and a photo of the attendees was circulated.

Follow-Up from the Public Meeting in Poolesville on White's Ferry Road Bridges

The Agricultural Advisory Committee (AAC) decided to support the closing of White's Ferry Road so that two old bridges can be replaced. On February 26th, there was a public meeting to discuss the issue and members of the AAC attended to support the closure. Representatives from the Department of Transportation (DOT), Poolesville residents and members of the agricultural community were present to discuss the issue. Most supported closing sections of White's Ferry Road for 11 weeks to replace two bridges with pre-fabricated bridges saying that this will result in a much lower level of disruption to the community than closing the road for 104 weeks to construct new bridges. The greatest concern was how to time the road closures so as to minimize the impact to local residents. The DOT prefers to close the road in the summer time so that school bus routes are not disrupted and also to avoid construction in colder temperatures. However, the community and local residents prefer closing the roads in the winter so summertime business is not affected. The DOT asked local farms to provide their planting and harvest schedules so that this information could also be represented in the decision making process. Mr. Criss will be completing a letter to the DOT detailing farming time-tables so the DOT can take this into consideration. Mike Subin of the County Executive's Office will be making the final decision on when the work will be completed.

Status of the T&E Committee on Tree related Bills 41-12, 35-12 and 1-13

The agricultural community continues to support trimming of trees along county roads. Bill 41-12 would require additional oversight in tree trimming near power lines and along roadsides. The County Council staff are still trying to work on amending Bill 41-12 to address the interests of the agricultural community. As of now, it is believed that by exempting Rustic Roads from the bill, the needs of the agricultural community will be adequately met. However, there are still loop holes in this approach that need to be addressed. Meanwhile, the agricultural community will continue to look for opportunities to share their approval for work being done along roadsides. A letter from Lonnie Luther was sent to the County Department of Transportation complimenting the County for their tree trimming efforts. A separate letter to the Planning Board and the County Council questioned the tree planting practices required by subdivision. This letter included photos of newly planted trees along Sky Lark Drive that will interfere with power lines as they grow, showcasing the need for more oversight in the planning and design phase for new development.

Mr. Criss has been working with the T&E Committee to make sure Bill 31-12 does not impact the agricultural community. The bill, designed to protect tree canopy in down county areas, un-intentionally imposes restrictions on the agricultural community. For now, the bill has been tabled.

The final reading of Bill 1-13 was on March 19, 2013. The fear of the farming community is that the County Council is moving towards making logging and timber harvests more difficult to conduct and property owners may not be able to achieve. Mr. Beall compared it to deer which are already considered natural resources to the state and county. As such, deer do not belong to property owners regardless if they are living on their land. The agricultural community needs to be vocal about this issue so that timber remains under the ownership of the property owner and not the county.

Status of New Appointments to the AAC

All eligible re-appointments have been reappointed and confirmed by the Council. Ms. Lewis asked how long appointments were and Mr. Criss responded that non-farmers have a one-year term and farmers are given a 2-3 year term.

Annual Meeting with the County Executive – April 9, 2013

The AAC's annual meeting with the County Executive is on April 9th. To be prepared, discussion ensued on who should attend and what issues needed to be addressed.

The first issue of importance is the Zoning Rewrite. The agricultural community continues to be uneasy about the Zoning Rewrite. The Planning Board wants to change the definition of "farming" and the agricultural community is unhappy with the changes. The agricultural community feels the new definition restricts farmers' ability to operate their farm in a way that will allow for year-round profitability. Many farmers bring in commodities that are produced elsewhere when their own products are not ready for sale. This helps farmers make profits year-round rather than only in the harvest season. The new definition of farming threatens this practice. Mr. Criss encouraged farmers to send letters to the County Council to keep the concerns of the farming community in the

forefront of the Councils' minds throughout the Zoning Rewrite process. The aim of the rewrite is to govern the rebuilding of down-county **and to simplify the code**. Many of the consequences for the agricultural community are unintended and thus bringing awareness to the County Council will be critical. Ms. Linthicum who was able to articulate the concerns of the agricultural community very well, was asked to attend the April 5th PHED Committee meeting. Mr. Woodruff advocated using relatable language, such as "food shed" to help articulate the argument. He also suggested using examples of farmers bridging gaps in their production by bringing in products produced elsewhere such as sweet corn or pumpkins. These practices benefit the community and to restrict them in any way would be an unintended, negative impact for all. A motion was made that a letter be sent to the Chair of the Montgomery County Planning Board, Francois Carrier, to address the concerns of the agricultural community surrounding the Zoning Rewrite and the proposed definition of farming. The AAC unanimously approved this motion (*Beall, Evans*).

Ms. Linthicum suggested that during the meeting with the County Executive, the farming community expresses the wish that the MNCPPC was as supportive to agriculture as the County Executive is.

The final issue the AAC would like to address in the Annual Meeting with the County Executive, is the development of a sustainable way to fund Agriculture Services. In December of 2010, members of the farming community came up with an alternative way to fund Ag. Services in the face of a 48% cut in funding. The plan was to use private money from the Farm Bureau to pay for Ag. Services. The plan, supported by Isiah Leggett, was implemented immediately and took the 48% reduction in funds to only 17%.

As fiscal year 2014 approaches, the funding from the Farm Bureau will run out. Agricultural Services will again be in need of sustainable funding. Ms. Evans suggested using the overwhelming support at the FAME conference for the County Extension as an example of the necessity of Ag Services. She also suggested giving two tickets to the Farm to Table Dinner to the County Executive and his wife.

It was decided the following people should attend the April 9th Annual Meeting:

David Weitzer
Chuck Shuster
Paula Linthicum
Jane Evans

Mr. Criss will create an agenda and circulate it to those attending.

The Committee discussed the importance of agricultural production in the region and a report What our Region Grows developed by the Washington Council of Governments COG published on National Capital Farms.org. The report shows the relationship between consumption and production in the DC region and it also helps to explain how farmers purchase agricultural products from other farmers in the region. Ms. Linthicum suggested this report be included in the discussion with the Planning Board.

After reviewing upcoming events, the meeting was adjourned at 8:48PM.