

Orange County Agricultural Preservation Board

Approved Meeting Summary: September 15th, 2021

****Virtual Meeting via Zoom****

6:30 p.m.

Members Present: Anderson, McKnight, McPherson, Myers, Redding, Sainers, Woods

Members Absent: Finley, McAdams, McPherson; Sykes

Guests: None

Staff: Jessica Perrin, Resource Conservation Coordinator-Orange Soil and Water; Peter Sandbeck, Cultural Resources Coordinator; Mike Ortosky, Ag Economic Development Coordinator

1. **Call to order:** Chair Redding called the meeting to order at 6:33 p.m.
2. **Chair Comments/Introductions:** None
3. **Considerations of Additions to Agenda:** Staff introduced Jessica Perrin, who was hired in June to fill Gail's position. She brings a strong background in soil conservation work in Durham and Wake counties along with prior experience with those VAD programs. A large part of her work with the VAD program is initially being spent reviewing all of Gail's files for recent and pending farms, to assist owners in completing all required paperwork.
4. **Meeting Summary/Minutes:** Staff apologized that the March 17 meeting minutes are not ready. The digital recording is not accessible due to the change from GoToMeeting to Zoom platforms; County IT believes it can provide staff with renewed access, so these minutes will be available for review and approval at the November meeting, if not before by email. We lack a quorum so couldn't approve now
5. **Discussion Items:** Staff noted that there are presently several farms that are in the VAD application process but none have completed all steps yet. Some farms should be ready for the November meeting.
 - a) **Dairy Subcommittee report and discussion:** McKnight provided an overview of the current state of dairying in the county and a recap of the general thinking of the subcommittee. There is an assumption that our goal is to support existing dairy operations and foster and support the formation of new and more diverse dairy operations. But that raises the larger question: we need to examine our assumption. Do we think dairy farms can even survive here as the tide seems to be turning? Only the small dairy operations like Jeff's or hers seem to be viable. So do we want dairy farms here? If we do, are there people here that want to be dairy farmers—either newcomers or former dairy farmers? If there aren't any interested, that's an issue, as is land. If we have folks who are producing, can they market what they make? If not, that's a problem. Do we need to consider this on a more regional basis? For example, one of the farmers on the Durham Co. Ag Board is a small dairy farmer who has the same concerns, so maybe there is a collaborative approach. We also need to bring Marti Day into the subcommittee meeting. There is general consensus that traditional commodity dairying is just not viable here. Dairying only seems to be profitable on a very large scale. Ortosky noted that farmers respond to demand. If there is demand because people value the commodity, then farmers can act to fill that demand. Most consumers just buy milk and don't place

a high value on local or quality. They might casually assume it is local but it's not and they really don't know where it comes from. How will this work if milk comes from across the country, in regions where water is becoming scarce? There is some demand for the Auberville (sp) service, that delivers milk to your door. So are there consumers out there who will value local milk and will be willing to pay a premium? For example, Maple View sold a lot of milk locally, so there must have been enough demand although maybe not extremely profitable. Dairying is lifestyle that limits the farmer's freedom to have a vacation or take time out, so there could be a generational factor here too, in that fewer people are willing to commit to that type of schedule. Maybe there is a model for two families running a farm? McKnight thinks we need to do a preliminary feasibility study to get some idea of what the market might be—is there money for that? Also, there should be some educational campaign to help consumers understand the issues here, that explains the benefits of local milk in the context of the larger issues of today. As an aside, Ortosky noted that he now works within the Extension Service and now has more access to the resources of NCSU, which might help. Our existing economic development grant program directs those funds to producers. There should be other sources. Our challenge is to articulate our idea and our project, then that can be used to get funding for a specific project with tangible outcomes. For a market analysis, the real question still seems to be about the demand—is there demand for local milk, or is the demand more for the value added pieces, like cheese? We need to really understand what consumers want in order to help shape the direction for future dairying activity. This could be a task for the subcommittee, to develop a purpose and scope statement, perhaps partnering with nearby counties, like Durham. If there is a market anywhere in NC, it will be in Orange and Durham counties. If specialty/local dairy won't work here, it won't work anywhere in the state. We need an in-depth demand analysis for this area. Who are these consumers and what will they buy/how much will they pay? NCSU and Extension seem to be the best bet for assistance in this effort. We all recall when dairying was much more present here, so one question is: what happened? Why have they all disappeared? Redding noted that all this sounds compelling enough to merit having the subcommittee continue to pursue this topic. McKnight will continue to discuss and bring updated thinking back to the subcommittee.

- b) Ag Trust Fund Proposal:** Staff reviewed past discussion about the proposed approach and how it evolved within the Food Council, including the candid feedback that was received from the County Manager. That concept was going to go through the equity evaluation process but we haven't heard the outcome of that. The general guidance we received then was that we needed to repackage this concept as a dedicated, stand-alone funding on a recurring basis, to get it proposed as a departmental line item and then keep doing advocacy with the BOCC to promote the idea. Staff thinks this winter is a good time to discuss this topic with department leadership to get advice and guidance on how to pursue the idea. This can be framed as a very ag-specific program that partners with the Lands Legacy program but does not compete with it.

6. Informational Items/Future Agenda Items:

- a. Ordinance Revision:** Staff participated in the state information session earlier today, going through the ordinance line by line to learn how the changes to the state legislation need to be implemented in local ordinances. Most changes were just clarifications and technical updates and nothing major. Staff will make the proposed changes then present a marked-up version of our ordinance to the APB at the next meeting. Staff can share this with any members who are interested.

- b. **Jessica Perrin's report:** Perrin reported on her VAD program activities since she started, including updating the brochure and expanding our coordination with the staff at Land Records and GIS to better utilize their services to help us make our information available to the public. She is also working on establishing a process for allowing her to conduct and create the conservation plans that meet both NRCS and Soil and Water requirements, but will need training and support for getting these done. She's spent a lot of time reviewing files and working on completing applications that are currently pending or incomplete. It is clear that this is now a real workflow issue as we work to comply with the requirements of our ordinance and the state--that we have these plans in place prior to approval by the APB. Looking forward, this also imposes a burden on staff to track and monitor land use changes as current VAD farms change use, for instance, from forestry to row crops or vineyard, or if the farm changes hands. Presently, there is a long waiting period for the NRCS conservation plans. This is a topic that staff will need to discuss further with management to look at ways to figure out how to speed up this process. Ortosky noted that we are fortunate that the majority of the farmers in the VAD program are great stewards of their land regardless of whether there is a conservation plan or not.
- c. **Membership:** Staff reported on current efforts to identify potential new members. Gail implemented a new line on our applications in 2015 that allowed applicants to indicate a willingness to volunteer to serve. Staff combed through the applications back to 2018 to gather up the names and contact information from those who said yes, and reached out to see if they were still interested. Several have indicated that they'll submit applications, so that's encouraging, especially since they're already familiar. In the meantime, the county is reassessing its membership process with the BOCC stepping back to review the system and adopt some changes by late November.
- d. **Ag Economic Development Update:** Ortosky provided an update on his position and duties. He's transitioning to Extension, where he will be called Community and Rural Development Agent, responsible for economic development, infrastructure and food agriculture. He will be looking at programming analysis and program development at the Breeze Farm, a place that assisted a number of successful new farmers in the county. This is a 270 acre farm that has a lot of potential for additional activity beyond the 2-3 acres used for start-up or incubator for new farmers. More funders are now interested in research and education, so there will be more focus on developing broader uses for the farm. He wants to bring more money and life to the farm. He's been partnering with Triangle J and others to apply for a USDA grant to develop a regional food system economic development partnership with growers, processors and distributors to promote a broader regional food system. He'll still administer the Ag Economic Development grant program. Discussion followed about helping to match up land owners with those who are seeking land as a way to get into farming; Noah Ranells is still with Extension and is working on this under the name of NC Land Link. There are still the PLANT classes at the Breeze Farm, now integrated into Extension's Farm School, which is still going on under Mart Bumgarner.
- e. **VAD Breakfast Update:** At present, the county policy is to not host meetings that involve indoor activities with food, so we will not be able to host this in 2021. We'll look forward to doing this again in 2022.

7. **Time for Information Sharing:** None

8. **Adjournment:** Meeting adjourned at 8:10 pm.