

Skagit County Agriculture Advisory Board

Meeting Minutes – July 11, 2018

Skagit County Administration Building

Members in Attendance

Nels Lagerlund
John Morrison
Terry Sapp

Michael Hughes
Kraig Knutzen

Barbara Cleave
Steve Omdal

Murray Benjamin
Scott Hanseth

Proxy Designations

Michael for Greg Lee

Members Absent

Greg Lee

Sloan Johnson

Tim Van Hofwegen

Others in Attendance

Hal Hart, Skagit County Planning & Development Services (PDS)
Dan McCarty, Skagit County Public Works, Natural Resources
Kathy Jewell, Skagit County Planning & Development Services (PDS)
Heather Carter, Director La Conner Chamber of Commerce
Cindy Verge, Executive Director Tulip Festival
Julie Grace, Skagit Valley Herald
Ken Stern, La Conner Weekly News

Call to Order

Nels Lagerlund called the meeting to order at 7:00 pm. Introductions around the table

Meeting Minutes

Michael moved to accept as amended the June 13, 2018 minutes, Barbara seconded. Motion carried.

Local Issues

Guest Presenters - Agritourism

Cindy Verge, Executive Director Tulip Festival

Her role is to bring people into the valley for tulips for 1 month each year. She realizes that it has an impact on everyone in the room. They work diligently to move traffic to the roads with higher capacity and traffic control. WA Bulb co has the off-street parking but it is affected by the weather. When they have those issues, it creates a negative impact, only so many places for cars to park. The county has been helpful in directing traffic to the larger roadways. They understand they impact the entire area with activities like the tulip ride, 800-1000 bikes, Parade in La Conner, Mt. Vernon Street Fair, etc. April gets double digit increase in sales tax revenue. Non-profits also raise almost \$200k during the month of tulip festival. Not a need for more infrastructure because the tourist go away after April.

Terry commented that he had looked at website and commented on mission statement. Pleased the last part of mission statement is about preserving agriculture in Skagit County. Cindy stated that without Ag there are no tulips. It's a very important part of our mission and what we do.

Heather Carter, Director La Conner Chamber of Commerce

She contacted WA Tourism Alliance and asked about agritourism stats and found they are lacking in tracking. Tourism is 4th largest industry in WA state with year round in rural & urban communities. 40% of tourism dollars are spent outside Seattle & Spokane.

La Conner is unique and petite; we experimented with Birds of Winter and approached from an educational standpoint. Had guest speakers at events for both amateur and professional birders. January is usually slow in La Conner, but this brought 450 people on a Saturday; over 65% visitors which means they came over 50 miles. March is daffodil festival (5th year), Tulip Festival in April, October has Brew in the Slew (5th year) and Festival of Family Farms. Wants more communication with the farmers. In future, want to include farmers in the Bird Festival and tell your story to the visitors.

The board brought up that we need to educate the public on the challenges the farmers have, about cover crops, about what takes place in the overall farming operation. Heather agreed this is a conversation that must be held with the larger tourism industry in the valley.

The group discussed how the trumpeter geese have been coming for years and more recently have grown in numbers and the impact that brings recently. Trumpeters come and eat corn, carrots, potatoes out of fields, newer machinery harvests better which leaves less for geese to eat. So now they are eating the grass. It's a success story in the increase in the population of trumpeters, but now it's negatively affecting the farmer. Now a festival promotes the birds, but no one acknowledges the farmer who makes the habitat for the birds or the impact on the farmers.

How can we use these events that bring visitors into the area as a way to educate them on the agriculture that goes on here? Not looking for the tourists to spend money with us, but a way to educate them on the farming process and pressures. Cindy talked about how Cow Town was a part of tulip festival, which was educational. It showed how potatoes grow, where milk comes from, but it has gone away. Our visitors come here because we have the expansive land and agriculture. She understands visitors make farming complicated but offered the success story of Taylor Shellfish. In 1999 they were never part of tulip festival, but now they have tour buses coming and touring, watching a video and buying shellfish. Right now they don't have enough of that offering at tulip festival. Would love to have dairy farms & potato farms to sign up for a tour one Saturday during tulip festival to show what they do and how. If an effort could be made to do this, it would be very positive to educate the public on farming.

Discussion turned to agritourism and the push to add restaurants into ag zone. We are facing the issue of zoning and Skagit County code language could be altered to allow agritourism, retail enterprises on farms in ag zone, which is not currently allowed. It benefits the cities, festivals, etc. Chambers and cities can measure the benefits of tourism, but not farmers. Example of the burdens on the farmers are traffic, birds eat crops, Elk that causes farmers to spend a lot of money to build fences to keep out of fields and protect cattle from the Elk introducing diseases. There is no compensation or understanding from cities or tourists to the farmers unless farms are made into retail enterprises, which most farmers at this table do not support. The concern is how to

recognize farming without turning farming into a tourist enterprise. The goal is to preserve the industry of farming and preserve the ag zone for agricultural ventures.

Steve explained that part of the problem is that the entrepreneur/boutique farmers want agritourism but it is not what the large production farmers want. They need to have a common venue in the city limits, not in ag zones. We have gone nowhere with that idea in our valley but it's what is needed. Heather agreed and brought up Pybus market in Wenatchee and how it's a perfect model for Skagit. Heather will get details & stats on how the Pybus market is run and report back to the board.

Heather discussed the TPA- Tourism Promotion Area/Act; being worked by for past 8 years. The Chambers are working on this together. It's a \$2 per room per night assessment to be collected, predicting the first year can bring in \$500k to \$750k to region to promote tourism. The Chambers receive only \$30,000 per year to promote, so this would be a very large increase. Heather discussed asked there should be a portion given to ag community or have a member of the ag community on the board. Steve says it is hard to put a value on the education and marketing we need. We definitely need more advocates for agriculture, not less. The question is how do you merge that together and make it a success? What is the mechanism to sell product. Centralized market in city area instead of on individual farms.

Michael asked if in the TPA is there a way to use some funds to help tell the story of the farmer, flyers in hotel rooms, etc. Heather thinks it's wide open to the possibilities. Someone in Ag community needs to sit on the Board. Currently the Directors of Burlington & Mt. Vernon are the leads, it's a non-profit. They are working on the documents to present to all the towns to sign. There has been a disconnect with the communications, the ag community must be included. Ideas such as coloring books about how potatoes are grown or milk how it's produced and gets to market. This would be a long-term help people understand the farming story.

Heather thinks we need to communicate and bring together the Chambers and leaders from Mt. Vernon, Burlington, Sedro Wolley and the surrounding areas. We are contacting the cities and groups to get an understanding that it's in the cities these agritourism venues belong. The urban areas need to understand they are the place for open farmers market, open music venue, breweries, arts-crafts, etc. Then the farmers who want can go there to sell their product and meet to educate the consumers. So we don't end up with several little stands every few miles on the road in ag-zones. We want to do is facilitate discussion with cities, chambers in area and work on little things that could help benefit farmers, and how to manage the events that doesn't paralyze the ag industry. We don't have the adequate roads to handle all the extra traffic.

Committee Reports – None

Old Business

Nels asked Hal about docket.

Hal explained that P-12 is being discussed on July 24 and then the docket will be released July 31st. Then open for public comment until August 31, 2018. Planning Commission Meeting August 21st.

Nels moved to adjourn, Michael seconded. Meeting adjourned at 8:30 pm

Next meeting August 8, 2018 at 7 pm