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Agricultural Advisory Board

DRAFT Minutes

Agricultural Advisory Board

November 11, 2021 7:00 PM CCACC (Chatham County Agriculture Conference Center) & Zoom
remote video

Called to order, 7:04 pm

Present: Tenita Solanto (Chair), Cathy Jones (Vice Chair), Ginger Cunningham (NCCES County Director), Sharon Day, Chris Hart, Doug Burleson, Ben Shields (Secretary), Brandy Oldham (CC Soil & Water Conservation District), Susannah Goldston (CC Soil & Water Conservation District), Jason Sullivan (CC Planning Director), Tyson Smith (White & Smith LLC), Sean Scoopmire (White & Smith LLC), Meg Nealon (Nealon Planning PLLC), Holly Miner (Tetra Tech), Bobby Tucker (Tetra Tech), Rachel Thorn, Craig Richardson (Clarion Associates), Ben Hitchings (Green Heron Planning)

Absent: Jim Crawford (BOC liaison), Jeanette Beranger, Jeff Vaughan, Caroline Siverson (Planning Board liaison)

1. Approval of Minutes

No changes were made to the September minutes. Ben motioned to approve the minutes; Chris seconded the motion. The motion passed unanimously.

2. Introduction of Guests

Jason Sullivan started the meeting by explaining how Chatham County is working to complete a Unified Development Ordinance with the assistance of White & Smith LLC, Planning and Law Group based in Charleston, SC. White & Smith is the lead consultant undertaking comprehensive revisions to zoning, subdivision and related land development codes.

Tyson Smith introduced himself, his firm White & Smith and his team of partners. Holly Miner is a Senior Planner and Bobby Tucker (former Ag Board member) is a Water Resource Engineer at Tetra Tech. Craig Richardson is the Director at Clarion Associates in Chapel Hill and will support code work. Ben Hitchings is the Principal at Green Heron Planning and Fellow at the UNC School of Government. Meg Nealon is the Principal at Nealon Planning and led the Plan Chatham project.

3. Unified Development Ordinance Focus Group

Mr. Smith shared a PowerPoint presentation on the UDO project, starting with a bit about the scope of the project. The scope will consist of 4 stages: Stage 1 will include focus group listening sessions and document review; Stage 2 will include assessments of the current code and drafting a blueprint; Stage 3 will include drafting cross referenced zoning, development and procedure codes; Stage 4 will include adoption of the drafted codes.

Mr. Smith explained UDO is a consolidated and organized set of land use codes. He explained how the project is slated to be completed in 2 years, which is brief but doable. Given that Plan Chatham is complete, the public outreach portion of the project is mostly done, which will help expedite the project timeline.

Mr. Richardson shared the website www.RecodeChathamNC.org, which will be the public interface for UDO project. The website includes project updates, documents and meeting announcements. Mr. Smith emphasized the News & Updates section of the website will be updated weekly so as to communicate project progress. He also shared how they expect to meet monthly with the Board of Commissioners and the County Attorney.

Mr. Smith shared the guiding principles for the UDO project, which include;

1. Compliance with NC Statutes and legal parameters
2. Implement Plan Chatham
3. Work with the Board of Commissioners
4. Consensus solutions where possible
5. Efficiency of Process

Mr. Smith emphasized how their goal is to create a durable code that will work for Chatham County in the long term.

Mr. Smith's audio went out here, so Mr. Scoopmire explained they now want to hear from us regarding our concerns of the future land use and regulations thereof. He referenced the memo forwarded to the Ag Board members the previous day with discussion prompts. Mr. Scoopmire said he would be recording the discussion in a bulleted document, shared on screen. Meg Nealon shared a bit about her work on Plan Chatham and hopes there can be compatibility between subdivisions and farms.

Sharon started the discussion by stating she is curious about Agricultural Zoning, and that folks are moving to rural parts of the county for open land and lifestyle. There are sometimes conflicts between home owners and farmers due to smells, sights, sounds and other perceived nuisances. Ben mentioned how domestic pets can also cause conflicts.

Ben then mentioned the economic tension between farmland and development in that farmers are asset rich but cash poor and land is often the largest investment they own, but the equity invested in it is unavailable until sold. Ben then mentioned how he would like to conservation of working land and prime agricultural soils by the clustering of houses in subdivisions.

Ginger shared how the Extension Service office is receiving more phone calls from new homeowners asking how to be good neighbors with farmers, particularly in the western section of CC. She also mentioned how farmers are also learning how to be good neighbors with these new home owners. Mr. Smith asked how might this be provisioned for with code.

Sharon mentioned how there is usually a slow decline of the agricultural support economy as land is sold for development.

Mr. Hitchens asked if small farm operations are more compatible with land use around clustered housing than large farm operations. Cathy suggested they are more compatible because they generally smell better and can be more picturesque. Susannah shared that more folks new to farming tend to start small operations and need protection, but large farms also need protection.

Mr. Tucker shared how he thinks the farm & development divide is usually scaled based and that nuisance lawsuits are common to confined livestock operations. He then asked how to fuse together agriculture supported development and small-scale agriculture. He then posited that development supported agriculture can be a way forward by tightly clustering housing within larger tracts of farmland. He suggests no more than 14 units per 60 acres, with about 10% of the land in roads, housing and such and the other 90% of land be set aside. Blue Heron Farm was given as a local example of such a subdivision. Education of homeowners was suggested as a means to reduce conflict with farms. Limits on types of land use was also suggested, such as limiting large livestock operations.

Mr. Tyson asked what sites are preferable for ag supported developments and would roadside be preferable. Mr. Tucker replied it is site specific, depending on site, slope, aspect and therefore cannot be generalized. Ben mentioned how the perception of open land may depend on what can be seen from roads. Mr. Tucker explained how setbacks can be beneficial by creating corridors for perennial food production along access roads.

Mr. Richardson shared how buffers are utilized in agricultural compatible code standards to mitigate nuisances. He cited Currituck County as requiring buffer zones between developments

and working farms. Ben asked who usually bears the burden of creating these buffers and Mr. Richardson replied the developers do.

Cathy mentioned how the Ag Board members were notified only 24 hours previous of this listening session and how we would have appreciated more notice. Cathy then said how she wondered why the discussion prompts included does the Ag Board have the tools and information it needs to execute its authorities. Mr. Smith then asked what our opinion of Voluntary Ag Districts and how they function. Ben said he thought it does not protect farmland strongly given the economic challenges faced by farmers and is mostly window dressing. Jason Sullivan shared that it does require the county to notify landowners who subdivide property within a certain distance.

The listening session ended with Mr. Smith sharing that the Board members can send further thoughts and concerns through Chance Mullis of the CC Planning Department. His email is chance.mullis@chathamcountync.gov. Mr. Smith shared that his firm will return in January or February to present their assessments and blueprint and seek feedback.

4. Discussion and Approval of New Board Member

Tenita shared the results of the online poll to vote for the new board member. Amy Fulford received 7 votes, Josh Beam 2 votes and the other folks no votes; therefore, Amy Fulford was approved as the a board member. Brandy or Susannah will notify the BOC clerk of the vote for approval and will also email Amy to invite her to our next meeting.

5. Voluntary Agricultural Districts update

Brandy shared a spreadsheet with all current eligible VAD applicants, consisting of 9 parcels at a total of approximately 843 acres. Cathy motioned to approve; Sharon seconded the motion. The motion passed unanimously.

Susannah shared the new state VAD rules require Soil & Water District to assess applications for parcels with highly erodible soil and that she is slowly working on these applications as time allows.

6. Ag Center RFP update & Cost of Services Study update

Ginger shared the feasibility study for Phase II of the Ag Center development is stalled as she is waiting for the Hunden Strategic Partners Inc. to complete some homework and she will have an update after Jan. 1, 2022.

Ginger also shared that the county finance office has extended the Farmland Preservation Plan RFP deadline to December 2nd with the expectation by the BOC approval in January.

7. Discussion of future guest speakers

Tenita asked if the board members would consider guest speakers at future meetings. Sharon suggested someone who could speak about utilizing microbes and fungi in plant production. Tradd Cotter of Magic Mountain Mushrooms of South Carolina was suggested as such a speaker for early 2022.

8. Growing Chatham newsletter update

Ginger shared how Cooperative Extension included the Cattle Proclamation in the summer edition of the Growing Chatham e-newsletter and that the county information officer also shared the Proclamation. Ginger urged the Ag board members to take advantage of the community partners section of the e-newsletter, particularly agricultural producers and farmer's markets. The deadline is the middle of the month before the month the e-newsletter is published. For example, the deadline for the December edition is November 15 and the deadline for the January edition is December 13th.

Ben asked if information about the VAD applications can be included soon, and Ginger said she will make sure a blurb will be included in the Growing Chatham December edition.

9. Next Meeting

The next meeting will be Tuesday, February 8th, 2022. Cathy motioned to approve; Ben seconded the motion. The motion passed unanimously.

Tenita motioned to adjourn; Cathy seconded the motion. The motion passed unanimously.

Meeting adjourned at 8:46.