

City of Keene
New Hampshire

AGRICULTURAL COMMISSION
MEETING MINUTES

Thursday, February 18, 2016

3:30 PM

2nd Floor Conference Room

Members Present:

Bettina Chadbourne, Councilor
Alan Bettler, Vice Chair
Charles Daloz
Sarah Wilton

Staff Present:

Michele Chalice, Planning

Members Not Present:

Alison Welsh
Kathy Harrington
Marcia Duffy
Mark Florenz, Alternate

1) Call to Order

Vice Chair Bettler called the meeting to order at 3:30 PM.

2) Approve January 21, 2016 Minutes

Mr. Daloz gave a correction to the minutes: in multiple places, the word “skitter” (bridge) should be changed to “skidder.”

Ms. Wilton stated that on page 4, during the discussion with Amanda Littleton, the group reviewed the definition of till versus no till. She continued that she does not have a correction to the minutes in regards to this, but the conversation was confusing because it seems like “no till” means different things to different people. Discussion ensued. Ms. Chalice stated that literally, “no till” means no digging up the ground. After more discussion, Vice Chair Bettler stated that they can agree that the basic definition exists. He continued that if the Agriculture Commission discusses no till again they should specify which specific no till practices they are talking about, which could be a variety. Ms. Chalice replied that she thinks that is advisable.

Mr. Daloz made a motion to approve the minutes as amended, which was seconded by Ms. Wilton. The motion passed with a vote of 3 to 0. Councilor Chadbourne stated that she was abstaining because she was not present at the meeting.

3) Election of Commission Chair and Vice Chair

Ms. Chalice asked if the commission wants to wait another month to elect a Chair and Vice Chair since some members are missing today. Mr. Daloz asked if the Councilor is automatically Chair. Ms. Chalice replied no. Ms. Wilton asked if Councilor Jacobs has left the commission. Ms. Chalice replied yes, he has been assigned to a different committee, and Councilor Chadbourne is the new City Council representative here. Vice Chair Bettler asked if the City is okay with the commission waiting until next month to vote. Ms. Chalice replied yes; she will put it on next month’s agenda.

4) City Parcels/Former Hay Field Leases – Review and Discussion of Status/Steps Forward

Vice Chair Bettler asked if Ms. Chalice spoke with Councilor Jacobs about this and if there is anything else to talk about. Ms. Chalice asked that the commission bring Councilor Chadbourne up to date.

Vice Chair Bettler stated that there are a few City-owned parcels that have traditionally been leased and hayed by farmers. Ms. Wilton stated that one farmer owned the bridge (at the Bent Court site) and took it with him. Ms. Chalice showed Councilor Chadbourne a map of where the parcels are located in the city. Vice Chair Bettler stated that currently no one is leasing the Bent Court site and Parks & Recreation Director Andy Bohannon is looking for someone. He approached the Agriculture Commission to see if they had thoughts about potential uses for those properties. Discussion continued and the commission reviewed what they had discussed about this at the last meeting.

Mr. Daloz stated that regarding the fact that the Public Works Department has designated Bent Court as a future well site, which limits the agriculture practices allowed, he spoke with Donna Hanscom (Public Works Assistant Director) about fertilizers. He continued that she was not against fertilizer as long as it is well controlled, and said using lime is also a possibility. Councilor Chadbourne stated that it sounds like using it as pollinator habitat would be easier since they would not need to worry about having a bridge there. Mr. Daloz replied that you would still need access over the brook. He continued that Ms. Hanscom thinks that if the site was just going to be mowed, her department would get the access. Ms. Chalice replied that she thought that was under Parks & Rec. Mr. Daloz replied that Ms. Hanscom implied that Public Works would do it. He continued that they may be able to access the site through the back by the golf course. It seems like Ms. Hanscom would be almost willing to just let this site go. It would not be used for heavy cropping.

Ms. Wilton stated that the commission passed a motion to recommend putting this site out for a hay lease. Ms. Chalice replied yes, for this year. Vice Chair Bettler stated that Mr. Bohannon is looking for a new farmer that would be interested in that. That was decided because any other ideas the commission discussed would take longer and not be implemented this coming season. Ms. Wilton replied that the other ideas might take resources, too. Vice Chair Bettler replied that for pollination they would need money for seeds, and some kind of equipment. He continued that they could maybe rent a skidder bridge from the Conservation District for that purpose. Councilor Chadbourne wondered about buying the previous bridge from the farmer who was there. Mr. Daloz replied that it is not there anymore. Ms. Chalice added that moving it would be an issue and costly.

Ms. Chalice stated that she talked with Mr. Bohannon about what Ms. Littleton said about alternative ways of creating pollinator habitat with much cheaper seed. She continued that Mr. Bohannon wants to talk with Ms. Littleton about that and is working on connecting with her.

Ms. Chalice continued that she received the template for the Moose Plate grant application, as the commission had discussed when Ms. Littleton was here. She does not know when the next application deadline is; she will get more details and wait to hear from Mr. Bohannon about whether this is an acceptable option. Then she will see what the commission wants to do from there.

Mr. Daloz stated that Ms. Hanscom indicated a willingness to see what could happen at the Bent Court site. He continued that her interest is keeping the site as clean as possible without any contamination. His idea was to hay one site and pollinate another, and monitor them/research which works best, but that might be too much. Keeping it simple would mean seeding it with clover. The other two parcels do not have highly fertile land. Maybe a person who does haying could improve the land as their “rent.”

Ms. Chalice asked if the commission wants to visit those other parcels, although there is no rush. Vice Chair Bettler stated that there is a concern that if nothing is done it will be overgrown. He continued that Keene does not have many fields, and it would be good to keep this as a field even if it is just brush hogged. Ms. Chalice replied yes, the meadowlark population has decreased because Keene has so few meadows. More meadow habitat would help not just pollinators, but limited bird species, too.

Councilor Chadbourne asked if Mr. Bohannon is the one who determines if there is rent and what the rent would be. Ms. Chalice replied that he has been the manager of these parcels. Councilor Chadbourne asked if the commission could advise him on considering how they do business to provide a better incentive/make it more palatable for potential hay fields. Vice Chair Bettler replied that Mr. Bohannon approached the commission because he is open to suggestions. Mr. Daloz asked if the commission said it is better to have a use that offsets the City’s costs than to have rent. Ms. Wilton replied yes, last month’s minutes say the commission determined that income is a secondary consideration.

Mr. Daloz stated that besides the big, flat field/future well site that they are talking about, the parcel includes, on the other side of the stream, what used to be an old YMCA camp/ropes course. Parks & Rec oversees that site. It is right across the street from Keene High School (KHS) and it would be interesting to see if KHS students could clean it up, plant fruit trees, or use it for something else. Discussion ensued. Vice Chair Bettler suggested finding out if KHS’s horticulture teachers would be interested. Discussion continued about KHS’s horticulture teachers and classes.

Ms. Chalice asked if the commission wants her to pass this idea on to Mr. Bohannon for his input. Commission members replied yes. Vice Chair Bettler stated that he could email the horticulture teacher to get his input. Ms. Chalice asked him to preface the email by saying that they have not yet talked with the Parks & Recreation Director. Discussion continued about the benefits of KHS students’ involvement.

5) Continued: “New Considerations for Keene Agriculture Commission”

Mr. Daloz stated that he is relatively new to the commission but has many ideas. He continued that Keene has a lot of fields with some agricultural potential, and this used to be an agricultural town. He wonders if there is a way the commission can encourage reestablishing a better food production system. Keene has much land that is potentially good for crops, pastures, and orchards. Other cities are seeing agriculture as a priority. Keene’s role could be serving as the processing center of the valley, which could be much more productive, he thinks, of agricultural products. He was looking to see if the commission had put forth a vision. Where are they headed 30 to 50 years from now? What could they do, relative to agriculture in this region?

Mr. Daloz continued that he created a long list of various things that people have historically grown in Keene. Ms. Chalice asked him to give her the list so she can distribute it to everyone.

Mr. Daloz continued that he is just throwing these ideas out there and they are open to much comment. The project to grow hydroponic lettuce has fallen apart but he thinks the City has \$500,000 for that. Ms. Chalice replied that staff was looking into whether those funds could be used for something else. Councilor Chadbourne replied that the person who was going to do that project had to pay back the amount of the grant that he had already spent. She continued that the agreement was to pay the City for the timber that came from that approximately four acres. Ms. Chalice replied that she thinks it was six acres. Mr. Daloz stated that this man had told people he had a market for hydroponic lettuce all year round, so maybe there are other areas they could grow lettuce in that would utilize his market.

Ms. Wilton stated that regarding Mr. Daloz's ideas about the Agricultural Commission needing to promote agriculture in the community, they already do. For instance, they are trying to resolve issues with the farmer's market, and they did the initiative with community gardens. Bent Court is a new issue. She continued that the Agricultural Commission might be able to make a contribution to the Comprehensive Master Plan (CMP). They discovered recently that it does not mention food production or agriculture. Maybe they could capture some of the language from what Mr. Daloz has written and fold it into the CMP, and have food production be integrated into it.

Councilor Chadbourne stated that that is an excellent idea. She continued that the City talks about the CMP being a living document, not something that is set in stone. It can be tweaked and added to. The CMP's general sense is promoting local business and local food and this is the next step in making it more specific.

Ms. Chalice stated that the joint committee of the Planning, Licenses, and Development/Planning Board was just given a list/summary of all the initiatives laid out in the CMP and they are in process of prioritizing them and choosing the aspects they want implemented in the next five or so years. This did not have the opportunity to be part of their consideration. There may be something to be said for the commission communicating to the joint committee that they are interested in having these agricultural ideas be evaluated by them as well. Actually amending the CMP is a different process. The general opinion is the City would rather move forward on implementing than spend time on rewriting or updating the plan itself. Amending may be a more reasonable notion. Those are two avenues to pursue.

Councilor Chadbourne suggested they pursue both avenues. She continued that they would have to write and submit something for the next joint committee meeting. Ms. Chalice replied that that needs to happen very soon. She continued that she could draft a memorandum and give it to the commission for review. The memorandum would at least bring up the topic of agriculture but she does not know if it would change the joint committee's priorities. That might be the body, too, that could decide if this could be an amendment to the CMP.

Ms. Wilton replied that more than figuring out the logistics, they need to clearly define the vision here. Vice Chair Bettler replied that it could be general. Councilor Chadbourne replied yes, just to get it on their radar. Ms. Chalice replied that many recommendations are very general. Councilor Chadbourne stated that if they get this onto the agenda a commission member could come to the joint committee meeting to speak.

Mr. Daloz stated that Ms. Chalice has a document of the bullet points of the CMP that are relevant to the Agricultural Commission. Ms. Chalice replied that that was done by Antioch University New England (AUNE) students on behalf of the Cities for Climate Protection

Committee (CCP). Mr. Daloz replied that some of the recommendations have already been completed, but there are others on the list to look at. Ms. Chalice read the document out loud. She continued that these exist already and could be pursued by the commission at any time. Vice Chair Bettler stated that that was brought up at a quarterly meeting of the Monadnock Farm and Community Coalition (MFCC). Ms. Wilton replied yes, this is their vision, but they are not a governmental entity like the Agricultural Commission is. She continued that the commission can pick up the MFCC's goals, tweak them if they want, and have them applied. Ms. Chalice replied that she will send the document out again.

Mr. Daloz asked who on the MFCC can come speak with them. Ms. Wilton replied that the two groups are supposed to be integrated and attend each other's meetings. Mr. Daloz asked if someone from the MFCC can come speak with them like Ms. Littleton did. Ms. Chalice replied that she will find out. Vice Chair Bettler stated that Mark Florenz is involved with them. Ms. Chalice replied that she will invite someone for the next meeting. She asked what the commission wants from them. Ms. Wilton replied that she wants them to talk about the status of these goals. Ms. Chalice replied that these might not be their goals; these might be page numbers in the CMP. She will check. If these are the MFCC's goals, then yes, she can ask the MFCC to talk about them. Mr. Daloz replied that the commission also wants to know how they can help address the goals.

6) Agriculture Commission Table at Friends of Open Space Event in April

Vice Chair Bettler stated that at the last meeting, the commission accepted the Friends of Open Space's invitation to have a table at their April event. They need to think about what to have at the table.

Ms. Chalice stated that they could have a pad of paper so people can sign up to get more information about the commission, and something that tells the mission. She could make a tri-fold board available. She asked what the commission wants. Discussion ensued, and commission members suggested having basic information such as information about what the commission has been doing and talking about, the community garden projects, farmer's market, and the Bent Court site. Vice Chair Bettler asked people to bring more ideas to next month's meeting, since they still have time to figure this out. Ms. Chalice stated that she has a template of a tri-fold that she can send to someone if someone is interested in working on it, and they may be able to do it via Google Docs.

Vice Chair Bettler stated that they also have to decide who will be at the table. He continued that he is pretty sure he can go. Discussion ensued about possibly having food samples, which they can talk about next time.

Mr. Daloz asked about having meeting minutes available at the table. Discussion ensued and Councilor Chadbourne suggested instead having a half-page handout with bullets of highlights. Ms. Chalice replied yes, with contact information, meeting times, the mission, etc. She can draft that. Councilor Chadbourne replied that she suggests having bullets/highlights of the meetings.

7) New or Other Business

Ms. Chalice reported that at 5:00 PM tonight, at Stonewall Farm, AUNE is having their On The Farm event. She read the flyer out loud and distributed copies of it.

Mr. Daloz asked whether they need an agricultural inventory of Keene. Ms. Chalice replied that the City has a parcel map, which she will try and get a copy of. Discussion ensued. Mr. Daloz

stated that inventorying agricultural demand would be a second piece, and the third part is whether there is a library of these things. He continued that he got the Farm Needs Assessment of Cheshire County booklet from Ms. Littleton. Is there a way of establishing one of those and having it available?

8) Next Meeting – Thursday, March 17, 2016

9) Adjournment

Hearing no further business, Vice Chair Bettler adjourned the meeting at 4:26 PM.

Respectfully submitted by,
Britta Reida, Minute Taker