

MINUTES
PENINSULA AND AREA AGRICULTURAL COMMISSION
Held at Saanich Municipal Hall, Committee Room 2 and via MsTeams
Thursday, May 9, 2024, 7:00 p.m.

Present: Chair Robin Tunnicliffe; Linda Geggie; Katie Underwood; Dianne Williamson; Councillor De Vries, Saanich, and Isobel Hoffmann, Recording Secretary.

Guests: Megan Halstead, Regional Agrologist (7:50 pm); Cassidy Daskalchuck, Saanich Planning; Mike Doehnel; Shellie MacDonald, Haliburton Farms; Kathleen Zimmerman, Amalia Schelhorn.

Regrets: Anita Bull, Terry Michell, Jenni Michell, Larry Sluggett, Councillors Paltiel (Central Saanich) and Marshall (North Saanich).

APPROVAL OF MINUTES

MOVED by Dianne Williamson and Seconded by Linda Geggie: “That the Minutes of April 11, 2024 be adopted as circulated.”

CARRIED

CHAIR'S REMARKS (the full report is attached to and forms part of these minutes)

- Regarding land access issues:
- The Chair stated she had heard of circumstances where farmers lease one or more properties, and the relationship with the landowner can be tenuous with leases often on a year to year basis.
- This prevents the farmer from investing in the property and their business as they don't want to build new infrastructure when there is no guarantee of a longer term lease.
- The landowners get the tax break, or their lawns 'mowed' by sheep, and yet sometimes violate the agreement by inviting other parties to “share the lease” after it has been signed.
- In all these cases, the tenant farmers have been unable to advocate for themselves.
- This particularly affects young agrarians who don't have the means to purchase land.
- In these circumstances, we can see that there is a real food security threat. We have a system that doesn't honour farmers and what they need to operate viable businesses.
- We have hobby farmers, estate farmers and genuine farmers and the rules need to be clear as to what constitutes a *bona fide* farmer. For example: the minimum sales threshold to get a tax break and fair rules for tenant farmers.

- On another note, she hosted Jennifer Pfenning, the President of the National Farmers' Union (NFU) last week. Jennifer has a 700 acre organic farm in Ontario and was here to see about ways that the NFU can engage with the South Island. Her farm is looking into more direct marketing strategies because they are continuing to get price-squeezed by the larger grocery chains that they have supplied for decades.
- She thought that there were lots of opportunities for cross-regional learning. The NFU does a lot of advocacy work for Canadian agriculture at the federal and international level.

TREASURER'S REPORT – not present

COUNCIL REPRESENTATIVE REMARKS

Saanich Councillor Zac De Vries stated on Monday, May 13, Saanich Council will be discussing the new provincial legislative requirements for small-scale multi-unit housing outside the Urban Containment Boundary.

The Planner stated:

- In order to comply with Small Scale Multi-Unit Housing legislation (SSMUH), staff recommend permitting one secondary suite on lots outside the UCB. Permitting secondary suites on properties subject to SSMUH outside the UCB reinforces District of Saanich's growth management and land use policy and serves to present a consistent regulatory environment throughout rural Saanich.
- The UCB protects the District's rural and farm land by regulating residential development and supporting agricultural structures and single detached dwellings as the primary building forms.
- Objectives in the District of Saanich's Agriculture and Food Security Plan encourages protection of agricultural land for current and future generations by limiting urban growth in rural areas.

SPEAKER'S BUREAU: No speakers scheduled

CORRESPONDENCE: None

AGRICULTURAL ISSUES: NEW

(a) Dumping of Fill on Farmland

A recent article in the Vancouver Sun shed light on the amount of fill being dumped on farmland. <https://vancouversun.com/news/local-news/bc-farmland-illegal-dumping>

The Chair stated;

- Further to discussions at the April meeting, she has continued to research municipal regulations for dumping of fill on farmland.
- Aerial photos show portions of farmland that over the past 8 years are now covered in gravel and used as a parking lot.
- With the current rate of development and the province's housing expansion programs, the volume of fill to dispose of will continue to increase; this is becoming a very serious concern.
- Perhaps a workshop to review the issue, inviting municipal planners and bylaw staff to participate in finding solutions. Staff from the ALC could be invited as well.
- Apparently most of the bylaw enforcement issues relate to illegal dumping of fill.
- The extent of the dumping on the Island and the lower Mainland is not understood; we need to have visuals, and develop some best practices and clear guidelines.

Discussion ensued noting the following:

- Cassidy stated she would be interested in such a workshop and offered to speak to Saanich staff.
- The Regional Agrologist offered to look into Provincial funding opportunities.
- The situation is different if the soil is tested beforehand and found acceptable.
- It seems the only time bylaw officers act is on a complaint basis and then it's too late. There is no clear mechanism for enforcement and no mention of testing soil in the bylaws.

- Regarding a proposed workshop, there are municipalities who are not PAAC members that may be interested.
- November was suggested as a good time to host a workshop – a non-busy time for farmers. This will also provide 6 months of lead time to organize.
- Illegal deposit of fill is not the only issue affecting farmland: it is the constant non-farm use of properties for RV and heavy vehicle storage, parking, etc.
- Each municipality has its own rules – is this a best practice?
- Firbank Poultry Farm is trying to build a new manure shed with a cement floor and is being faced with numerous municipal roadblocks over and above the normal farm building codes that add to the cost, such as installing a venting system.
- Noted that Farmers' Institutes need to keep their accreditation current; perhaps they would be interested in taking the lead for the workshop.

CARRY for further discussion

(b) CRA Lifetime Capital Exemption for Farmers (Larry Sluggett) - not present

(c) Cougars in Metchosin

- The Chair stated that 35 sheep have been lost in Metchosin so far this year due to cougars. Last year, 61 sheep were killed.
- Barns or electric fences are not a solution as the cougars can still get to the sheep.
- Dogs are no protection either.
- If something doesn't change we will lose our large sheep farms.
- She will prepare a report on the issue to keep PAAC updated.

(d) Climate Action Survey Results – Bob Maxwell not present

- Copies of the survey results were distributed to PAAC for information.

AGRICULTURAL ISSUES: CURRENT

a) Water Update: Mike Doehnel

- A draft report on the farm water rate will be presented to the Chair of the Water Advisory Commission for discussion and then sent to the Regional Water Supply Commission.
- Most members advocate for no change to the current rate.
- The unanswered letter that PAAC sent almost two years ago to the Regional Water Supply Commission regarding differences in municipal water rates is now part of the package.
- There has been discussion about increasing organic food waste recycling and composting; this is a low-cost but beneficial option resulting in a useful resource, but is there an appetite to push the CRD to get at least 50% of the food waste put in the green bins to actually stay on the Island rather than shipping it to the mainland?
- Farmers know the benefits of organic matter, in particular for water retention, but no-one is stepping up to the plate to make this happen.
- Many items should not be going to the Hartland landfill. This is a serious business, especially as more people are moving to the Island, houses are being demolished to make way for new construction and all the old materials go to the dump.
- Starting a food recycling programme is an easy step.

Councillor De Vries stated:

- Only 10% of the plastics collected get recycled.
- The life of the dump is why the focus is on wet waste; bio-solids are stored at the dump and probably should not be.

- Metro Vancouver has a programme for bio-solids. The CRD Board can't decide on a long-term plan for our bio-solids.
 - Discussion noted that farmers are desperate for organic matter, which is a ready source of nutrients. Our live stock numbers are dwindling and this also reduces the manure sources. Something needs to be done.
- b) **South Island Farmers' Institute Update** – Katie Underwood & Shellie MacDonald
- SIFI held it's final sustainers meeting with Mike Hughes from Kildara Farms. He provided a history of the farm, noting challenges and successes.
 - Peter Alexander from BCAA spoke about how to complete forms to qualify for lower tax rates. He noted that BCAA cannot make changes to the threshold amount – this has to be approved by the Ministry of Finance.
 - Funding was received from the Ministry of Agriculture and Foods which means SIFI's programs are now fully funded again, including Farmer2Farmer events and Haliburton Farm.
 - An innovators' series is planned for the summer, with more social and networking events. Child care will be provided at the summer sessions so parents can attend workshops.
 - Noted that the Ministry's funding application process was difficult, and it was a tight turnaround to complete the final report within 12 days.
 - Very few people from the South Island attended the recent Island Agriculture Show.
- c) **CRD Foodlands Access Program** – Noah Brotman - not present
- d) **CRD Goose Management Strategy** (*Report not received in time for meeting*)
- A report was received after the meeting from Samantha Hammond at the CRD and circulated to PAAC members.
 - The Secretary advised Samantha of future meeting dates.

OTHER BUSINESS

- a) **Vancouver Island AgriService Newsletter – Meghan Halstead**
- Link to sign up for the newsletter – published quarterly:
 - New link: <https://confirmsubscription.com/h/y/EF5CA661750438AD>
 - Workshops are being proposed by Megan and Ministry staff regarding compensation to farmers from wildlife killing livestock.
 - A list of Island agriculture events was circulated to PAAC and most have already occurred, including a Small Scale Pig Production workshop and BC Hazelnut Growers Association island Field Day.
 - On June 2nd an Inter-Island Sheep Breeders workshop will be held in Coombs. To register: lisapresident@gmail.com
 - A food traceability programme was launched on May 9th – a great opportunity for funding. Traceability Adoption Program – Investment Agriculture Foundation of BC (iafcc.ca). More information can be found at BC Traceability Funding Programmes, Province of BC (gov.bc.ca).
- b) **Governance Review Update**
- The secretary reached out to Central Saanich to ascertain if there has been any progress on the Review as no updates have been received. They advised they were waiting for a response from Saanich. The issue is scheduled for the May 13 Saanich Council meeting. An April 24, 2024 Report to Council available at www.saanich.ca.

- Saanich does not have staff time to assist with the review but when recommendations are received from Central Saanich, they will be considered by Council.
- PAAC noted that it has been 8 months and it seems no progress has been made, and we are still short on members. Tonight we only just made a quorum. June is the last meeting before the summer break. The secretary was asked to write to Central Saanich and ask for an update for that meeting.

LATE ITEM – Proposed Co-op Housing Venture

Amalia Schelhorn, Saanich Organics, had asked to attend the meeting to discuss the idea of starting a farm co-op and growing food regeneratively, and was looking for advice.

- A house currently for sale in the Mount Newton Valley would be a perfect opportunity to provide housing, revenue and build a multi-generational community of mutual support, addressing the housing shortage by creating an opportunity for people to live together rather than building new homes.
- There is also potential on this site to grow much more food than is currently being done; as well the site could be a venue for weddings, workshops or retreats.
- This would be innovative way for people to have land ownership and build capital.
- She was unsure of the regulations but based on the changes being made to building homes on ALR lands, she wondered if another home of 900 sq.ft could be built on the property.
- Does PAAC think this is something that could explored?
- The current owners of the house are anxious to sell and may be interested in the proposal.

PAAC discussion note:

- Consultation with a bank regarding an ownership model would be necessary. Van City was suggested.
- Important to get a good understanding of the rules and regulations for a co-operative structured business.
- Brandy Gallagher from Eco Village or the Young Agrarians were suggested as resources.
- With the current political climate on creative housing solutions, this seems like a golden opportunity.
- The property and the home are large enough to support four or five businesses.
- Unfortunately, there are many “estate farms” where people like the idea of living on a farm but don't actually want to farm. On the other hand, serious farmers do not have the money to buy agricultural land.

On another matter, Amalia stated she was interested in the **Farmer Survey on Climate Change** that was prepared by Bob Maxwell and she wondered if he would be interested in doing an interview.

- The Belfry Theatre sponsors a Verbatim Society where interviews are conducted and writers turn this into a script, which is then shown as a play.
- Bob wasn't at the meeting but the secretary will provide Amalia with his contact information.

Upcoming Events / Webinars

- Saanich Fair – August 31 – September 2, 2024

ADJOURNMENT

The meeting adjourned at 8:55 p.m.

NEXT MEETING

The next meeting is scheduled for Thursday, June 13, 2024 in Committee Room #2 at the Saanich Municipal Hall.

Robin Tunnicliffe, Chair

I hereby certify these minutes are accurate.

Isobel Hoffmann, Senior Committee Secretary

Full Report from the Chair – May 2024

First off I'd like to commend Isobel on another great PAAC report. It was nicely tied together, and the layout was attractive and really readable. I hope that next year we can make things easier for her with more timely submissions. I have had lots of great feedback on it (since my name is on it, people think I did it :->) Thanks again Isobel.

In the past month I've been having more conversations with other farmers and a few anecdotes have got me thinking about access to land issues in our community. The first one is from a prominent sheep farmer in Metchosin. We've been helping him with his succession plan, and we were interested to learn that he has leases for almost 200 properties in Metchosin and the Highlands for his sheep and hay business. Not a single one of them is longer than a year, and they are comprised of a handshake deal. How do you value a business like this? John was very reluctant when we suggested that he get written agreements and ask for longer terms. He felt that the relationships were tenuous and he might threaten his access to land if he were to ask for something on paper. 200 landowners get a tax break for having their lawns mowed by this farmer. Why exactly are municipalities subsidizing this? If getting tax status can be this easy, why would anyone commit to farmers, especially ones who are wanting to farm more intensively.

I was recently at a potluck with a new generation of young agrarians and I was sorry to hear the same old stories about their tenuous access to land. More year-to-year leases where the leasing farmers are prevented from investing in their businesses. Others have leases but they have been violated by inviting other parties to "share the lease" after it had been signed. For example, a pair of farmers leased a field that was partially impeded by blackberries. After they rented equipment to clear the land, the landlord decided to rent out the cleared portion for RV storage since the formerly blackberry covered portion hadn't been considered usable area when the lease was written. Another farmer found herself having to share her leased areas with other farmers when this wasn't part of the original deal. In all cases the tenant farmers were not able to advocate for themselves. The power imbalance is too great. In these circumstances, we can see that there is a real food security threat, and we have a system that doesn't honor farmers and what they need to operate viable businesses.

On another note, I was lucky enough to host Jennifer Pfenning, the President of the National Farmers Union last week. She comes from a 700 acre organic farm in Ontario. She was on a visit here to see about ways that the NFU can engage with the South Island. Her farm is looking into more direct marketing strategies because they are continuing to get price squeezed by the larger grocery chains that they have supplied for decades. She thought that there were lots of opportunities for cross regional learning. The NFU does a lot of advocacy work for Canadian agriculture at the federal and international level. They're also a member of La Via Campesina, an international peasants' rights group that advocates for food justice. The NFU is much larger in the rest of Canada where there is more commodity farming.