

THURSTON COUNTY AGRICULTURE ADVISORY COMMITTEE

McLane Building Conference Room
5033 Harrison Ave NW, Olympia, WA 98502

Minutes for February 25, 2016

Members Present: EJ Zita (Chair), Robert McIntosh (Vice-Chair), Mary DiMatteo, Pat Labine, Kevin Jensen, Chris Groen, Richard Mankamy, and, Eric Johnson

Ex Officio Member: Dave Nygard

Staff Present: Samantha Woolstrum and Maya Buhler

Members Excused: Doug Wiseman

Public Present: Treacy Kreger, Board of Supervisors Thurston Conservation District
James Goché from Market Gardens Northwest LLC
Robin Buckingham, Thurston Conservation District
Derek Rensky, Employment Security Department
Britany Payer, Evergreen State College

The meeting was called to order at 7:01 by EJ Zita followed by round-table introductions of the members, staff, and guests.

Approval of previous meeting minutes -The minutes from the January 28, 2016 meeting were reviewed, corrected and approved by consensus with amendments.

Approval of agenda – The agenda was discussed, changes were suggested, and it was approved as amended.

Ag Committee membership: We discussed the openings on the committee and the need for new members. Does the BOCC have applications that we can review?

News sharing – Update on the mobile slaughter unit—Tracey with Heritage Meats has been renegotiating to relocate. Tracy is exploring the possibility of assuming the lease at the end of March when the current lease expires with the Pierce Conservation District and is negotiating with Schorno at Silver Springs. The plan is to keep it at Nisqually Springs Farm

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by Stewart's meats for now, open 3-4 days a week. This would be fine initially but might not be a long-term option. They are looking at several locations, including – Dr. Barnett's alpaca farm across from Fred Colvin in Tenino.

Some objections were expressed to Heritage Meats taking over the Mobile Slaughter Unit – they are a competitor to small producers and are already a sole provider of other resources. The problem was stated that Heritage Meats is the only USDA cut and wrapper closer than Bremerton.

Guest Speaker – Aslan Meade with the Economic Development Council (EDC) reported that the primary goal of the EDC is to ensure that Thurston County and its small businesses are thriving. Small Business Counseling (SBDC) is offered at the EDC. The Washington Small Business Development Center Network is a resource for expert business advising, management training, and market research. SBDC advisors offer one-on-one technical assistance at no charge to business owners, including how to access capital, get insurance, and use spreadsheets. The Procurement Technical Assistance Center (PTAC) helps companies achieve contracts for work with local, state, and federal governments. The Washington Center for Women in Business is an SBA-funded women's business center offering online and in-person training, and personalized coaching to help women business owners throughout the state of Washington. SCORE is a nationwide nonprofit association whose mission is to grow successful businesses through education and mentorship. Their work is supported by the U.S. Small Business Administration (SBA). With a nationwide network of 13,000+ volunteers, SCORE is able to deliver services at no or low-cost to small business owners. The South Thurston Economic Development Initiative (STEDI) is a recently-formed group that is committed to ensuring that business owners in south Thurston County have access to resources.

Aslan is actively recruiting to get a South Sound representative from the Northwest Agriculture Business Center (NABC). The NABC provides Washington farmers with the skills and the resources required to profitably and efficiently supply their products to consumers, retailers, wholesalers, foodservice operators and food manufacturers. NABC has had a great impact in Skagit County, creating farmer cooperatives and a food hub. Pat reminded the group that the goal of getting a NABC representative in Thurston County is in the working lands strategic plan.

Aslan also works with the buy local campaign, LION – Local Investment Opportunities Network (creamery, cidery, theater), and local procurement for food systems – hospitals, schools, etc.

Jim Goche (public) asked if STEDI still worked only with cities, not farmers. Aslan replied that STEDI is now working with farmers. Jim also asked if the EDC is doing an agriculture economic impact study. Aslan replied that the EDC is not working on any "policy" studies,

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but it does support studies for a food hub. EDC's [Economic Vitality Index Study](#) is done every year and has some food information, but uses data from the USDA agricultural census.

Pat Labine commented that farmers need investment. Young ones don't have money for equity. We need local venture money to invest in young farmers and farmland, to create a stable land base.

Aslan mentioned the Zero Net Farmland Loss meetings that started last November, are being coordinated by Loretta Sepannen, and are exploring these same topics. He also mentioned that the EDC can help match investors and people seeking investment and train people to invest in working farmland. Farmland preservation money has come from the Recreation and Conservation Office. The Office of Farmland Preservation seeks to create a pot of RCO funds to be designated for farmland preservation.

Aslan talked further about the goals and scope of work of the EDC. Port management has commissioned the EDC to look at challenges and opportunities related to Agriculture in Thurston County, in order to identify bottlenecks that may be eased and investments that may make strong contributions to the community. The EDC has also been asked by others to create a business and resource directory for agricultural and related businesses that includes the type of farm, contact information, and possibly number of employees, needs, production, etc. This would help to identify 1) how many dairies, meat farms, produce farms etc. exist and 2) serve as a directory for farmers to network with each other. The Ag Advisory Committee may be able to spread the word among their personal network to help Aslan complete this task and possibly to make it more robust.

Discussion of the SCC request for feedback on Ag Easement program. The Washington State Conservation Commission, Office of Farmland Preservation has drafted a law creating an agricultural conservation easements program ([RCW 89.08.530](#)). E.J. Zita stated that comments are being asked for by March 7, 2016 and proposed the Agricultural Committee draft a letter of support to County Staff and the Commissioners asking them to forward it to the Office of Farmland Preservation before the March 7th deadline. The Committee agreed to do so.

Habitat Conservation Plan Discussion. The Committee had questions on the County's HCP and requested someone to come talk about it at the next meeting.

Thurston County has a complete description of the HCP on their website at <http://www.co.thurston.wa.us/planning/hcp/hcp-get-informed-faqs.htm>. The County also has a presentation on their site where interested community members can read about conservation futures, mitigation, and permit fees. See: <http://www.co.thurston.wa.us/planning/hcp/docs/Feb-2016-Focus-Group-PPT.pdf>

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Public Comment – James Goché from Market Gardens Northwest LLC submitted the letter attached below, and shared public comments. Jim Goché requests a bigger study than the Port has commissioned from the EDC.

No additional comments

Discussion of the Green Sheets Presents - There were no green sheets presented.

Other business – Conservation Futures Program Representative for 2016- Mary DiMatteo.

Mary DiMatteo reminded us of the Thurston County Agriculture study that Lucas Patzek and Sarah Rocker did in 2012, and we agreed to read and discuss it.

The meeting was adjourned at 9:00 p.m.

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Appendix: Letter and testimony from James Goché, February 26, 2016.

Treacy and I have been part of an ad hoc agricultural stakeholders committee working with the Thurston County Economic Development Council (EDC) and the Port of Olympia to “get agriculture on the economic development radar”.

Our agricultural economy in Thurston County is large and growing but largely undocumented and poorly understood. Therefore we have asked the Port, as the statutory economic development agency for Thurston County, to help create a comprehensive study of our local agricultural economy that defines what it is and then measures its impacts (See attached proposal). Once such a study has been completed, we believe that it should be updated on a regular basis.



There are several reasons for this request.

1. The Port needs the information. Several years ago, the Port expressed an interest in local agriculture and a willingness to explore ways to help local farmers. Since then, the Port has received a number of proposals and now needs an objective basis upon which to make decisions.
2. Thurston County’s Voluntary Stewardship Program (VSP) also needs the information in order to finish the VSP Work Plan and complete its pilot project. When the County opted in to VSP several years ago, it agreed to create a voluntary non-regulatory process for meeting the Growth Management goals of “protecting critical areas” and “supporting and enhancing agricultural activities”. To do this, state law requires Thurston County to create “metrics” and to set “benchmarks”. The County’s VSP Stakeholders Group, which has been working with County Planning staff, the Washington Farm Bureau, and others to draft a Work Plan (one for each of the County’s four watersheds), has defined a number of elements for what “supporting and enhancing agricultural activities” requires. One of these is a healthy and vibrant agricultural economy, which is necessary for local farmers to stay in business and to keep ‘working lands working’. Thurston County currently has no comprehensive information about what our local agricultural economy is and therefore cannot create “metrics” and set “benchmarks”.
3. To provide policy-makers and economic planners at all levels of government with reliable data. Many of the state/local laws that affect local agriculture (notably the Open Space Act) are increasingly out of step with 21st century agriculture and need to be updated. At the same time, we have to create new public policy to reform our regulatory and tax systems so that they support agriculture and specific programs

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like our farmers markets, charitable food programs, farm-to-schools/hospitals food programs, and direct purchasing initiatives like CSA's.

4. Last but not least, local farmers and those who sell to them and buy from them (a working definition for what our "agricultural economy" is) need this information to understand the economic environment in which they work, to run businesses, and to support their families.

We understand that the Port has been negotiating a contract with the EDC and until last week were under the impression that the contract would result in the proposed study. After a meeting last Friday (Feb. 19) however, we were advised by EDC staff that the project under discussion would be considerably more limited.

According to Port staff:

The Port has asked the EDC to provide an analysis on how the Port can engage in growing the capacity of the agricultural industry in Thurston County. A successful analysis will most likely include data collection on the agricultural landscape of Thurston County, convening of a broad cross section of agricultural producers and suppliers, reference and inclusion of existing local agricultural efforts and analysis, and a metric or scoring component to aid the Port in identifying potential agricultural infrastructure investments.

According to EDC staff, they are planning to create a decision-tree grid that will prioritize the agricultural proposals that have been submitted to the Port. This grid will include:

- 1) Agricultural infrastructure investment categories
- 2) An agricultural business and resource directory

While the scope of the project is still being discussed, it seems that the current proposals are not sufficient to meet any of the 'needs' mentioned above. Local agriculture is not an "industry" in the traditional sense and it is unclear how "investment categories" could be determined in a meaningful way without first developing a thorough understanding of the "investment market sector" (i.e. our agricultural economy). In addition, how can a "business directory" be created without first determining what the business (agriculture) is?

At last night's meeting, EDC staff posed the question of us – "So can we assess our agricultural economy"? The answer to this is simple:

- Talk to those of us who "are the agricultural economy". We already know the businesses that we run and when our collective experiences are documented, they will provide the basis for an agricultural economic impact study. In this, direct communications are essential. Attempting to use "food councils" and other special interest groups that don't represent agricultural interest is counter-productive.

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- Add to this the professional economic expertise that is available through St. Martins University and at other educational institutions to analyze the data and compile it into a study.
- In doing these things, ask for the help of the community. Volunteers are readily available and their involvement will stretch limited funding and develop public support for and understanding of the impact study.

Experience has been that in order to be successful, creative discussions and innovative projects have to start with commonly understood terms. To the right are some basic definitions that have been distilled from various statutes and projects and also from practical experience on the farm. They are submitted to the Agricultural Advisory Committee for its consideration.

We would be happy to discuss these things further with the Committee members and ask that the Committee consider making the subject of an agricultural economic impact study an agenda item for an upcoming meeting.

Again thank you for the Committee's time last evening and for starting what may be the beginnings of a larger discussion about food, farming, and ways to "support an enhance agricultural activities" in Thurston County.

WORKING DEFINITIONS: Productive discussions require a common understanding of the terminology used and the following are offered as working definitions

:

"Agriculture" refers to the production of food, fiber or fuel. This term is construed broadly to include subjects like horticulture and aquaculture. Agriculture also involves the relationship which exists between producers and those who sell to or buy from them.

"Farming" refers to the production of agricultural products for one of three purposes:

- "subsistence farming" -- growing food for consumption by the farmer and his/her family.
- "charitable farming" -- growing food for those in need.
- "commercial farming" -- growing food for sale

"Food" A wholesome and nutritious substance that is consumed to support life.

"Commodity Crops" Crops that are customarily grown in vast quantities often on large tracts of land and typically using industrial methods that are not sold directly to the public

"Market Gardening" Growing crops (usually fruits, vegetables, and flowers) in modest amounts usually on small holdings for direct sale to consumers at local markets.

"Hobby Farming" A meaningless and derogatory term usually applied to small farms.

-end of Public Comment letter from James Goché-