

Skagit County Agriculture Advisory Board

Meeting Minutes – August 8, 2018

Skagit County Administration Building

Members in Attendance

Nels Lagerlund	Michael Hughes	Barbara Cleave	Murray Benjamin
Tim Van Hofwegen	Steve Omdal	Terry Sapp	

Proxy Designations

Michael Hughes for Kraig Knutzen

Members Absent

Greg Lee	Kraig Knutzen	Sloan Johnson	John Morrison
Scott Hanseth			

Others in Attendance

Dean Wesen, Skagit Conservation Board
Bill Blake, Skagit Conservation Board
Don McMoran, WSU
Hal Hart, Skagit County Planning & Development Services (PDS)
Kara Symonds, Skagit County Public Works
Jeanne Aungst, Skagit County Planning & Development Services (PDS)
Julia Grace, Skagit Valley Herald

Call to Order

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

Meeting Minutes

Murray moved to accept as amended the July 11, 2018 minutes, Michael seconded. Motion carried.

Local Issues

Guest Presenters -

Dean Wesen, Skagit Conservation Board:

Grant based enterprise has worked well for many years, however, last year's budget did not pass. It's written in the RCW that conservations can ask for amendments. Board is currently looking in to it.

Bill Blake, Skagit Conservation District:

The Skagit Conservation District is seeking to establish a base level of secure funding through the establishment of a Rate and Charges assessment as allowed by RCW 89.08.405. The District which was established in 1942 has a long history of helping sustain the Agricultural and Forestry culture we enjoy today in the Skagit Valley. The ability to continue the full level of services to the County residents was severely impacted in 2017 when the state capital budget was not approved.

Services provided:

- Dairy Coordinated Nutrient Management plans required for Dairies to stay in compliance with regulations and keep our working lands in production reducing risk of conversion.
- Small livestock farm planning to support landowner with beef, horses, sheep and other livestock to keep our waters clean and healthy for recreation and shellfish harvest.
- Youth Education to teach the values of Skagit Natural Resources to our future stewards.
- Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP) that funds the planting, maintenance and lease of buffers and habitat along fish bearing streams and drainages allowing farms to prosper while restoring important ecological functions.
- Adult Education programs including Watershed Masters and Backyard Wildlife training that teach landowners how to manage our natural resources with minim impact.
- Water Quality monitoring provided through the Stream and Storm Team volunteers managed by District Staff saves the County thousands of dollars through the time donated to collect and analyze samples.

Services that Rates and Charges will restore or create:

- Forest Health Stewardship and Fire wise programs to help forest landowners better manage for a safer and healthy forest.
- Urban Forestry program to include services for critical area buffers, danger trees, Bio-retention and park forestry management.
- Salmon, Wildlife and Bird habitat management programs that reduce conflict with Agriculture and maintain or restore a healthy ecosystem.
- Advancing technology to better understand water quantity management options to address climate impacts on summer low flows impacting irrigation, fisheries and economic development.

How did the District come up with the proposed rate of \$5.00 per parcel and \$0.10 cents per acre?

The State RCW 89.08.405 states the maximum annual per parcel rate shall not exceed five dollars, except that for counties with a population of over four hundred eighty thousand persons. The population of Skagit County is far below that. The RCW states the maximum per acre charge is \$0.10 cents. The County Assessor provided parcel information that indicates there are roughly 58,252 lots that will be considered for rates and charges. There are certain lots identified by the State Department of Revenue that due to low income qualification will be exempt. The goal is to apply the rates and charges for service to those lands the District activities provide benefits. The RCW 89.08.400 states the special assessment may be imposed for a period or periods each not to exceed ten years in duration.

The District primarily relies on funding from the Washington State Conservation Commission. The District also benefits from funding provided by Skagit County, Anacortes, Mount Vernon, Burlington, Sedro Woolley and the Natural Resource Conservation Services. A majority of those are targeted towards farm planning, water quality improvement and education. The District also competes for other grant opportunities when available.

The recent Voluntary Stewardship Program adopted by Skagit County identifies the Skagit Conservation District as the non-regulatory agency that can assist landowners in developing farm plans and implementing Best Management Practices. There was no funding provided to the District to perform this additional work. The Dept. of Agriculture also refers landowners to work with the District in a non-regulatory manner. We receive requests for forestry assistance that are not currently funded.

The population of Skagit County has doubled in just 40 years, placing enormous pressure on our natural resources, and this trend will only continue. Flexible, locally driven and smart conservation programs are needed now more than ever, and the Skagit Conservation District has a long and successful track record with this. We are a trusted partner when it comes to putting working conservation plans like Firewise or Stream Team in to action.

In 2017 the State Capital budget delay forced the district to cut back on staff hours, reducing our ability to fully deliver programs to landowners. The District does not have a reserve account as recommended by the State Auditor. The assessment would allow the District to build a reserve account of \$50,000.00 that would provide two-months of operating expense for budget shortfalls. The funding would assist with cost share programs where the District can only be reimbursed after first paying for construction of Best Management Practice.

The creation of a dependable local funding base for Skagit Conservation District would provide a significant level of stability, supporting the continuity of basic operations and allowing the District to address local priorities for which state and federal grant funding is lacking. At a rate of \$5.00 per parcel plus \$.10 cent per acre, this proposal would raise approximately \$280,000.00 annually for the District's operations guaranteeing that the District could continue to fulfill its commitments to local residents and be less impacted by problems at the state and federal funding levels. Individual payees could appeal the fee to the Board, which currently has 5 elected members. A letter has been sent to all cities about this. 16 Counties currently have the \$5.00 fee.

Terry Sapp mentioned that he is an example of a small farmer with several parcels. He has benefited by the conservation, is concerned it would be challenging for them to pay more than the \$5.00 that smaller parcel owners would. He does realize the value of the program.

Steve Omdal suggested running numbers to see if it would be possible to place a cap on the fee or average the fee to help make it more responsible. Nels Lagerlund mentioned that it might be a better option to set a limit on a land owner/partnership. Also that Open space taxation has gone up recently and has had an effect on Ag-NRL owners. Seems like it is one tax after another which has a negative impact on farmers.

Timeline for new fee:

It is being presented to the commissioners, as well as this meeting. It will then be amended again after this meeting and taken back to the commissioners to decide. It would need to be approved by 12-15-18 to be effective 2019. Public Hearing will be held. If comments are received, it could go in front of the Hearing Examiner again.

Kara Symonds, Skagit County Public Works:

The FLP (Farmland Legacy Program) is funded by the County's Conservation Futures Fund, with some dollars leveraged with funding partners and grants, such as SPF and Washington State. The FLP has over 11,000 acres in easements and has extinguished over 215 development rights. To Kara, this makes the FLP the County's

most significant flood risk management program as well; these are 215 homes, septic systems, etc, that will not be development in the floodplain.

There are currently about 1,500 acres and 33 development rights in the queue in various forms of the process, from title reports, or appraisals or offers. Working with a broad spectrum of the agricultural community. The County has a seven person advisory committee that ranks all the applicants, 1 representative from each district, 1 at large, and 1 representative from SPF, the SCD and the SLT.

The FLP has a couple of ongoing contracts including an appraiser and a monitoring agent. Kara works about 0.3 FTE on the program and is grateful to work with a permit tech in planning. She has been focusing on improving the accuracy of our database and getting the planning software updated with notices that parcels have a conservation easement. The partnership with planning is extremely helpful because the program also monitors easements that were created under planning's Agricultural Land Preservation code, nicknamed the 39&1.

The committee is tackling some issues lately within managing such a large amount of acreage; there is an increase in the requests for amendments, BLAs, development permits, etc. In addition, the committee is debating the purchase of development rights in areas that are agricultural in nature, but not necessarily zoned Ag-NRL. In the future, they will be able to pull information regarding the number of acres in the program. PDS asks FLP for comments on all development permits that come in.

The question was asked regarding offer to land owner and was explained they receive the difference between the land value prior to the easement and the value after the easement.

SPF contribute different amounts to specific land. Kara currently is the only person working on FPL, with the exception of Gwen helping 1 day a week with the database. Previously a position had been posted, filled and unfortunately did not work out. Would like to advertise and hire an Agricultural Program Specialist if approved in the budget.

FLP currently has a monitor that insures that easements are being followed, that property is still being farmed and that they continue to follow the easement. When borderline contact is made with the owner to insure that a violation does not occur. There are currently 5 signs up in Skagit County: 2 on Cook Rd and 3 on Gardner Rd. City of Burlington donates a portion of funds thru their program.

New Business

Don McMoran, WSU Extension

Budgets:

The County budget was turned in on August 15th, which included step increases for three employees. WSU will be taking a 1.5% decrease in 2019 plus a 1% payroll deduction to pay for a much needed financial account program.

Grants:

WSU Water Irrigation Systems Efficiency (WISE) and Cover Cropping grants are going as planned. WSU Skagit County Extension was not funded for AgrAbility in 2019, but we are in the top one third of proposals for the Puget Sound Partnership Near Term Action grant.

Publications:

Don is awaiting Growing Parsnips in W. WA and Being the first in Your County to Identify New Invasive Insects to be published in the near future.

National Meeting:

Don attended the National Association of County Agricultural Agents meeting in Chattanooga, TN where his poster was selected as a National Finalist. He also gave a talk on How to be the First in Your County to Discover a New Invasive Insect.

Workshops:

Currently planning for the W. WA Seed Workshop, Skagit Ag Summit, W. WA Potato Workshop and W. WA Berry Workshop.

Terry: Snohomish Co called to ask if we would host a weed workshop (Kevin from Forestry). Terry will pass email on to Don. Would like to know for the board's interest if Open Space is being monitored? Tax Benefit is being tested by Auditors. Concerned that parcel owners may not qualify for Open Space and will begin to contact Planning Department.

Nels – talked about Open Open space. Can be brush, timber. Pay different taxes.

Hal will check into the tax rate for Open Open Space. (Hal will ask Grace to forward information or Kiffin Saben in the assessor's office).

Committee Reports - NONE

- a. Economic development- Steve Omdal (Chair), Don McMoran, Terry Sapp
- b. Critical Areas – Nels Lagerlund (Chair), Murray Benjamin
- c. Land Use – Sloan Johnson (Chair), Michael Hughes, Scott Hanseth, Barbara Cleave
- d. Flood and Drainage – Kraig Knutzen (Chair), Greg Lee, Scott Hanseth

Old Business

Hal Hart, Skagit County Planning Director:

Planning Commission meeting scheduled for August 21st 6pm. Bring any comments that you may have regarding the 2018 Comprehensive Plan docket. Hal encouraged at least one person from the board to attend. Comment Letter submitted by Nels to Hal.

Nels: Planning submitted various options that were available, but Nels stated that AAB does not support opening Ag zone up for restaurants.

Nels asked the board to come up with a plan to include the cities in discussions about Agritourism. Steve would like to see respected chambers included as well. The board has decided to schedule a committee meeting towards the end of the month to come up with a better plan, Friday Aug 24th at 12:00 at Bob's Burger & Brew. Steve to make reservation.

Nels moved to adjourn, Michael seconded. Meeting adjourned at 8:45 pm

Next meeting is September 12, 2018 at 7 pm