

Agritourism Study Advisory Committee (ASAC) Meeting

Wednesday, May 29, 2019
Agricultural History Farm Park

MEETING ATTENDEES

Mark Beall	Jessica Snyder
Wade Butler	Caroline Taylor
Bob Cissel	Bob Tworkoski
Jeremy Criss	Mike Scheffel
Michele Cropp	Gwen Wright
John Fendrick	Robert Kronenberg
Janis Glenn	Carrie Sanders
Ellen Gordon	Nancy Sturgeon
Keith Miller	Atul Sharma
Sarah Rogers	Jessica McVary

I. Welcome and Introductions

Gwen Wright, Planning Director, welcomed the Agritourism Study Advisory Committee (ASAC) to the meeting. Ms. Wright began with an apology for the delay in the study and noted that there have been staffing changes to reconvene work with the ASAC and conclude the agritourism study. The staff assigned to the Agritourism Study were introduced to the ASAC. These staff include:

- Robert Kronenberg, Deputy Planning Director
- Carrie Sanders, Division Chief
- Nancy Sturgeon, Master Planner Supervisor
- Atul Sharma, Master Planner Supervisor
- Jessica McVary, Project Manager

II. Committee Member Updates and Comments

Following the staff introductions, Ms. Wright requested that each ASAC member share their comments on the study to date, as well as their goals for the study.

- Ms. Cropp stated that the ASAC needs more information about the change in staffing prior to moving forward.
 - Ms. Wright responded that the staff change occurred to get the project back on track.
- Mr. Fendrick expressed concern that the assigned staff do not have experience in the agricultural reserve.

- Mr. Butler indicated that the Rustic Roads and Heritage Areas are challenging for agriculture and farmers have not been given a fair shot in the conversations related to these topics. The farmers have a desire to be heard and have not been heard to date.
- Ms. Glenn noted that the ag reserve has a lot to offer. Farmers are having success with agriculture but need help with promoting and supporting with tourism – including help with bathroom accommodations, parking and revitalization of historic buildings. Ms. Glenn also noted that farmers need help to “level the playing field” for businesses through permitting.
- Ms. Taylor expressed a desire to celebrate the ag reserve without dismantling it. She also conveyed the need to view agritourism through a lens of equity, socioeconomics and environmental perspectives. Ms. Taylor reiterated the need for agritourism to include a level playing field with permitting that is equitable and transparent. The definition of agritourism – as agreed by members of the ASAC – must have a nexus to farming.
- Ms. Rogers expressed a need to respect the plans approved in recent history, including the 1980 *Functional Master Plan for the Preservation of Agriculture and Rural Open Space* and the 2002 *Heritage Area Management Plan*. Ms. Rogers further noted that tourism can support agriculture and the stewardship of cultural resources.
- Mr. Tworkoski noted that the rustic roads are the veins of the ag reserve and contribute to the cultural heritage. He stated the need to communicate with farmers and indicated that the Rustic Roads Committee could work with farmers on the operational issues. He also recommended learning from the agritourism experience of Suffolk County, New York.
- Ms. Gordon expressed a concern with the pace of the study thus far and conveyed the need to move quickly to prevent a piecemeal approach to agritourism. Ms. Gordon referenced the County Council’s action on the Farm Alcohol Production Zoning Text Amendment and the need for considering the cumulative impacts.
- Ms. Snyder stated that land owners subject to agricultural preservation need to have an opportunity to diversify business. She further indicated that land owners and farmers need to be treated equally and if agritourism is successful, it is possible that more agricultural land could be preserved.
- Ms. Cropp expressed concern that the staff members assigned to the study do not have direct experience in the ag reserve. Ms. Cropp further stated that the issues are divisive, including the relationship between rustic roads, farming and agritourism. Conditions on the rustic roads can impact farm equipment, products and produce which contributes to a loss in income. Ms. Cropp further expressed that the ASAC needs to set goals that reflect the diverse opinions and come together on the things about which the group agrees.
- Mr. Criss conveyed that his office seeks to protect farming, promote the economic viability of farming through technical assistance and alert the County Council and the County Executive of ag related issues. Mr. Criss reiterated that the ASAC agreed on the definition of agritourism and the importance of agritourism having a clear nexus to farming. Mr. Criss further described the opportunity for the Department of Permitting Services (DPS) to create clarity through “recipes for success.” He also offered to provide

a list of questions the DPS would ask on agritourism applications and reiterated the challenges with the lack of compliance with regulations on rustic roads.

- Mr. Fendrick noted that the 25-acre lot minimum is inadequate because additional acreage is necessary to farm. He further expressed concern with an oversaturation of agritourism and inquired if the agritourism endeavors will self-compete or if the market will correct the agriculture to agritourism ratio. He noted that the County needs businesses, work force and revenue and that agritourism is a way to make agriculture viable, but the process need to be streamlined. He also requested the ability to submit a dissenting opinion if he does not agree with the agritourism study.
- Mr. Cissel noted that farming is evolving. He further noted that the protection of the ag reserve and the evolution of the ag reserve with agritourism is a common goal. Mr. Cissel reiterated the need to maintain the definition of agritourism, create a consistent and predictable process for agritourism while allowing farmers to continue to farm, be productive and be profitable. He also stated that the building lot terminations need a market of receiving areas and that enforcement of rustic roads maintenance is necessary. Mr. Cissel also inquired about the timeline and process for the study and communicated that leadership is critical to communicate to the ASAC.
- Mr. Butler noted that the ASAC is a large committee with many opinions and issues and requires leadership to help reach compromise. He communicated a desire for more county residents to know about the ag reserve and how the down county development has allowed preservation. He believes that this business plays a role in educating people about agriculture. He indicated that the lack of signage, bathrooms, rustic roads and food establishments are challenges for agritourism. He also noted that the rules and regulations associated with food distribution are burdensome for the farmers to sell what they grow.
- Ms. Taylor described regenerative agriculture and available resources.
- Ms. Gordon referenced the role of the ag reserve in capturing carbon versus energy capture through industrial solar.

III. Comparative Analysis and Code Assessment – Update

- Ms. McVary thanked the ASAC for their comments and described the work that has been underway since the November 2018 ASAC meeting.
- The consultant team of Rhodeside and Harwell and EPR presented a preview of the comparative analysis of eight jurisdictions as well as a code assessment during the November 2018 meeting.
- Several ASAC members provided comments to staff and the consultant team on both the presentation materials and the draft code assessment.
- The consultant team reviewed the ASAC comments and is currently working to develop a final draft of both the comparative analysis and the code assessment. In addition, the consultant was directed to evaluate two additional jurisdictions – Suffolk County, New York and Rockingham County, Virginia. Highlights from the two additional jurisdictions were provided in the meeting packet.

- While the consultant is concluding their work, Ms. McVary noted that the Committee and staff work on the study continues. The consultant’s work is an input, that will be used as a technical resource in the development of the Agritourism Study.
- Ms. McVary indicated that staff would like to begin talking with the Committee about how we integrate the consultant’s report and the work of the Committee into the agritourism study. She stated that as we begin to weave these integral components together, we would like to hear from each of you on specific items that you would like our team to be aware of as we conclude the study.

IV. Agritourism Study – Outline

- Ms. McVary shared a draft outline of the Agritourism Study with the Committee.
- Mr. Fendrick inquired if there is an opportunity for ASAC members to provide a dissenting opinion for the record if the committee disagrees with the final study.
 - Ms. Wright responded that staff hopes that the group can reach compromise and achieve the best outcome possible for the county. While it is acceptable for committee members to submit a dissenting opinion, we do not want to go into the process with the expectation that this will be necessary.
- Mr. Cissel stated that there was a consensus that the ASAC would meet and then a study would be initiated.
 - Staff reiterated that the consultant’s report is a technical resource for the agritourism study.
- Mr. Butler inquired if the consultant’s comparative analysis will discuss the economic viability of agritourism in the ten jurisdictions studied.
 - The analysis will not include an economic analysis, but the Planning Department can evaluate the economic viability in greater detail if desired.
- Several ASAC members inquired about the terms used in the draft study outline, including the description of considerations and the menu of potential solutions.
 - The staff team conveyed that the description of considerations is intended to identify issues, concerns and opportunities to reflect the dialogue of the ASAC.
 - Mr. Criss noted that some of the items identified as challenges may require state, rather than county action.
- Several ASAC members inquired if they are considered the study’s “relevant stakeholders” or if additional outreach and engagement – including interviews – will be conducted as envisioned in the original scope of work.

V. Study Outcome

- Ms. Wright noted that a consistent understanding of the study outcome – for staff and the ASAC – is necessary to ensure that everyone is imagining the same product.
- Ms. Wright and Ms. Sanders also provided an overview of the difference between master plans, zoning and regulatory approvals and studies and conveyed that studies identify issues and offer suggestions for future next steps.

- Ms. Snyder stated that she thought the end result of the study would either provide opportunities or restrictions.
- Mr. Cissel noted that the items chosen to consider in the consultant's work were questioned by farmers.
- Ms. Wright communicated that the purpose of the study is about how to promote agritourism, but it may need to point out technical information related to agritourism. For example, the study will need to discuss the hurdles and how to overcome or address the hurdles.
- Mr. Cissel asked when the study is complete, what will be done with it?
 - Ms. Wright responded that the study will be presented to the Planning Board and staff will offer to present the study to the County Council. She further noted that the study could generate interest to initiate new actions.

VI. Next Steps

- Staff will:
 - Provide the comments on the comparative analysis and code assessment submitted by ASAC members.
 - Distribute a doodle poll to the ASAC members for a June meeting date.
 - Provide a general timeline which reflects discussions from the meeting in advance of a June meeting.
 - Provide draft goals and background sections of the study in advance of a June meeting.
 - Request the DPS "Recipe for Success Questions" from Mr. Criss.

VII. Adjournment