



**MINUTES OF THE
PENINSULA & AREA AGRICULTURAL COMMISSION
Committee Room 2, Saanich Municipal Hall
Thursday, JANUARY 9, 2020, at 7:30 pm**

- Present:** Phil Christie in the Chair; Carol Davidson, Satnam Dheenshaw; Linda Geggie; Bev Marley; Larry Kimmett; Larry Sluggett, Dianne Williamson; Councillor Smyth (N.Saanich). Also present was Isobel Hoffmann, recording secretary.
- Guests:** Chris Wiczorek, Executive Assistant to the Minister of Agriculture; Jeff Weightman, CRD; Jill Robinson, CRD.
- Regrets:** Robin Tunnicliffe, Terry Michell, Councillors Graham and Taylor.
- Minutes:** The Minutes of November 14, 2019 were adopted with a minor change to Page 4, under Farm Economics, deleting the word "little" to indicate "*There was ~~little~~ mildew due to fluctuations in temperature....*"
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TREASURER'S REPORT – Carol Davidson – The treasurer reported that the balance in the chequing account is \$1,596 with \$20,006 in a Term Deposit.

SPEAKER'S BUREAU:

Jill Robinson, Parks & Environmental Services, CRD

Ms. Robinson stated she is the Elk/Beaver Lake Initiative Coordinator and is here to provide a follow-up presentation to the one she gave last September.

- The surrounding parkland has a lot of significance and is important culturally and has over 1.5 million visitors annually who use the area for recreation. There are also social, health, wellness, environmental and economic benefits. Over \$10 million a year is generated from various activities and events, such as the Ironman and it is the most fished lake on the Island.
- The major issues include frequent cyanobacteria and blue/green algae blooms, dense aquatic growth (milfoil) resulting in poor fish habitat. No native fish exist any more; carp and rainbow trout are brought in by the province.
- Too many nutrients in the lake, particularly phosphorus are harmful. 30% of the nutrients come from external sources.
- Over the past 100 years or so, these nutrients have been building up on the bottom of the lake, which results in low oxygen levels.
- The CRD is looking at a remediation plan to reduce the internal nutrient loading and the Elk/Beaver Lake Watershed Management Plan will look at ways to reduce the external nutrient loading.
- These proposed plans are subject to receiving at least 50% of capital grant funds for the project. The CRD received approval last fall to move ahead in part, and staff is coordinating the collection of critical data.
- Regarding the Watershed Management Plan, a public open house was held last summer and workshops were held in the fall. Four phases are proposed:
 - Phase 1: Gather information, concerns and determine priority actions.
 - Phase 2: Prepare a draft plan to reduce external sources of nutrients.

- Phase 3: Finalize the plan, obtain feedback and conduct an on-line survey.
- Phase 4: Implementation: Obtain support from the CRD, the province, Central Saanich and Saanich and work closely with these jurisdictions.
- External nutrients are mostly caused by run-off from creeks and waterways: O'Donnel Creek (a primary source), as well as Haliburton, Hamsterly, and Linnet Creeks.
- Other sources are from wildlife (eg: birds and geese), septic and groundwater run-off, and the atmosphere (winds blowing across the lake).
- From this information, we have developed a plan with a purpose, a vision and a goal:
 - Purpose: To reduce external nutrients entering the lake from the Elk/Beaver Lake Watershed;
 - Vision: To have a healthy and diverse ecosystem to support safe recreation for future generations;
 - Goal: To Improve the water quality, reduce the impact of invasive plants on recreational activities, restore and protect native species and ecosystems, build community awareness and understanding on how to reduce external nutrients.
- The Objectives of the Plan will be to:
 - Reduce the amount of phosphorus before it enters the watershed;
 - Mitigate the phosphorus entering the lake from run-off and ground water sources;
 - Manage the nutrient phosphorus load within the lake.
- Recommended Actions include:
 - Building community awareness on the importance of managing and reducing nutrients;
 - Improving public access to resources on ways to manage and reduce nutrients;
 - Improving urban and rural land use (ie: septic systems, fertilizer use, animal waste).
 - Improving agricultural land practices to reduce and manage nutrients through compliance of the Agricultural Environmental Management Code [AEM] (eg: buffer zones, proper manure storage, water run-off management, application of fertilizers, live stock management, soil erosion control).
- We want to ensure there is full awareness and understanding of the requirements of the AEM Code, Environmental Farm Plans, good stewardship and best management practices.
- A number of "key action items" have been proposed to reduce the amount of phosphorus entering the watershed, run-off and groundwater sources; to restore and enhance riparian areas, forest, prairie and wetland habitats, reduce shoreline erosion, manage invasive and hyper-abundant species.
- She would like feedback by January 20th if possible to finish the draft plan. It is expected by late February/early March the plan will be available to receive public input, followed by endorsement by the CRD, Saanich and Central Saanich.

PAAC discussion ensued:

- Agriculture can work hand in glove with the environment. Where it doesn't work well is on agricultural lands that are not being actively used.
- Around the O'Donnel Creek area there are many "farms" but no management, and we see thousands of geese on these areas. Drainage is an issue: with proper drainage the water flow can be controlled and less nutrients will enter the lake.
- Bill 52 allows farms to put 4 loads (40 cubic meters) of gravel on the land under current legislation, but this is insufficient in many cases farmers cannot access their fields without graveling the internal farm access lanes. .
- Chris Wieczorek noted that the Minister is aware that some of the content of Bill 52 is too bureaucratic.

- Under the Environmental Code of Practice farmers must do nitrogen testing regularly and phosphorus every three years. The government currently assists farmers with the testing costs, up to \$400.
- Suggested that PAAC partner with the CRD to address nutrient issues with small-scale farmers, new farmers and people who are not farmers but use fertilizers near the watershed area. Noted there may be funding through the Ministry's Knowledge Transfer Fund.
- Planting winter cover crops and building up organic matter should help with retaining both nitrogen and phosphorus.
- It was noted that there is a serious problem with sources of organic matter, required for soil improvement, on the Peninsula especially now that almost all of the dairy farms are gone.
- The farm community wants to do the right thing and everyone wants to restore and protect the Elk/Beaver Lake ecosystem.

CORRESPONDENCE: none

AGRICULTURAL ISSUES – NEW

a) Support for Agrologist for the Peninsula and CRD

Further to a lengthy discussion at the November PAAC meeting, Chris Wieczorek stated he discussed the matter with Minister Lana Popham.

- He noted that at one time the Island had three agrologists and that this has now been reduced to one.
- The Minister acknowledges the value of having a regional agrologist and that there is a need on the Island.
- Unfortunately money from this fiscal budget has been assigned. He suggested that PAAC write a letter to the Minister to make a case for support of an agrologist to be assigned to the lower Island and Peninsula.

The Chair noted how things have changed over the past 40 years when at one time there was good support for agriculture with over 20 soil specialists, district agrologists and forage experts with a vast wealth of knowledge. Just 15 years ago, we had two expert agrologists in Michael Betts and Brent Warner who were invaluable to local farmers.

MOTION: Moved by Bev Marley and Seconded by Larry Kimmett: “That PAAC write a letter to the Minister of Agriculture in support for an agrologist on the Peninsula and southern part of Vancouver Island.”

CARRIED

Discussion followed:

- Noted the presentation we heard this evening regarding the Elk/Beaver Lake Initiative indicates the need for an agrologist.
- It is important that a professional can visit farms to ensure the best practices are being carried out and that the many problem areas are being addressed (eg: expanding geese populations, drainage, use of fertilizers, manure/nutrient storage, reductions in organic matter).
- New farmers in particular need these extension experts: education first, then enforcement. There is a gap here now.
- An agrologist is the best possible use of budget funds: anything done within the next year or two to strengthen agriculture will be a cost-saving in the future; hiring another expert needs to be a priority.

- One of the things Brent Warner did was look at opportunities for farmers in business development.
- It is well known that agriculture has one of the lowest budgets of all the ministries.
- Perhaps it is time that the municipalities share in the costs associated with hiring an agrologist, showing more support for agriculture. This is particularly important if the municipality has a high number of producers.
- Agreed the municipal role is important, but typically support seems to work better at the provincial level.
- However, noted that often the provincial focus is on larger farms and the smaller – yet very productive – farms fall under the radar.
- We need to be careful; this is a high-level idea. We need a specific ask and to take into consideration the municipal role at a local level.
- Discussion on the use of fertilizers, acknowledging the damage that can be caused to ground water by over-fertilizing and the far-reaching results of that (ie: nutrient levels in Elk/Beaver Lake), as well as the high cost of fertilizers. Having an agrologist and/or a soil expert to rely on would be beneficial.
- Large-scale farms who use commercial fertilizers must do soil testing annually.
- The length of time it takes for permits and applications to be processed through the ALC was also noted.

Agreed a letter would be drafted, sent to the Chair for review and then circulated to PAAC members for comment.

b) Suggestion for educational component at each meeting – Larry Kimmett

Larry suggested we allot about 5 or 10 minutes at each meeting to educate ourselves on new agriculture issues, events or technology. It was agreed to add this topic to PAAC's regular agendas under "Agricultural Issues – New".

c) Cancellation of the Central Saanich Agricultural Advisory Committee

Discussion noted:

- The bylaw to create the Agricultural Advisory Committee was completed in 2016 and repealed last week. It was explained to PAAC at the last meeting by Councillor Graham that Central Saanich had reorganized a number of its committees and it was decided for various reasons, including costs, to discontinue the Agricultural Advisory Committee, partly because PAAC covers most of the areas and agricultural issues that arise.
- Most members felt that given Central Saanich is essentially the bread basket on the Peninsula, it should have its own Agricultural Committee.
- Discussed whether PAAC should send a letter to Central Saanich advising of our disappointment and asking the Committee be reinstated. Not all members were in full support, questioning if we were interfering with municipal business.

MOTION: Moved by Larry Sluggett and Seconded by Carol Davidson: "That PAAC write to Central Saanich Council expressing disappointment in the dissolution of the Agricultural Advisory Committee and requesting that it be reinstated because it provided a voice for local farmers and feedback to PAAC."

Councillor Smyth stated he sat on North Saanich's Agricultural Commission, which has also been disbanded. The members were all good people, but there were only two farmers out of the 12 members. How is that helpful or informative to the politicians? He wants to hear from the farmers – and as a farmer himself, he noted we need to provide a strong voice.

PAAC cannot play the same role as a local agricultural committee – although we have provided comment on local issues, we are more of a regional-based group.

The Motion was then PUT and CARRIED

Agreed a letter be drafted and circulated to members prior to sending to Central Saanich.

AGRICULTURAL ISSUES – CURRENT

a) Goose/Deer Management Strategy (Bev Marley & Jeff Weightman)

Jeff Weightman stated:

- We are trying to get addling permits in place.
- An assessment will be done on the current funding for other activities during the season.
- The annual bird count will be conducted by helicopter; we routinely get reports on location of geese from bird watchers, the public and farmers, so we know where the “hot spots” are located.

b) CRD Food & Agriculture Strategy (Linda Geggie & Jeff Weightman)

- Currently preparing a work plan for the coming year.
- The CRD is still waiting to hear from Saanich re the Farmlands Trust before proceeding with a business case.

c) Saanich Agriculture and Food Security Plan – No one present to update

d) Sandown Update (Brett Smyth)

- The Request for Proposals will close within the next few days. To date there are two applicants.
- The Chair stated if and when PAAC discusses the issue he will have to leave the table as he is assisting one of the applicants with his proposal.
- The proposals will be vetted by staff who use a good rating system.
- Councillor Smyth stated he is not aware of the exact timeline, but indicated it will be sooner than later.
- Of the 83 acres, only 55 acres are in play at this point as the remainder is either forested or in very low lying areas.

f) Farm Worker Accommodations – nothing to report

AGRICULTURAL STRATEGY – SUB-COMMITTEE REPORTS

a) Water (Michael Doehnel) – not present

b) Farm Economics (Terry Michell)

- Terry was not present but Satnam provided the following information:
- The commercial and wholesale market prices were down between 10% and 15%.
- Cost of fertilizers has risen dramatically.

- Although the demand for local produce is still there, the prices have decreased and costs keep going up. There are more mainland producers now, particularly of berries.
- In the past 18 months, 3,000 dairy farms have gone bankrupt. Milk consumption has decreased because food preferences are changing – eg. Soy, almond, rice milk.
- In the 1950s BC had over 7,000 dairy farms, this is now reduced to around 200.
- The high consumption of almond milk has led to mass production of almonds, and in turn the bees that pollinate the almond plants have brought disease back to the hives.
- The agriculture industry is changing dramatically.
- Noted that we need to investigate how the smaller farms are doing rather than just focusing on large commercial-style operations. Questioned if someone from PAAC could canvas owners of smaller farms – under 5 acres – to ascertain how they are coping economically. Noted that Robin Tunnicliffe operates a small farm in Metchosin successfully.
- Suggested up to 10 small farms be selected, using the Farm Fresh publication as guide, and/or contact Katie Enqvist with the DFMA for assistance.

CARRY for further discussion; Isobel to contact Ms. Enqvist.

c) Agricultural Land Base (Phil Christie) -

Bill 52 was introduced by the Ministry of Agriculture last year, and in part this was to control the size and number of residences on agricultural land as well as the amount fill or other material that could be imported onto a farm. While it has worked to control the amount of deleterious filling on farmland it has also caused some major headaches where legitimate uses for gravel fill is required to improve access laneways and other farm access. Graveling is often a win/win for the farmer and environment. Restricting the amount of gravel or fill has resulted in some farmers not being able to maintain farm access roads through their property. This means the fields are rutted and muddy and this can result in siltation and nutrient pollution of local water bodies..

He understands that the Ministry of now planning to re-look at both these parts of the Bill.

- He acknowledged it is important that we don't degrade the land, but often a second residence can be of great help to farmer, providing accommodation for farm workers and helping to make the farm more viable..
- Now that applications for farm worker housing have to be made through the ALC, it can be seen as too much interference and time consuming. There has been a lot of feedback on this, and he understands the Ministry is intending to tweak the legislation.

Chris Wieczorek stated:

- The Ministry recognizes there are some problem areas to be addressed with Bill 52.
- Mega mansions were a problem on farmlands, mostly on the mainland, some over 20,000 sq.ft., and the owner, or “farmer” was farming about .25 acres.
- A second problem was to control the dumping of fill on agricultural land.
- Both the mega mansions and the dumping were major problems and the focus of Bill 52.
- The Bill has been mostly successful, but some challenges have arisen as noted above. The Minister is aware of these issues and will be working with staff; Chris W. will report back on the progress at the March meeting and send updates through the secretary in the meantime.

d) Education and Outreach (Linda Geggie)

- The Island Agricultural Show in February 7 and 8 in Cowichan; this will be the Farmer2Farmer workshop but in a different format. There will also be a series of workshops offered in February, March and April.

- Destination Greater Victoria (previously Tourism Victoria), is working with CR-Fair on the Flavor Trail to develop capacity and promote local agritourism.
- They will be having the first in the series of workshops on January 27th. This will be to talk about the programme and to discuss what local farmers and food producers would like to see as a vision for the future of agritourism in the region.
- CR-Fair and Destination Greater Victoria will also be developing a Flavour Trails Circle Tour on the Peninsula and working to identify businesses appropriate for the Circle Tour.
 - Destination Victoria will have promotion features on local businesses, the Roost for example.
 - CR-Fair and Destination Victoria have received funding from Western for this programme.
 - The first activity is creating promotional material and the second is to undertake capacity building.
 - A series of three workshops to look at opportunities, support farms, to assess their interest and readiness, as well as support related business planning.
 - We need to determine what kind of grants and opportunities are available for the farmers to undertake changes to their properties or services in support of building their capacity.

Linda advised she will send information to PAAC on this programme for distribution to our network.

PAAC MEMBERSHIP

Only one response for membership has been received thanks to a recommendation from Linda Geggie. We need at least two, perhaps three new members. Information has been posted on municipal web sites. It would be beneficial if we could find members from various areas currently not represented, such as growers of grapes, grain, hay, hops, animals, small scale farmers. Suggested that the secretary contact Katie Enqvist with the DFMA and ask her to reach out to the membership.

The one application received will be circulated to members and submitted to the four municipalities for ratification.

UPCOMING EVENTS:

- **ABBOTSFORD AGRICULTURAL SHOW:** January 30, 2020. Registration is \$90. Many different seminars to attend. The Chair encouraged members to attend if they are able as this is an excellent event.

Adjournment: On a Motion from Bev Marley, the meeting adjourned at 9:30 pm

Next Meeting: The next PAAC meeting is scheduled for **Thursday, February 13, 2020, at 7:30 pm**

WEBSITE: Members were asked to advise of any information items to place on the website.
<http://saanich.ca/living/afs/index.html>

I hereby certify this is a true and correct copy of the Minutes.

 Isobel Hoffmann, Recording Secretary