

MEETING NOTES

Catawba County Farm & Food Sustainability Plan

Working Committee

September 20, 2012

COMMITTEE MEMBERS PRESENT:

Barbara Beatty, John Brzorad, Jeff Carpenter, Jeff Elmore, Kristie Gilbert, Clarence Hood, Nathan Huret, Tom Kenney, Al King, Jeremy Lee, Fred Miller and Danny Montgomery

STAFF PRESENT:

Mary George, Planning, Parks, and Development, Tom Lundy and Haley Kadish, County Managers Office

OTHERS PRESENT:

Erin Seiling, Lenoir-Rhyne University and Chris Bartleson, interested citizen

REVISED POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Mary George welcomed everyone in attendance. She focused the Committee on the revised Policy/Regulation Recommendations which were highlighted in their agenda packet. Outstanding from the last meeting was a discussion regarding the establishment of a mitigation fund to purchase easements or other farmland protection measures. She presented a map of the Land Suitability Classes as suggested by Committee member Montgomery. In reviewing the map, it was noted that the land suitability classes 2 & 3 did not provide any differentiation of key agricultural land than the prime farmland map presented at the Committee's August meeting. Mary also informed the Committee that staff met with Economic Development Commission staff, Scott Millar and Committee member Huran, along with Clarence Hood to discuss this recommendation. From the EDC perspective, Nathan indicated that it could put the County at a disadvantage when working with potential industries looking to locate here. Clarence also commented that the farmers who owned land in the prime farmland designation would be put at a disadvantage for selling since there would be more requirements placed on their land. Based upon these concerns, both EDC and Clarence suggested that the recommendations referencing a mitigation fund be deleted. The Committee agreed.

Clarence suggested that more incentives be added to keep land in agriculture, rather than penalties. He presented an idea of allowing a tax rebate for those farmers enrolled in the enhanced Voluntary Agricultural District program, similar to what has been done for new industries. He noted that the Cost of Community Services study could provide justification for treating agricultural land differently based upon their impact for services. After discussion, Fred suggested that a simpler approach would be to have the Board of Commissioners dedicate a source of funding to support agricultural programs/easements for those farmers in the enhanced program. It was agreed to add this recommendation to the Policy/Regulation Recommendations.

The Committee then discussed the Action Item under Strategy #5 which encourages the School Board to incorporate agricultural education into the schools' programs. It was noted that now would be a good opportunity to educate the new Superintendents on what is being done to promote agricultural education, including the Farm & Food Plan. This could be incorporated into a monthly meeting that the County Manager has with the Superintendents. Also it was suggested that a dedicated grant writer be incorporated at the School Administration office. This position could research and write grants for greenhouses, FFA programs and other agricultural education opportunities.

DRAFT PROJECT RECOMMENDATIONS

Mary began reviewing the draft Project Recommendations with the Committee. Under the first Strategy's Action Item- "Develop or facilitate the necessary infrastructure to assist in production, processing..." Jeff informed the Committee that the Foothills Agricultural Study has been broadened to include Catawba County. A survey is being distributed to farmers in the County along with information at the farmers markets. This will help gauge interest of the County's farmers in a regional aggregation center to help market their product.

Regarding fruit and vegetable production it was noted that freeze-dried foods have risen in popularity and this may be another viable market product for a commercial kitchen. Mary Informed the Committee of an innovative proposal being considered for an award by the Chamber of Commerce's Edison Project. Barbara Gilbert has proposed the development of a commercial kitchen in the County which could be available to caterers, farmers and other people wanting to produce value-added products. The Committee agreed to have a letter of support sent to Mrs. Gilbert for her proposal.

Under Strategy #2, "Evaluate the use of County facilities to expand fruit and vegetable production," it was noted that the school's FFA teachers need GAP certification to ensure that the product being served at the schools' cafeterias meets USDA requirements. Also, the

Committee suggested that conversations be initiated with CVCC's President regarding the opportunity for agricultural courses, GAP training, etc. to be conducted at the College. The Committee also wanted to add an "organic farming" component to those explored at the County's Eco-Complex.

Mary asked if the Committee had any other changes or suggestions to be included in the draft Projects section. Clarence indicated that he had concerns about the Plan incorporating sufficient recommendations for commodity farmers since they are the main economic entity in the County. He noted that the competition for land was a large concern for commodity farmers and wanted to see if this could be addressed through some type of clearinghouse for those willing to rent land. It was agreed that additional outreach be conducted to the commodity farmers through a set series of questions asked by members of the Committee. Clarence, Jeff Elmore, Barbara and Al agreed to work on this with staff. The input received will be reported back at the Committee's next meeting in October.

There being no other business, the Committee adjourned.

Respectfully submitted,

Mary George, Project Manager