

AGRICULTURE, PLANNING, TOURISM & COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT
COMMITTEE MEETING MINUTES – APRIL 25, 2023

AGRICULTURE, PLANNING, TOURISM & COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE MEMBERS

PRESENT: Griffith, Campbell, Hicks, O'Brien, Shaw, Skellie, Ferguson

AGRICULTURE, PLANNING, TOURISM & COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE MEMBERS

ABSENT: None.

SUPERVISORS: Henke, Hall, Hogan, Clary

Debra Prehoda, Clerk of the Board

Melissa Fitch, County Administrator

Roger Wickes, County Attorney

Al Nolette, County Treasurer

AGENDA AS PRESENTED IN COMMITTEE NOTICE:

- 1) Call to Order
- 2) Accept Minutes – March 21, 2023
- 3) Agricultural Stewardship Association
 - a) ASA's New Land Conservation Plan
 - b) Update on State PDR Program and Pre-Application Review
- 4) Tourism Updates
- 5) Planning Updates
- 6) Other Business
- 7) Adjournment

Chairman Griffith called the meeting to order at 1:00 P.M. in the second floor classroom, Room B214, Municipal Center, Fort Edward.

A motion to accept the minutes of the March 21, 2023 meeting was moved by Mr. Ferguson, seconded by Mr. Skellie, and adopted.

AGRICULTURAL STEWARDSHIP ASSOCIATION (ASA): Chris Krahling, Senior Project Manager, addressed the following items:

- ASA's New Land Conservation Plan – During the last year they have been updating their land conservation plan for the organization. Hired a consultant that helped coordinate some stakeholders' meetings with the various partner organizations, entities, offices, as well as some private landowners. One thing that they wanted to do with this plan in addition to farmland protection was to put additional focus on some community conservation as well as some private resiliency aspects to the plan. When they revised the plan they were looking at this plan as being an eight-year plan instead of a five-year plan to get them to the year 2030, this is an eight-year plan from 2022 to 2030. In this plan they scored and ranked individual parcels in Washington and Rensselaer counties for ag parcels as well as forestry parcels. The goals that they have set for themselves from the land conservation standpoint for the next eight years is to conserve 12,000 acres of farmland in the two counties with 2,500 acres of working forest and an additional 500 acres of community lands. Some of the funding they anticipate coming available is some funding for working forest, still great support from the State for farmland protection and think the acreage amounts are certainly well within reach of 50,000 acres in the next eight-years. They have been averaging about 2,000 acres per year in the two counties. The plan was adopted by the ASA Board this winter and now working on designing the plan. Once it is final, it will be made available to the public and on their website.
- Update on State PDR Program and Pre-Application Review – The State program opens up every two years and ASA accepted pre-applications for any interested landowner to fill out the paperwork and tell them about their farm operation and the property and then they sit down with the selection committee and rank those pre-applications so they are ready when the State funding

opens up. This year they had 19 pre-applications in Washington County. Reviewed the 19 pre-applications and identified the top six and getting ready for them to go when the PDR funding opens up, which should be any day now. Shortly, he will be looking for letters of support for applications.

Laura Oswald, Economic Development Director, addressed the following items:

- TOURISM UPDATES:

- A fair amount of money was put in the tourism budget to continue to add more portfolio videography and photography. Winter did not cooperate for making a winter themed video and will pursue that next year. The history and antiques videos are just in the process of being finished and now working on planning to do a video focused on short-term rentals and overnight stay opportunities in the county and another video on golf courses across the County. They are looking at a way to combine all the various trails in the County to create something along the lines of a Sportsman's Trail which would combine hunting, fishing and other outdoor activities to be promoted as a group. Adding to the you pick and grown in Washington County video. All of these videos mentioned are in progress. Have contacted the committee working on the 250th anniversary in relation to the history video. Wanted to make the committee aware and has previously mentioned a significant solar eclipse happening in April 2024. Hotel rooms in the Rochester, NY area are already all booked. It is expected that visitation is going to impact our area because we are in about the 97% area of the eclipse and how can we capitalize on that event. Events generate the most interest on social media and some events are having some issues such as the cheese trail and artisans trail are faltering right now so are looking at perhaps contracting with an events planner to kind of help us to work with the existing groups across the County and figure out how we cannot take things over for them but support them in their efforts so whatever is causing them to falter in terms of planning and resources maybe we can help with. Notices were sent out about an open house at the visitor center in Schuylerville on Thursday from 3 P.M. The Capital Saratoga Region, which includes Washington County, applied for a federal EDA grant/New York Tourism grant and were recently notified that they were awarded \$750,000. This is pretty significant funding that will focus on the outdoor experience, the international traveler, and business travelers and will do things like put signage up at the airport that is intended to focus on highlights of the various counties in the Capital Saratoga region, and focus on meetings and conventions that are targeted at the green economy. Contract with the Lake George Steamboat Company for our rack card fulfillment and added areas on the eastern Vermont side, Fair Haven, and Bennington, to our rack card distribution.
- Occupancy Tax Reserve – The Treasurer stated the County has an occupancy tax reserve that was established by the Board but the framework of how it's funded was not developed. He would like some input from the Board on what constitutes the amount that should go into that fund. We have occupancy tax money that comes in which has increased from \$12,000 to \$122,000 last year, and how should it be applied. Asked if you want to continue funding tourism out of the General Fund or use occupancy tax money. The Budget Officer stated the Economic Development Director was working towards an amount in the occupancy tax fund that would support funding tourism. The Economic Development Director stated at budget time that about \$100,000 of the tourism budget would come from the occupancy tax collections to the tourism budget. He would like to memorialize how this money is used. Information will be gathered for discussion at next month's meeting.

- **PLANNING UPDATES:**

- The Department of State held a municipal training here on April 20th with over 40 attendees from local municipalities noting that neighboring municipalities were invited to attend this training and it was well attended. Congratulations to the Planner for this successful event. May try to schedule another training this year.
- Continuing their in person visits to town planning boards and have completed five. Let them know of any particular issues that any of the planning boards are having that you would like some input on. They send out invitations periodically to the different towns.
- On an annual basis, the Adirondack Glens Falls Transportation Council puts out a call for projects that basically goes into an annual work plan and there were several communities in the County that have benefited from this between last year and this year: town and village of Fort Ann relating to improvements in the village near the Empire State trail, village of Fort Edward trail extension feasibility study at Old Fort Edward Village and village of Argyle pedestrian improvement plan, town and village of Greenwich a pedestrian and bike plan and village of Cambridge Route 313 and pedestrian study. These are all planning projects. Be aware on an annual basis the Adirondack Glens Falls Transportation Council contacts all of our towns so if you have projects or are curious as to whether some project would be eligible, let her know.

OTHER BUSINESS:

Broadband/Cell Coverage – The Economic Development Director provided an update on broadband/cell coverage. The RFP to get fiber connections to approximately 900 addresses is out and due at the end of May. They are getting questions and inquiries from the major providers so hoping that we can get going with something within our budgets to reasonably fund. Expecting to get proposals. The 700 or so addresses that were identified as best suited for a fixed wireless solution are most suitable for the \$1M USDA funding which has specific rules and regulations. Came up with a concept for use of the USDA funding. When the USDA provides grant funding, they require a lien on the asset and if the provider purchases the asset and owns it, the lien devolves on the provider. That causes problems with the providers who are trying to finance other endeavors because it ends up as a first position lien and it causes them borrowing problems. She has been unable to get any providers to agree to those terms that the USDA is requiring. The proposed way to address this lien is the county would purchase and take title to the equipment, the lien would then be held by the County. This project could take approximately two years so the lien against the County would be applied for the duration of the grant period. The equipment will depreciate annually so at the end of the lien period the equipment would have depreciated to a low to zero value and the lien comes off the County and the equipment would get transferred to the provider. For the duration of the time that the County holds the lien, the County would have an operating agreement with the provider that they would have to install, own, operate, fix the network. Would the county be willing to be the lien holder in order to access the \$1M USDA funding? The County Attorney stated the government would be the lien holder and the County is the equipment holder, own the asset. The County Treasurer stated this would not impact the County going out to borrow. The Treasurer also mentioned he has presented an idea to Public Safety/Planning the possibility of using this funding for a tower. USDA funding is specific for terrestrial based internet connections. The option of using the funding for development or improvement to a tower would need to result in fixed wireless connections, cannot build a tower specifically for cell phone carriers.

A cell phone study was commissioned in 2015 that involved putting equipment on the back of a vehicle then driving up and down all the road to actually measure what sorts of cell phone signals are being generated in specific areas. Right after this study, the New York State Broadband for All Program came out and the focus of the funding was to broadband internet connections so there has been little funding for expanding cell phone coverage. In 2021, the FCC updated their cell phone coverage maps but they are still not completely accurate. The Economic Development Director stated that Beth Gillis, Regional Planning Board, had previously conceived the idea of using the Regional Planning Board to look for funding for a study to measure and look at cell coverage inadequacies across the region. Beth Gillis, Regional Planning Board, addressed the committee. She stated last week the Lake Champlain Lake George Regional Planning Board applied for \$500,000 to measure cell coverage in the five county area that they cover. Last year updated Hamilton, Essex and Clinton and will be updating Washington and Warren counties. The main part of the project is to utilize the coverage data to reverse engineer and where macro towers would be most efficient. Due to the terrain and not having cell phone coverage in areas there is a technology called small cell cellular technology that is basically a cell boosting box that goes on a light pole and works for about a quarter to a half mile and utilize those to get continuous coverage across major travel corridors. Applied for \$1.5M in congressional funding on behalf of Hamilton County to test this technology on two roads and will also be doing planning and engineering for the five counties to see where it would be best suited to engineer. There is a lot of planning and engineering that needs to be done to be able to utilize this technology. The Economic Development Director stated there are more than 30 cell towers across the County and need to evaluate existing cell towers and what equipment is on what towers. If this funding is awarded, it helps look at cellular availability. The Economic Development Director stated the fact that there is a cell phone coverage problem in the County is something that we have been aware of for a long time but the available funding that we have worked hard to get was solely directed at broadband and terrestrial based connections. She stated there is a difference between a municipally owned Public Safety tower and a commercially owned tower so in terms of what we might be able to do with the USDA funding that might enhance, improve and or partnership build the tower that is a potential use so long as it results in terrestrial based internet connections. That could possibly be taking care of two concerns simultaneously and the fact that we are improving or building a cell tower and it also gives us additional cell service. Mr. Campbell stated discussion on a tower would need to include the Public Safety Committee. The Economic Development Director needs general consensus that in terms of continuing discussions regarding the USDA funding that the understanding is that if the County was to use the USDA funding the County would own the equipment, the USDA would then put a lien on and then we would ultimately transfer to the owner operator of the internet, fixed wireless provider. Chairman Griffith stated go ahead and the committee members concurred.

The meeting adjourned at 1:59 P.M.

Debra Prehoda, Clerk
Washington County Board of Supervisors