

Orange County Agricultural Preservation Board

Approved Meeting Summary: March 15th, 2023

Bonnie Davis Center

6:30 p.m.

Members Present: Compton, Fickle, Hooten, Hughes, McAdams, McKnight, McPherson, Myers, Saiers, Sykes, Taylor, Waggoner, Woods

Members Absent: None **Guests:** None

Staff: Jessica Perrin, Resource Conservation Coordinator, Soil and Water; Mike Ortosky, Community & Rural Development Agent, Extension, and Peter Sandbeck, Cultural Resources Coordinator, DEAPR

1. **Call to order:** Chair McKnight called the meeting to order at 6:31 p.m.
2. **Chair Comments/Introductions:** None
3. **Considerations of Additions to Agenda:** None
4. **Meeting Summary/Minutes:** Hughes moved to approve the meeting summary, seconded by McPherson; motion passed
5. **Items for Decision:** None
6. **Discussion Items:**
 - a) **Farmland Preservation Subcommittee presentation and update:** Saiers provided an overview of the progress and activities of the group. Members see a need for our updated Farmland Protection Plan to dovetail into the updating of the county's big comprehensive plan update process that is just getting started. Also, the data that Dana Hall is now updating for the PUV program will complement the data that we're already working on. Saiers then provided a brief update of the progress being made by the subcommittee, with some discussion about the growing sense of the importance of doing a new farm survey to get current data for this project and for our update of the Farmland Protection Plan. Ortosky reported on his conversation with Dr. Boys at NCSU about having them work with us on doing such a survey; there was definitely interest.
 - b) **Feedback from Annual Report Presentation to BOCC:** Saiers then related that her report was favorably received, with interest shown by various members. There was some discussion of the role of the Rural Buffer and whether or not that has worked as a farmland protection tool. There is a general perception that the buffer is an active tool for farmland preservation, when in fact it may be inadvertently driving a lot of large-lot subdivision development. Cost data might help demonstrate to the BOCC the value of farmland and the

cost of the loss of farmland. Perhaps we can utilize the data for the cost of providing community services for farmland versus residential development. It has been consistently shown that it costs the county more to provide services to residential uses than for farming, on the order of \$1.20 versus \$.75 for farmland. Numbers like this will have more meaning when we present our arguments to promote farmland preservation. Ortosky noted that there are ways to direct development to incorporate farmland preservation through the planning process. For example, allowing a large farm parcel to be developed with a cluster of housing confined to a small area, with the rest of the farm remaining in agriculture. Right now, it is much harder and more expensive to do a cluster development than it is to subdivide into 10 acre lots. We should focus on directing our attention to preserving the best or prime farmland, the flattest land that has the best soils.

- c) **Membership:** Staff reported that there were two vacancies at present: one at-large position, which is easy to fill, while the other is a district position, for the Schley-Eno district position. Members discussed current applications that had been submitted online. There was a consensus that the group would like to see applicants with demonstrated active background and experience in farming that is relevant to the work of the board. Compton suggested Blake Thompson who farms in the White Cross community and is an officer of the Farm Bureau. Waggoner moved to ask staff to generate some qualified applicants for consideration at the May meeting.

7. Informational Items/Future Agenda Items:

- a. **Staff report on VAD program:** There wasn't a lot to report on VAD program right now, due to demands on staff following the recent retirements of Kenny and Todd. Soil and Water has been working on a program to help close lagoons and waste ponds on farms that closed during covid, with 90 percent cost share funding available, with several of these now underway. Soil and Water received some STRAP (stream restoration/clearance) funding from the state, with three currently underway. The county is now participating in the Beaver Management Assistance Program, which gives OC residents access to a beaver management expert, who can trap beavers and do partial dam removal; Chris Hirni is managing that program. Two new staff members have been hired to fill the vacancies created by the retirements; Bradsher Wilkins and David Latta will start in April.
- b. **Ag Economic Development Update:** Ortosky provided a brief overview of current activities. Another round of ag grants will be funded starting July 1. There have been over 100 grants awarded since the start of the program. They are planning to make the video production to highlight the successes of the various farms that received funding from the program. At the Breeze Farm, the endowment that was left by the Breeze family is now going to start to kick in, to be transferred to the NC State Foundation. Interest of around 25-30k per year will go to the Breeze Farm, which is a huge help. The Ag Summit was a success with at least 125

attendees, with great keynotes and engaging sessions. It was rewarding to see the county planning staff in attendance.

- c. **Farmland Preservation in the Oaks Community:** Staff provided an update on the status of the efforts down in Oaks, in Bingham Township, to prevent a large farm there from turning into another subdivision, as it is prime farmland now in active cultivation. Community members have made positive contact with the property owner/seller, who now seems to be more interested in keeping the land in farming. The Triangle Land Conservancy and the Conservation Fund continue to work together to pursue a possible farmland/conservation easement project to keep the open land in farming. This also includes some stream buffers to benefit the water quality of nearby Cane Creek reservoir, so OWASA is interested as well. The stream that runs through this farm empties into Caterpillar Creek and the reservoir. Preserving this farm ties into a community effort to create a historic district to protect the historic farms and agricultural history there, along with the remains of the 18th century road and old mill site on the creek. This is an ongoing effort, with nothing yet certain, but the community is hopeful. Discussion followed. All agreed that the general trends in land values in the county are making it very difficult for full-time farmers to acquire land like this and use it for crop production, as prices move toward \$15k to \$20k per acre. And this trend is ruling out farming for the next generation of farmers. This is the sort of story that can help the BOCC understand the nature and scope of this challenge. Often, the simplest way to protect watershed land is to zone it for large lot subdivisions, which in fact is not an effecting water quality strategy in the long run.

8. Time for Information Sharing:

- a) **Annual Piedmont Livestock Show:** Compton reminded members to be sure to attend the upcoming livestock show being held on April 11-12, all are invited to support the 4-H kids, after having no show or a limited show for several years during covid.

9. **Adjournment:** Saiers moved to adjourn, seconded by McPherson. Meeting adjourned at 7:50 pm.