

Town of White Creek
Comprehensive Plan and Ag Protection Plan
Steering Committee/Agricultural Focus Group Meeting Minutes
May 20, 2009

Attendees: , Jim Perry, Carol Moore, Peter Hetko, Don Sweet, , Sarah Ashton
Absent: Tim Smith, Rupert Jennings, Bill Badgeley , J. Tudor, Rich Moses, Ed Gulley, Rody Walker, Darryl Caputo

Minutes: The minutes of the April 15th meeting were reviewed and approved with a few changes. Motion by Perry. Seconded by Hetko. Thanks to Moore for taking them.

Maps: The group looked at the maps denoting agricultural lands and determined that a full survey of properties would have to be undertaken to determine if parcels coded as residential for example really contained significant farming activities and for the purposes of the plan should be considered largely agricultural. Moore had shared the map with residents; it is a way to engage residents in the planning process and found that people like looking at the map identifying properties and talking about the uses. She will continue to meet with people and identify additional agricultural lands. Nan pointed out that assessors might not know if a person was raising bees or maple sugaring for example. Perry suggested asking Soil and Water to help review the map. Nan noted the importance of identifying all the lands used for agricultural purposes. Some individuals may rent their land for agricultural purposes. The current map is based on 2006 data and some of this may have changed by 2009. A subdivision for example may not show up as agricultural. Hetko asked if there was a way to overlay the information about slopes, soils and see patterns and Nan confirmed that we could. Ashton and Hetko volunteered to look at the parcels for Ashgrove and Chestnut Hill to determine if there are any additional agricultural ones. Moore will continue to share the map around RT 68 and environs.

Criteria to Prioritize Farmland: The group then turned its attention to refining the criteria to prioritize farmland. Nan noted that one of the purposes and requirements of the grant received was to identify priority farmlands in accordance with Section 324 of the law that established the grant program. The community must identify priority farmland and define what priority farmland means. She noted that the state definition was primarily defined by soils. Local communities have the ability to ask themselves “What are critical farmland areas? How do we define them? Objective lists of criteria have been developed and Nan shared a draft “Town of White Creek: Green Infrastructure Priorization” as a spring board for discussion. Criteria are identified and weighted—the community identifies which criteria are most important and the relevant weight to be given. Once the criteria and relative weights have been established each parcel is evaluated, points allotted/scored and a computer generated map is produced identifying priority farmlands. The question that she suggested the group ask is: “What makes a parcel of land important to farming in the future?” She offered an example, is a five acre parcel near state lands as agriculturally important as an existing 100 acre farm? Lots of the criteria is mapable—from existing data sets but other items like “does an owner have an kinds of farm plans’ can be added but then the committee would have to check with each farmer to collect this data. Hetko noted that some Committee members were not present. Ashton noted that there was a conflict as NYS Representative Tony Jordan had called a meeting with the agricultural community and some committee members had gone to that and others had noted that it was critical to hay. There was comfort with us moving forward but affording the opportunity to review the criteria.

Soils: Perry felt that there should be more weight on soils but questioned how to divide up the weight on soils. There weren't reasons to prioritize a farm which has poor soils. Hetko noted that Pennsylvania once had wonderful soils and now houses sit atop them. Nan explained that soils are ranked as Prime Soils (1-4) and Soils of Statewide Importance (5-8) based on USDA, NRCS—these are the best soils. Sweet asked if soil records are available—the type of soil and if it is tillable and its depth. Nan noted that Wash. Co Soil and Water has provided this data to us. Following discussion committee members decided to boost the points or weight of soils relative to the other criteria—potentially giving half (50%) the weight to soils suggested Perry. Ultimately later on in the meeting it was revealed that White Creek does not have many prime soils but Nan noted that criteria and priority lands are determined relative to the resources in the municipality not in comparison with others at this level.

Agricultural Exemption, Agricultural Districts, Active Agricultural Uses, Adjacency to Protected Agriculture: There was a lot of discussion about these criteria. One person noted that if a parcel has an agricultural exemption then it demonstrates a commitment to farming. Another noted that ag exemptions are granted after Wash Co Soil and Water evaluates applications for such exemptions based on existing use and soils and location in an agricultural district. Another asked what if a parcel is in active agricultural use but is not in an ag district; it will be disadvantaged. Nan pointed out that research has shown that if there is farmland next to an existing farm then there is a better chance that the adjacent land will be farmed. Sweet asked if it was important to map what lands are already protected. Nan noted yes that maps would identify what parcels had already been protected. Moore noted that the agricultural exemption was a motivating factor to keep farming. To get the exemption one has to show that the parcel is a certain size, soils and farmed resulting in a certain level of gross income—in NYS ag assessed lands are part of the 100 class.

What about general open space—Perry suggested that DEC might regulate some of this open space. Nan suggested that some farms with open space may be more valuable with certain environmental features on them. Hetko noted that natural resources may be important to farming and keeping it viable. Environmental features contribute to the town. Moore noted that farmers can drain a wetland but not wetlands of over 10.4 acres. What is the value of a 100 acre parcel completely surrounded by farmland vs another smaller parcel not?

Ultimately the group thought that NYS Agricultural District could retain a weight of 5; Ag Exemptions be reduced from 15 to 5 points; Adjacency to Protected Ag lands 10 points and it had to be contiguous (deleted within a ¼ mile of protected lands because of the way a crow flies could be quite a distance).

Parcel Size: The question was raised: What is the value of one acre of beautiful farmland vs 50 acres of farmland? Following a group discussion: The category of 200 acres or more for parcel size was dropped as parcels aren't that big in the municipality and the largest category was 100 – 199.99+ acres. (The biggest parcels are actually owned by NYS.) Also there are smaller parcels which could be used for an organic vegetable farm which should receive some points. Hence the smallest parcel was changed to 7 acres which is the limit for being eligible for an agricultural exemption. Hetko noted the importance of giving points to small farms which help give diversity to the local agricultural sector. No decision was made with regard to the points allotted to each parcel size category. Ultimately the committee thought it would be good to see how big the parcels really were—to get a mapping of this and then make that determination.

Farm Plans: Perry thought it should be thrown out. 'What is the thinking behind it?' he posed. Nan noted it suggests a commitment to farming. The goal of prioritizing is to determine which

farms are priority for protection. Other steering committee members who are not present might have an opinion. How would data on plans be obtained? Ashton will ask Soil and Water if they keep such records and otherwise a farmer would have to volunteer this information.

Development Pressures: The criteria seek to identify what pressures farmland might be under for conversion to other uses. Typically communities look at proximity to utilities like water and sewer districts—thinking that risks are greater if these services can be easily extended into farmlands. Nan asked, What are the things that measure development pressure? It was suggested that we talk to real estate agents and ask them what people looking at this area to live or develop are attracted to. Do they want a 100 acre parcel? Hetko noted that some were looking for 50-60 acre parcels. Luther Forest Tech park also would add pressure as new people came to the area. Ashton was going to inquire of Mike Wyatt who works for NYSDOT if such economic and community impact studies existed as he might know of important resources to inform the White Creek planning process. Hetko and Ashton will ask real estate agents. One farmer—the Andrews farm—has already been contacted. Others wonder if anyone will ever come in a big way. Ultimately it was suggested to change the distances noted for development pressures—minimizing them. Distance to State Roads and Major Intersections the smallest category was 0-1/2 mile, then 1/2 to 1.5 miles and then 1.5 to 3 miles; Distance to the hamlets changed with the same categories. Compatibility of adjacent uses was not really discussed.

Open Space and Environmental Resources Discussion started out about floodplains. Floodplains are regulated by FEMA. They impact stream systems and change the flow of water and there are horrific floods (like in Mississippi) if they are gone. There is more erosion downstream. Hetko noted that Salem rechannel its streams, there was rip rap placed within and the result was flooding down stream as the banks were worn. Slopes could be related to scenic resources. Slopes are highly erodeable areas and using them wrong could contribute to poor water quality. In many places slopes are covered only by woodlands which are primary habitats for wildlife. People asked how these features related to agriculture. Availability of streams and water was debated. Hetko noted that streams are a hub that links various ecological areas. Another pointed out that the state regulates streams and farming near them have to have a buffer. The question was raised would you prefer to preserve a 100 acre parcel with a stream or one without. Ashton noted that access to water was key and important for agriculture. The example of Orville Way a subdivision near the Town offices was raised—it is in a floodplain and for some reason the state could not prevent houses going on it because it is technically not a state wetland. How do farms contribute value to the community?

What about resources like Oil and gas? If properties have these are they under threat for development pressure. What about wind farms which produce energy and generate income for farmers but can disturb farm operations too like in Lewis county where productive farmland has been turned over to wind farms. Greene County has no laws regarding wind turbines and the only way someone knows that they are going up is a resident has to get a building permit. There is no review process allowing for community discussion. The town could pass an ordinance saying no toxic waste can be dumped within the municipalities boundaries too.

Ultimately the committee decided to delete the reference to slopes and floodplains as a criteria and retain wetlands and streams.

Overall the suggested criteria weight is: Soils 50%; Farm Resources 25%, Development Pressure 15% and Open Space Environmental Resources 10%. Nan was going to work on this and bring back to the committee for review a revised chart for discussion.

Next Meeting Weds. June 17th 7:30PM Town of White Creek, 28 Mountain View Drive to focus on other vision statements.