

MEETING SUMMARY

PDR Oversight Committee

February 26, 2010, 8:00 AM

Planning and Development Services – Northwest Annex Office

Voting members present: Veronica Wisniewski, Allison Aurand, John Gillies, Paul Schissler, Mark Harting, Barbara Dykes; Others: Larry Helm (Ag Advisory Committee), Ann Russell (Kulshan CLT); County PDS Staff: Samya Lutz, Dean Martin

1. Public Comments/Announcements/Agenda Review: Those present spent some time discussing the Tuesday County Council meetings, at which one member voiced a lack of support for the PDR program. Discussion continued about whether the questioning came from there being too little in the way of PDR program accomplishments (the numbers are not impressive), philosophical differences in priorities (protecting one resource as the expense of others), or the way the issues are structured (focus on ag as economic development might be effective). The group went on to discuss what ‘success’ would mean: large waiting list; strategic, prime ag land protected; valuation that makes sense based on resource values that are important to this county (not necessarily market values); a clear case built on the economics (from both Cost of Community Services perspective & overall ag industry value).
2. Review of Minutes: The February 5, 2010 meeting minutes were reviewed and approved.

3. Business Rules:

The group discussed the draft revision of the Business Rules. Additional changes were proposed:

Barbara made a motion to make the following change under the ‘Meetings’ heading (Mark second):

The ~~regular~~ meeting place will be ~~at the office of Whatcom County Planning and Development Services, 5280 Northwest Drive. A regular meeting that falls on a legal holiday is ordinarily held on the next business day~~ published 10 days in advance.

Motion passed unanimously.

Under the ‘Attendance’ heading, add the following sentence at the end of the paragraph

An absence is unexcused when a committee member does not contact the Chairperson, Vice-Chairperson, or staff in advance.

Allison made a motion to pass the draft revisions in the text, along with the two additional changes proposed (John second). Passed unanimously.

4. PDR Applications & Ranking

Those present discussed the overall approach to the ranking this year, including asking for a resolution from Council which is typically done by the end of March. The timing this year is a bit different, with the USDA application deadline having been moved up to January, and only one application submitted at that time. We would like to have a rolling deadline, allowing other farmer applicants to be able to come in and move through the program as they are ready. The issues of program restructuring and outreach also play into the approach to Council. Should the Program Guidelines be revised and brought forward at the same time as the ranking? Should a separate presentation be given to Council explaining the overall PDR program and its context? Veronica suggested that the background presentation be brought forward at the same time as the Jensen ranking & purchase approval, and later on the committee come back to Council with the Guidelines revisions. Allison suggested the background presentation be brought forward with the Program Guidelines revisions at one meeting, and later the Jensen application be brought before Council. It is primarily a question of timing and how quickly the recommendations for changes to the Guidelines can be completed. The Jensen property will likely be ready to close by July. Can we be ready to move forward to Council with program revisions by May?

The committee looked at the Jensen ranking, in comparison to John & Diane VanderVeen's revised property. Larry asked if there were any considerations regarding economic viability of the operation in our ranking process. Allison talked about Skagit having a 'giveaway' question asking if the farm has 'gross receipts of \$30,000 or more' which received 10 pts. Mark thought it is not the committee's responsibility to be judging profitability. Samya presented the draft ranking to the committee. John talked about the diversified soil types present on the property. **Mark made a motion to accept the ranking on the Jensen farm, and move the process forward (Allison second). Passed unanimously.**

5. PDR Program Discussion

The group discussed some of the things that have been looked into and/or tried in the past. John talked about approaching Maberry and Bajema; having to fight to keep staff assigned to the program, and a lack of support from the farming community even after Farm Friends was so involved in the inception of the program. The issue comes back to marketing, selling the program, and contacting individuals. There is also very little certainty in the process from the farmers perspective. It would be good if the program were able to jump on quick sale opportunities in order to capture the development rights & resell the land with easement restrictions. Some examples were discussed about farmers using their right to develop as leverage with Ecology and other regulatory agencies. Farmers also just want to keep all their options open. Mark felt it's difficult to market until we change what we're offering. John talked about who the current program does work for – past & current applicants. Many farmers are in a reactive state now, with the economic situation and lack of organized, unified voice, and also the uncertainty with regard to water.

Mark made a motion to have a subcommittee form to come up with a proposal for an alternative program/valuation/funding structure (Barbara second). Veronica talked about the benefit of having a specific proposal for the committee to sink its teeth into that looks at how the funding comes in and out of the program. Mark, Allison, and Paul volunteered to be on the subcommittee, with staff assistance. **Passed unanimously.**

Barbara and Allison talked a bit more about the Whatcom Farms for the Future proposal (see handout from Feb 5), where there was a measurable goal laid out of 10,000 acres by 2020. It is ambitious – is it doable? Yes, if... there is support from elected leadership, key areas are targeted and domino effect takes hold (neighbors talking to neighbors). The point, however is not to retire all the development rights, but to secure a viable base of farmland. Samya will recirculate the handout by email.

6. Other Discussion

The Farm Friends annual meeting will be held later this afternoon in Lynden at the Rotary building. John offered to speak on behalf of the committee, and field questions/comments if there is an opportunity to do so. Other committee members felt comfortable with John doing this.

7. Next committee meeting: The committee will meet again to conduct regular business on Friday, March 19th, 8:30 AM, at the Smith & Northwest Planning & Development Services office.

Motion to adjourn – Passed.

Signed, Veronica Wisniewski, Chair PDR Oversight Committee