

Skagit County Agricultural Advisory Board (AAB)
Minutes – March 15th, 2006

Members in attendance:

Dave Boon (Vice-Chair)
Randy Good (proxy for Murray Benjamin)
Bill McMoran
Ron Wesen (for Lyle Wesen)
Bob Hughes
Kim Mower
Mike Hulbert (proxy for Roger Knutzen)

Members not in attendance:

Murray Benjamin
Annie Lohman
Murray Benjamin
Roger Knutzen

Others in attendance

Larry Gadbois
Dave Moore
Carolyn Kelly
Burlington-Edison FFA
Allison Deets

1. Call to order & introductions:

Vice-Chair Dave Boon called the meeting to order at 6.05 pm. He welcomed members and guests to the meeting. Carolyn Kelly, Manager of Skagit Conservation District, farmer Larry Gadbois, farmer Dave Moore, and the Burlington-Edison FFA were in attendance.

2. Minutes:

Dave Boon called for additions, corrections, or comments to the February and March 2006 minutes. Randy Good moved to accept the February and March minutes as presented. Bill McMoran seconded the motion. Motion carried.

3. Eminent Domain Presentation – Burlington-Edison FFA

The Burlington-Edison FFA has put together a role play presentation depicting ag and eminent domain issues, centered on the expansion of Highway 20. The FFA members introduced themselves, and the AAB did likewise. The case presented was that of “Elise Walker vs. State of Washington.” FFA members gave the definition of eminent domain. “Elise Walker” and her “attorney” presented their case, followed by the “State of Washington” and its “attorney,” with a “judge” overseeing the proceedings. The “judge” asked several questions of the two sides, to help frame the issue.

The first question was “How will eminent domain impact the Skagit County community?” On the con side, Elise Walker and her attorney argued that the land loss leaves employees jobless, results in a loss of the food supply, and a loss of contribution to the local economy. On the pro side, the State of Washington argued that selected road widening represents a benefit to the County, including opening potential for more business and jobs with the additional lanes.

The second question was “Will employment opportunities increase or decrease with the expansion?” On the pro side, the State noted that experts and specialists are needed for the expansion, and that there will be an employment percentage increase - only 25 jobs will actually be lost by the loss of this farm. On the con side, Elise Walker’s lawyer pointed out that no permanent employment would be provided by the expansion, and that the impacts

will not simply be localized (on-farm) job loss – the support infrastructure for agriculture may be impacted as well, and employment will decrease in Skagit Valley.

The third question was “How will this expansion affect the economy?” On the con side, Elise Walker argued that the expansion will affect any individual or company associated with Walker Farms, which is part of the seed industry here in Skagit County; as Skagit is the largest producer of spinach seed, how can we expect farms to survive? On the pro side, the State’s attorney argued that taxes may rise, bringing revenue to the county, transportation will be provided to and from work, and farms and businesses will be compensated for their loss.

The final question from the judge was “How will both sides be affected?” The State’s position is that more lanes will allow for a more efficient drive, and not only will road safety be improved, but more career opportunities will likely become available. Elise Walker’s attorney pointed out that compensation does not equal annual profits or guarantee the future of her client’s business.

4. CREP – Carolyn Kelly

Skagit Conservation District Manager Carolyn Kelly provided information about and an update on the CREP program. She reported that the District is almost at the end of its original contract with the federal government (USDA). She said that, as we look to the future, we’re looking at ways to improve the program and make it more workable for landowners and make participation more attractive. The limiting factors report, still in draft, by Carol Smith made some new recommendations as to buffer width. The study offers an opportunity for increased flexibility for both the District and landowners – Ms. Smith reports that buffers as small as 35 feet can provide adequate coverage. Additionally, the Districts and USDA are exploring a hedgerow option if the stream is 5 feet wide or less; this option would require a hedgerow of 15 feet under CREP.

Bill McMoran asked where the funding comes from for the CREP projects. Carolyn Kelly said the funding is primarily federal, but the state and District itself kick funds in as well so nothing comes out of the landowner’s pocket. The basic goals of CREP have to do with water quality, sedimentation, and fish habitat. So far, the District has about 70 contracts on about 500 acres. Current rental rates are 200% of soil rental rate (which is determined by FSA) plus another 10% if it’s a soil of long-term significance. The rental contract is for 10-15 years. In addition to the rental, the federal contract gives \$10/acre/year for maintenance; however annual maintenance is about \$300/acre/year, which is contributed by the state and District.

5. Skagit Environmental Bank (Wetland Mitigation Banking)

Carolyn Kelly provided some background on the issue, and this specific situation. Loren Korthuis dropped in Carolyn Kelly’s office about 5 years ago, knowing he wasn’t going to dairy forever, and knowing the land was getting wetter and wetter. She and Loren worked on multiple use options for the increasingly wet property, as well as looking for someone to come in and partner on the property. Several players were interested, but none could make a deal work for the entire property. Eventually, the mitigation bank people came to talk to Loren and put deal on the table.

The Board discussed mitigation banks generally, and this bank in particular. The basic premise of a wetland mitigation bank is that if a developer is doing a project and destroys a wetland, then he can buy credits to “offset” the destruction and the bank “creates” or restores a wetland. After heated discussion, the Board came to several conclusions and questions, including:

- Why has this bank been expanded to all of WRIA 3 and portions of other WRIs in Whatcom and Snohomish Counties? Originally, it was within the watershed – if you’re destroying the Nookachamps, you should have to mitigate in the Nookachamps.
- Once you destroy a wetland – how do we “re-create” it someplace else?
- Follow the money – this is a profit exercise
- Who mitigates for the loss of farmland to this bank?

Bill McMoran moved, and Randy Good seconded, to send a comment letter into the agencies that have provided the joint notification and request for comments on certification of the Skagit Environmental Bank. Motion carried, and the Land Use Committee was tasked with the job of developing a letter that Chair Oscar Lagerlund will sign. Specifically, the Land Use Committee’s job is to “find the issues that are important to agriculture and bring them forward.”

6. Land Use Committee Update

Land Use Committee Chair Mike Hulbert reported that the Committee continues to work on the Comprehensive Plan Update comments. The code revision recommendations made by the AAB were accepted by PDS and submitted as part of the department’s recommended package. The Committee has been talking with conservation organizations about reaching a compromise regarding some of the points with which those groups are uncomfortable. After discussion, the Vice-Chair called for a consensus opinion on comments for the Comprehensive Plan Update, including code revisions. The AAB agreed to the points discussed, but authorized the Land Use Committee to make changes, reshape, or frame the comment letter as circumstances warrant between now and the end of the comment period on April 18th. Staff and Mike Hulbert encouraged members to attend the March 21st public hearing of the Planning Commission, in the Skagit County Commissioners’ Hearing Room at 1800 Continental Place, Mount Vernon.

7. Open Board Position

There are two candidates for the board position vacated by Rose Merritt. Glen Johnson is a local farmer, from Fir Island. John Vendeland is an agribusiness consultant, who works nationally and internationally, but lives in Burlington. Mike Hulbert noted that although they might not always see eye-to-eye, John Vendeland has a very broad base of knowledge; Bill McMoran agreed, saying that John Vendeland’s experience would certainly be an asset to the board as it begins looking at economic development tools. Kim Mower said it is important to consider, however, that Glen Johnson is an actual farmer – he gets into the soil and grows things. After further discussion, Mike Hulbert moved for acceptance of the candidates; Kim Mower seconded. Carried. Mike Hulbert made a motion, and Randy Good seconded, to nominate John Vendeland as a board member. Kim Mower made a motion to nominate Glen Johnson as a board member. Died for lack of a second. Vice Chair

Dave Boon called the question. The motion to nominate and forward John Vendeland to the Commissioners for appointment to the Agricultural Advisory Board carried unanimously.

8. Miscellaneous

Board discussed the letter received from the County by affected Districts regarding the Bayview Stormwater Management Plan. A meeting has been scheduled to talk about the plan as it stands now, and provide an update to the Districts.

Carly Ruacho requested insight on behalf of PDS on a commercial composting operation that's been proposed for an old dairy farm on Cook Road. Currently County Code does not allow composting for commercial purposes unless it's all on-site materials. While the Board wanted to know the specifics of the proposal, they discussed only broader policy implications and alternatives.

Carly Ruacho reported that there is a panel discussion on March 9th regarding ag issues in proposed the Comprehensive Plan and Code revision. This will be followed by at least two public hearings, one on March 21st to discuss the Comp Plan and Code revisions, and another on March 23rd to discuss mapping changes.

Staff reminded the Board that there is a 5,000 acre celebration coming up for the Farmland Legacy Program (FLP) during Ag Week, on the 23rd of March. The FLP will be hosting the celebration at the Skagit County Fairgrounds. Skagit County Cattlemen will be barbecuing, and all members of the AAB are more than welcome to attend.

Vice-Chair Dave Boon adjourned the meeting.

Adjourn regular session 8.08pm.