

Skagit County Agricultural Advisory Board (AAB)
Minutes – October 18th, 2006

Members in attendance:

Oscar Lagerlund (Chair)
Murray Benjamin (proxy for Randy Good)
Bill McMoran
Lyle Wesen
Annie Lohman (proxy for Mike Hulbert,
John Vendeland)

Kim Mower
Roger Knutzen
Bob Hughes

Members not in attendance:

Dave Boon

Others in attendance

Holly Freishtat
Carly Ruacho
Allison Deets

1. Call to order & introductions:

Chair Oscar Lagerlund called the meeting to order at 7.05pm. He welcomed members and guest Holly Freishtat (Ag Marketing Program) to the meeting.

2. Minutes:

Chair Oscar Lagerlund noted that there was no meeting in September, and that the August meeting did not have quorum, so the notes provided are for informational purposes only. He called for corrections to the July meeting minutes. Bill McMoran moved, and Murray Benjamin seconded, approval of the minutes as presented. Motion carried.

3. Ag Marketing Program – Holly Freishtat

Holly Freishtat, Director of the Ag Marketing Program sponsored by Skagitonians to Preserve Farmland and the Economic Development Association of Skagit County, presented a report on the progress of her program. Holly Freishtat has been on board for a year, and wanted to provide a detailed update on the direction of the Ag Marketing Program and its activities. She handed out information she's developed about the program, and talked about a new project she's developing, a "farm to institution" project.

Historically, farmers haven't wanted to sell to institutions because the pricing was so bad, but with the movement in all sectors to buy local, prices are improving. Holly Freishtat is working on a case study to see if the "farm to institution" project could work; right now, the study is focused on the three Skagit hospitals, though several hospitals in Seattle have expressed interest. Assisted living facilities and nursing homes have also expressed interest, and Holly looks forward to incorporating them into her model as well. The brochure she has shared with the group is one that gets handed out to CEOs of hospitals, buyers, and others who participate in the food service sector of the institutions. The brochure, in combination with tours Holly's been giving, talks about healthy food care in healthcare institutions. Holly Freishtat has developed a grower group to work on this project, and Skagit Valley Hospital is willing to be the pilot institution.

Board member Bob Hughes asked if the hospitals understand that local farmers can't provide year-round produce. Holly Freishtat said that hospitals understand that, though the Valley will be able to provide some products year-round, though of course not vegetables. She is working with the hospitals, teaching them about seasonal produce, and helping them to develop menus that reflect seasonal cycles. As part of the teaching process, Holly Freishtat took the CEOs, buyers, and hospital food service administrators on a farm tour, which was very instructive and gave the participants new ideas about crafting menus to reflect the seasons in the Valley.

Holly Freishtat also reported that Mindgarden Group, which was hired to do a branding assessment, will have its report completed in December, and she will be able to provide a report on that assessment at that time.

4. Comprehensive Plan Update – Carly Ruacho

Skagit County Planning & Development Services staff member Carly Ruacho reported on the Comprehensive Plan Update progress. The Planning Commission considered the agricultural code change recommendations as part of the 2005 Comprehensive Plan update process at the end of August. The Planning Commission adopted everything recommended by the Skagit County Agricultural Advisory Board related to the code with the exception of the requirement for tax forms as proof of farmworker salaries for temporary manufactured homes. That question was held for a later discussion under miscellaneous items, which will take place October 10th.

After considerable discussion, the Planning Commission approved a moratorium on new habitat projects that will take agricultural land out of production permanently. This moratorium will be in place for six months, and be subject to review and possible extension at the end of that period. During the moratorium, the stakeholders who commented on this issue during the public comment period will be invited to sit down as a working group and define the permit and its processes. The Planning Commission was unanimous in its opinion that the "status quo" is no longer acceptable and that there will be some level of special use permit.

Allison Deets congratulated the Board on a job well done, noting that none of this would have happened without the hard work of the AAB. She also said she was surprised at how much of what the Ag Advisory Board proposed made it past the Planning Commission – no matter how good the policies, the success rate of advocates (even very accomplished ones) is usually far less than 100%, which the AAB more or less achieved here. Board member Roger Knutzen echoed this thought, saying that if the AAB never did anything beyond this success with the Comprehensive Plan, or if it had even gotten half of the proposals through the process, the AAB would have fulfilled its purpose. He also extended thanks to Carly Ruacho on behalf of the Board for her technical assistance throughout the process. Oscar Lagerlund reminded the Board that the project isn't done yet – the recommendations made by the AAB must still be approved by the Commissioners, so the Board needs to continue its work on this project.

5. Wetland Mitigation Banking – Bill McMoran

Board member Bill McMoran reported on a wetland mitigation banking meeting called by Senator Mary Margaret Haugen. Senator Haugen brought several staff members with her; her stated purpose for the meeting was to educate staff so they can begin developing legislation to limit the establishment of wetland mitigation banks in natural resource zoned lands, such as agriculture. The discussion centered on the Skagit Environmental Bank, the former Korthius property, an 800 acre proposed wetland mitigation bank site near Barney Lake east of Mount Vernon. The agricultural community is opposed to this wetland bank as it destroys 800 acres of prime farmland in the Skagit Valley, or 1% of the ag zoned land in the County. This appears to be in direct conflict with the Growth Management Act and Skagit County’s own Comprehensive Plan, which directs the County to protect agricultural soils.

Following a working lunch, the entire group, which included three representatives from the Agricultural Advisory Board, went out to tour the mitigation bank site. The meeting and tour were productive, and Senator Haugen is concerned about this issue.

6. Miscellaneous

Allison Deets reminded members about the November business and transition planning workshops, “Into the Future: Planning for the Next Farming Generation,” and provided invitations to board members.

Roger Knutzen requested information and an update on the Bayview Ridge Subarea Plan and Stormwater Management Plan. Staff will request members of Public Works and Planning & Development Services who are involved in the Bayview issue attend the next meeting.

The next AAB meeting is being moved to November 8th due to the business planning conference, which will be held November 15th and 16th.

Chair Oscar Lagerlund called for adjournment of the meeting.

Adjourn regular session 9.15pm.