

**HUNTERDON COUNTY PLANNING BOARD**

**Minutes – April 6, 2023**

**MEMBERS PRESENT:** Carol Hoffmann, Phil Greiner, Andy Borkin, Gabrielle Bolarakis, Page Stiger, Richard Dodds, Dana Desiderio, Tom Mathews

**ABSENT:** Marc Saluk, Natalie Zaman, Commissioner Director Rich, Commissioner Deputy Director Jeff Kuhl, Commissioner Van Doren

**STAFF PRESENT:** Bill Millette, Bob Hornby, Frank Bell, Katherine Fullerton, Sue Pena, Rebecca Deakin

Aaron Culton- County Counsel

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Planning Board Chair Carol Hoffmann read the Open Public Meetings Act notice and called the meeting to order at 8:16 A.M.

*"This meeting is being held in accordance with the provisions of the Open Public Meetings Act. Adequate notice has been provided by prominently posting and maintaining so posted throughout the year in the Office of the County Clerk, Hall of Records, Main Street, Flemington, New Jersey, a public place reserved for such announcements, and by mailing on or before January 19<sup>th</sup>, 2023 to The Hunterdon Democrat, The Express Times, Courier News, The Trenton Times, Star Ledger, and TAPinto, newspapers designated by the Hunterdon County Planning Board to receive such notices. Notice has also been posted online in the Hunterdon County News."*

**MINUTES OF THE MARCH 2, 2023 MEETING**

Motion to approve minutes with revisions, Richard Dodds; Andy Borkin seconded.

Planning Board Chair Carol Hoffmann stated that the Board now will recess the regular public meeting and go into a Public Hearing for the Farmland Preservation Plan. The regular public meeting will resume after the conclusion of the public hearing.

Planning Board Chair Carol Hoffmann read the Open Public Meetings Act notice and called the public hearing to order at 8:21 A.M.

*"This meeting is being held in accordance with the provisions of the Open Public Meetings Act. Adequate notice has been provided by prominently posting and maintaining so posted throughout the year in the Office of the County Clerk, Hall of Records, Main Street, Flemington, New Jersey, a public place reserved for such announcements, and by mailing on or before March 17<sup>th</sup>, 2023 to The Hunterdon Democrat, The Express Times, Courier News, The Trenton Times, Star Ledger, and TAPinto, newspapers designated by the Hunterdon County Planning Board to receive such notices. Notice has also been posted online in the Hunterdon County News."*

Chair Hoffmann introduced herself and stated that the Hunterdon County Planning Board is holding a public hearing on The Hunterdon County Comprehensive Farmland Preservation Plan. This hearing offers the public an opportunity to comment on the plan. Copies of the notice for the hearing and information containing the plan was sent by certified mail to the municipal clerks and secretaries of the planning boards in each municipality in Hunterdon County. In addition, the draft of the plan has been posted on the county website since January 26, 2023. The plan was prepared by The Land Conservancy of New Jersey in conjunction with the Planning Services staff. The Chair thanked the County CADB Administrator Bob Hornby for his work on the Plan and The Land Conservancy for their detailed analysis of the best farms for preservation in Hunterdon County. The plan was approved by the County Agricultural Development Board (CADB) at its March 9<sup>th</sup>, 2023 meeting. The comment period began on January 26<sup>th</sup>, 2023, when a web link was created to receive comments. There were 19 comments made prior to the CADB meeting. Staff resolved those comments to the satisfaction of the CADB. There were comments made by one person after the March 9<sup>th</sup> CADB meeting. The purpose of this meeting is to receive comments on the CADB approved plan.

The Planning Board Chair asked for a MOTION to open the public hearing. Richard Dodds made a motion to open the hearing. Phil Greiner SECONDED. All in Favor.

The County Farmland Administrator Bob Hornby and Barbara Heskins Davis from The Land Conservancy of New Jersey gave a presentation to the Planning Board on the revised Comprehensive Farmland Preservation Plan. The presentation slides are attached to these minutes.

Mr. Hornby presented some basic facts regarding agriculture in Hunterdon County: It is a \$92 million industry, and the County has more than 1,600 farms, most of which are family owned. The County preserved the first family farm in the state in 1985 and currently leads the State with 481 preserved farms covering more than 36,000 acres. The County has funded roughly 12% of the \$303 million spent on farmland preservation in the County. The rest of the funding has been contributed from a variety of non-profit, municipal, state, and federal sources. The current Hunterdon County Farmland Preservation Plan was adopted in December of 2008 as a part of the County Planning Incentive Grant program. State regulations enacted in 2019 require an update to the Plan on a 10-year basis for continued preservation cost share funding from the State Agriculture Development Committee (SADC). This legislation also included generous cost share funding for the preparation of the new plan. The Land Conservancy of NJ was contracted in the spring of 2022 and work on this Plan has been a collective effort from the CADB, Planning Staff, and The Land Conservancy of NJ. Robust public comment has been considered throughout the process of creating this guidance document for the next ten years of preservation. He then presented Barbara Heskins Davis, Vice-President for Programs at the Land Conservancy and lead contact throughout the updating of this Plan.

Mrs. Davis presented information on the eight chapters of the Comprehensive Farmland Preservation Plan. The first 3 chapters discuss the business of agriculture in Hunterdon County, with figures based on the census of agriculture. Chapters 6, 7, and 8 provide resource information; what the local farmers and County Ag Board can use if they need assistance for programs, funding, and policies. Chapter 4 is the history of Hunterdon County's current Farmland Preservation Program. Chapter 5 is the future of the preservation program. The County Ag Board wants to target County funding on the most productive farms. That was expressed strongly by the CADB at the first meeting last year.

- **Chapter I** focuses on farming and the land base in Hunterdon County. It talks about where farming is concentrated, what is being farmed and how. *Referring to a slide in the presentation, a snapshot of one of the maps from the plan.* The state requires a base map of agriculture in the county. The dark brown areas are preserved farms, light brown is farm assessed property, and anything in green is open space preserved land. We made sure that the maps show details and can be layered with other information to provide a more detailed explanation of the agricultural picture in Hunterdon County. Half of all the farm assessed land is crop land with woodlands with wetlands coming in a close second. There are graphics shown throughout the report. Using the maps and charts throughout the plan provide a picture of agricultural soil based in Hunterdon County. Nearly a 1/3 of all the soils in Hunterdon are either prime or of statewide importance.
- **Chapter II** looks at the Agricultural Industry. Trends in market value play a big role in finding future needs and markets. We were able to illustrate these trends and start to look forward. These charts are typical of the information and graphics that we used to describe these trends and where agricultural industry is currently in Hunterdon County. Most of the data came from the 2017 Census of Agriculture, which, although it is being updated currently, is our most recent confirmed data. We are including a sampling of agricultural services in the appendix of support services for the County. The County AG Board may be putting a link on their website to expand the listing.
- **Chapter III** talks about Land Use Planning, which is the basis for public preservation funding. If a town has plans for redevelopment, the State does not want to direct preservation funding for these areas to make sure they are not funding actions with contrary purposes. This section explores local and regional planning initiatives in the county and its relation to agricultural preservation. Charting population growth and change within Hunterdon County is an analysis that allows us to see where the growth is trending. Hunterdon County has relatively stable growth at a moderate to low rate over the past 10 years, much less than the population growth in the rest of the state.
- **Chapter IV** discusses the current Farmland Preservation Program. This section focuses on what farms have been preserved, how they have been preserved, and where. It also investigates how preservation is paid for and what programs the funding came from. Updating this plan will qualify Hunterdon County for continued state funds. Base grant funding is provided because of the plan update; Hunterdon County also has access to competitive grant funding which is part of a larger state pool. Over \$303 million has been spent on preserving farms in the county through the Farmland Preservation Program. Delaware

Township has the highest number and largest acreage of preserved farmland with 5,198 acres on 75 farms. Stockton, Califon, and Hampton each have at least 1 preserved farm which is the testament to the commitment to preserve farmland throughout the county.

- **Chapter V** discusses the future of the Farmland Preservation Program. It's the cornerstone of the plan and talks about the future of the program. It discusses why the county is targeting certain land and summarizes minimum eligibility and ranking criteria that prioritizes preservation. *Referring again to the presentation slides*, the next three slides explore the Tier approach to the Farmland program. In this plan update the county continues to support the preservation of the most productive farmland.
  - Tier I encompasses 15,362 acres, where the land is 50% tillable with 50% or more prime or statewide soils. These first-tier properties may qualify for county funding and are represented by the purple parcels on the map. The farms that qualify for state funding would be encouraged to apply directly to the SADC.
  - Tier II focuses on properties less than 40 acres but greater than 10 with 50% tillable and 50% prime or statewide soils which are adjacent to preserved farms and important for preservation. These farms are orange on the map, they start to fill in missing gaps in preservation, leading to a continuity of farmland which has a better long-term viability.
  - Other Farms are highly productive farms 10 – 40 acres which are more than 50% tillable and 50% prime soils which are not adjacent to preserved farmland. The soil eligibility is more selective and does not include statewide soils.
  - All applications are at the discretion of the CADB as to whether it will recommend preservation.
- **Chapter VI** discusses the Agricultural Economic Development. It looks at businesses both in terms of infrastructure and financing, anticipated agricultural trends, and how county, state, and private programs support agricultural business through marketing, education, and information.
- **Chapter VII** describes federal and state programs available to farmers, including funding and program requirements for soil and water conservation, energy conservation, and waste management. It also describes outreach and incentives for farmers looking to implement resource conservation practices.
- **Chapter VIII** discusses existing and potential agricultural support tools, such as, Right to Farm Ordinances & Agricultural Mediation Programs, Permit Streamlining, and Agricultural Education and Promotion. Supporting farmers on the Right to Farm is integral to the CADB's mission. This chapter explores what is needed to help farmers run their operation, whether they have been farming in the county for decades or are just starting out. Hunterdon County ranks first for new farms in the state which is an exciting statistic and one that we hope predicts a healthy future for farming in the county.

Mrs. Davis concluded by stating that they are pleased that the CADB approved the Plan at its March meeting. We are here today to get comments from the Board and public and for the Board to consider it for adoption as an element of the County Master Plan. The Plan will then go to the County Commissioners on May 2<sup>nd</sup> to accept the plan, and the plan will be final. The SADC approved the plan at their March meeting.

Chair Hoffmann asked if the Board had any questions or comments.

There was a question about the definition of Statewide soil. Mrs. Davis explained that the Natural Resource Conservation Service maps soils for different uses. They have three categories for agricultural soils, i.e., soils that are capable for agricultural production. Prime soils are the best agricultural soils; statewide important soils are capable of producing high yields of crops when treated and managed according to acceptable farming methods.

A Board member asked about the goals that were mentioned in the plan. There is a goal of preserving one thousand acres a year. Previously, the goal was fifteen hundred acres a year. Is that a reflection that we have preserved the best farms already? Mrs. Davis explained that the farm preservation program is well known, so there is probably a reason if a farm hasn't been preserved yet. There are opportunities for these farms to be preserved, but these opportunities are harder. One thousand acres a year is a strong goal and a realistic goal.

There was a question regarding the need for farms qualified for preservation to be developable and if the acres presented as able to be preserved reflected the developable qualifications. Every application that comes to the County for preservation is at the discretion of the CADB, and they will make sure that it the application meets all the requirements for County and State preservation.

There was a question noting that in 2008 there were 68,000 acres in farmland, then in 2012 it dropped to 58,000 acres. Since then, the acreage in farmland has gone up again. The Board member asked if this was due to the recession. Mrs. Davis responded that variabilities can be seen in data and sometimes people can't keep up their farmland assessments.

Chair Hoffmann asked if there were any other questions from the Board. As there were none, the hearing was opened to public comment. Chair Hoffmann stated that these comments are for the farmland plan, and we ask that you keep your comments to three minutes. This is recorded and the minutes will be posted on the Hunterdon County Planning Board website when approved. If you have comments for the regular Planning Board meeting, we will take those after this hearing is over. For comments, please state your name and your municipality.

Barbara Sachau from Raritan Township expressed concern about the focus of farms that we preserve. We are experiencing chaos in the country in relation to the food shortage. The County should focus on saving farms that are producing foods we eat in Hunterdon County; that should be the priority. She also expressed concern about the use of chemical pesticides that farms use to hurt and kill people and animals. She suggested that only clean farms should be preserved.

Bob Hornby, CADB Administrator, explained that farms 40 acres and over are best suited for row-cropping. Vegetable farmers generally like farms under 40 acres. The expectation with the Other category is to draw in the vegetable farmers. One of the strengths of the program is that we don't tell the farmers how to farm. We do an easement on the farm so that it stays in agricultural use, and we trust the farmers to farm. In terms to the chemical side of this, it goes back to the fact that we don't tell the farmers how to farm. It is not something the county has regulatory authority on. Through Rutgers and the Ag Extension Services there are pesticide classes. Farmers are a lot more regulated than the landscape industry in terms of what they can spray and the training required. We have a lot of confidence in the program. Since it is a permanent easement, you can't look at what's on the ground today, but the future.

Ms. Sachau suggested that we should tell farmers how to farm as we are funding it with taxpayer dollars to support the program.? She doesn't think we are telling them; it's an incentive that you might give to farmers to make them want to do better. There's no regulatory idea here. She continued by stating that a report by the Land Conservancy said that only 12% are producing vegetables. The taxpayer money should be used as an incentive.

Chair Hoffmann asked if there was any more public comment. No more public comment.

Chair Hoffmann made a MOTION to close public comment, SECONDED by Richard Dodds, All in favor.

Chair Hoffmann asked if there was any other comment from the board. Andrew Borkin replied that it appears to be a very well thought out plan. Thank you to Bob Hornby and Barbara Heskens Davis for an excellent job.

Chair Hoffmann asked for a MOTION TO ADOPT the 2023 Hunterdon County Comprehensive Farmland Preservation Plan with amendments as recommended by staff.

Carol Hoffmann, Chair			X			
Andy Borkin, Vice Chair			X			
Phil Greiner, Secretary			X			
Dana Desiderio	X		X			
Page Stiger			X			
Richard Dodds		X	X			
Gabrielle Bolarakis (Alternate)			X			
Tom Mathews (County Engineer)			X			
Zach Rich (Commissioner Director)						X
Jeff Kuhl (Commissioner Deputy Director)						X
Shaun Van Doren (Commissioner Alternate)						X

**8 IN FAVOR, 3 ABSENT, MOTION CARRIED**

A resolution approving of the Hunterdon County Comprehensive Farmland Preservation Plan as an element of the Hunterdon County Growth Management Plan will be forwarded to the Board of County Commissioners.

The Chair closed the public hearing and resumed the regular Planning Board Meeting.

**COUNTY COMMISSIONER UPDATE**

There were no Commissioners present to give an update.

**STAFF UPDATES**

Staff updates were not included on the agenda, staff was present to answer any questions from the Board. There were no questions.

**COMMITTEE REPORTS**

Executive Committee:

Carol reported that the Executive Committee did not meet this past month. Staff is working on dates for future Breakfast Talks. DEP seems interested about the section we would like them to talk about.

DRC Committee Report:

Chair Hoffmann said that we have no new applications to review at this time. An email will be sent if we need volunteers for April 20<sup>th</sup> if needed.

Transportation: Tom Mathews

Tom reported:

- U19 is now open on Baptist Church Road
- R24 is now open in Readington Township
- The resurfacing of the Columbia Trail and Landsdown Trail has been completed.
- State Route 173 NJDOT announced that they will start resurfacing. Bloomsbury, Bethlehem, Union Township will be impacted.
- Rock Fall Mitigation has started up again on Route 78.

Andy asked if the County was looking at the stream on Westcott Drive the other day. Tom replied that they were there. The two culverts have filled up and are still 75% clogged since Ida. We are going to hire

somebody to do the job. The second part of the project is an OEM project in collaboration with DPW. Yesterday's meeting was to review the situation and get direction.

Old Business/New Business:

No business to discuss currently.

Public Comment:

No public comment at this time.

There was no further business to be brought before the Board. Richard made a motion to adjourn the Planning Board meeting, Dana seconded. Meeting was adjourned at 9:20AM.

**NEXT MEETING DATE:** Thursday May 4, 2023, at 8:15 AM

Susan Pena for Secretary, Phil Greiner