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MEMORANDUM

To: Agricultural Advisory Committee
From: Benjamin L. Spinelli, Esq., Executive Director
Subject: Committee Meeting Minutes – March 23, 2023
Date: March 30, 2023

The fifth Agricultural Advisory Committee meeting was held on Thursday, March 23, 2023, at 11:00am at the NJ Highlands office in Chester.

The following were present:

Committee: Highlands Council Vice Chair/Committee Chair Alstede, Jamie Bourgeois (Riamede Farm); Peter Melick (Melick Farms), Michael Beneduce (Beneduce Vineyards)

Other in-person attendee: David Dech, Planning Director (Warren County).

Highlands Staff: Benjamin Spinelli, Neda Hartman, James Humphries, Maryjude Haddock-Weiler, Corey Piasecki, and Karen Castanhas.

Present via Zoom video/audio: Dr. Brendan Furlong (B.W. Furlong & Associates), Walter Lane, Director, Office of Planning, Policy, and Economic Development (Somerset County), and Tom Boccino (Somerset County).

Committee Chair Alstede opened the meeting at 11:10am.

Committee Minutes of January 26, 2023

Committee Chair Alstede asked the committee if they had any edits to make on the January 26, 2023, minutes. There were no edits.

Economic Sustainability

At this time Maryjude Haddock-Weiler, Planning Manager, introduced Walter Lane and Tom Boccino, representatives from Somerset County and Warren County representative David Dech.

Mr. Dech, Planning Director, explained Warren County has a program entitled Grown In Warren and its initiative is to highlight farms, farmer's markets, and farm-to-table restaurants that encompass the diversity and tradition of agriculture in Warren County, New Jersey. Mr. Dech added, in Warren County there is a large deer problem and there is a need for a food processing center. Also, the Board of County Commissioners, through the Department of Human Services, administers the Warren County Transportation (WCT) system. The current WCT provider is Easton Coach Company, located in Phillipsburg, NJ. Easton Coach Company provides a wide range of paratransit and special transportation services to eligible Warren County residents. The Route 57 Shuttle Service consists of two routes: Phillipsburg/Washington and Washington/Hackettstown shuttle routes. The designated transfer point is in Washington Township, this transportation could potentially support tourism in the County.

At this time there was discussion about Destination Marketing Organizations (DMOs), which are organizations that promote a location as an attractive travel destination. The Highlands Council staff anticipates working with the various DMOs to advance tourism in Highlands counties. Also, during this discussion, ideas were brought up regarding overnight accommodations and convenient transportation for tourists for weekend events.

Mr. Lane, Director of Office of Planning, Policy, and Economic Development, gave an overview of the Somerset County agricultural marketing, eco-tourism and economic sustainability efforts which are available for tourists visiting Somerset County. Mr. Lane indicated that it would be helpful if the Highlands Council could help coordinate the regional branding concept for each county to work within. The Highlands Council could potentially help with funding for municipalities or assist with a feasibility study on tourism.

Mr. Spinelli briefly mentioned the Highlands Council staff would look into a feasibility study for a food processing center.

Dr. Furlong mentioned the USDA would require registration for a licensed food processing center.

Mr. Lane left the meeting 11:55am.

Land Access For Young/New Farmers

The Highlands staff previously met with North Jersey Resource Conservation and Development (RC&D), as well as the Foodshed Alliance, to better understand how the Highlands Council can assist with next generation farmers and attracting and supporting young farmers in the future of agricultural in the region.

Committee Chair Alstede mentioned he is involved in instructing young/new farmers with ideas on finding information for farming. The program Farm Start East will help new farmers with grant loans. Mr. Alstede also mentioned it is very helpful for young/new farmers to attend agricultural school.

At this time there was a discussion about how the Highlands Council could help coordinate information to young/new farmers. It was mentioned there are people who would like to run an agricultural business, but not as their sole income, rather more of a lifestyle choice and these are the individuals who could use help with a business plan.

Highlands Council Projects

Mr. Spinelli mentioned the Highlands staffing update of Jeff Everett assisting the Highlands Council staff on an agricultural program.

Dr. Furlong left the meeting at 12:25pm.

Next Steps

Committee Chair Alstede would like the next meeting scheduled in June.

The Highlands Council staff will review and get additional items together to present at the Agricultural Advisory Committee meeting in June.

The meeting adjourned at 12:32pm