

Minutes, Gardiner Open Space Commission Meeting

March 6, 2023 at 6-8:20 PM

Hybrid Meeting/ Town Hall and on Zoom

Attendance:

Present in Town Hall: Jean-Ann McGrane, Kay Hoiby, Linda Geary, Laura Rose, Tara Hoey

Zoom: Kellie George, Laura Wong Pan and guests:
David Behm and Christie DeBoer

Regular Business

Approval of February Minutes: Motion made by Kay to approve, seconded by Tara, unanimous approval, no objections.

Next meeting scheduled for: April 10, 2023, 6-7:30 PM

Quote to be offered by: Jean

Guest Speaker

David Behm of NYS Ag and Markets was present to discuss the Ag and Markets Grant.

His talk included an overview of the requirements of the grantor, the grant application, information about timelines, maximum amounts offered, and what is expected of the applicant after an award is agreed upon.

They will be looking for applications this year starting in May.

He referred us to this web address:

[https:// agriculture.ny.gov/land-and-water/farmland protection](https://agriculture.ny.gov/land-and-water/farmland-protection)

Said to scroll down the page to General Resources.

He introduced himself, said he's been with Ag and Markets for 18 years and expects to stay with them moving forward. Said he will be the go-to person to work with throughout the process, if the next round is a Request

for Applications (RFA.) It could also be a Request for Proposals (RFP,) in which case his involvement would happen only prior to the proposal being submitted.

He talked about the difference between RFA and RFP and said he can't tell us which they will be doing this year yet.

He talked about the purpose of the grant, which is to help create conservation easements in NYS, on working farmlands that support industry and commerce. Some of the money is also meant to support various goals, including food security, climate resilience and water source protection. The idea is to keep it possible for a farm to remain a farm over generations. In the last round of grants, over \$50 million was awarded.

We as a town are new on his radar, but our region is part of where this money is meant to be targeted. He made clear that he's willing to work with us moving forward. About 2 million could be made available to us in this round of grants, if we choose a project and get the application in on time. A project can include a single, or multiple farms.

The top percentage they fund is 87.5% but this can be less depending on how the grant is written, what the owner is willing to give in exchange for it and other partners that may become involved in funding the conservation easement. (Partners can include Federal, not-for-profit, private sources, and/or the landowner.)

He stressed that they aren't doing easements that will, for example, save wildlife over getting the haying done in a timely manner.

In the past, the goals of various grant providers have differed, creating complications in the formation of the conservation easements, so he wanted to be sure we understood what this one is about.

He expressed a preference for use of their easement template, but also a willingness to use an alternative, and fund at a lower level.

He talked about requirements for the Mid-Hudson Region, including: Size: a minimum of 45 acres; and Soil Type: prime farmland soils and soils of statewide importance are preferred, but don't have to cover the whole of the parcel(s.) Their percentage requirement also will vary depending on the use of the parcel (ex. a horse farm needs less prime soil than a field crop operation does.)

Another requirement involves the percentage of the property engaged in productive farm activity. There are some quirks in this (ex.) on a cattle farm, the area you store their feed in isn't included in the active farm op.

He said to get started, we need to submit a site plan to him of the farm(s) we have in mind. It can be relatively simple; here's the house, here's the land being used for farm production and this is the section of the property that will be conserved.

He can help us see if the property meets the criteria they require once he sees a site plan. He emphasized the importance of a site plan as a first step several times during this part of his presentation.

Linda asked if unique crops matter and he referred her to Article 25AA Section 300 of NYS Ag and Markets Law.

Crops, Livestock, Livestock Products) to determine eligibility.

Tara said we have a copy of the documents David is referring to in our Google Drive, under Grants.

Laura R asked if a religious organization can be funded and he said it would depend on if their farm produced products for general commerce, vs. for commerce within their community only. He said the heart of this grant is its support for commercial operations.

David then talked about the timeline for completing the project, which is four years in total including two years after a contract is first drafted. It takes some time to get to that contract. He said payments are made in 4 installments, and talked about which phase the project had to be at for each payment to be issued. He walked us through all of the tasks that need to be completed at each phase of the project.

His talk took about 1 hour and 20 minutes. When he concluded, he left the meeting.

We then asked Christie DeBoer to give us feedback on Walkkill Valley Land Trust's experience in applying for this grant. They had applied for it when working on the Taliaferro conservation easement in New Paltz.

Group Discussion

We discussed that we don't have project in mind yet.
How are we going to get to this point?
Can we do it before May?

Tara said she wants to do a test run of the Ag and Markets grant application using Old Ford Farm and Becky Fullam, as Becky has agreed to help and also may want to preserve one day.

Laura R said we have a list from the CPP that tells us which the top farms are, in terms of the urgency to preserve them, and maybe we should start at the top of that list and work our way down. We can use this ranking system to justify the decisions we make about what to preserve. Old Ford Farm isn't at the top of this list.

Jean pointed out that you need a right project and a willing landowner to get to the point of creating a conservation easement and that developing these relationships will take time.

We have information we can use, in the NRI about soils, size, climate resiliency scoring and water resources, as well as the ranked lists from the CPP. We also now have a great deal of information from David Behm to digest, so maybe we should be looking at all of this before reaching out to anyone.

We have done some outreach through our educational programming, but not enough to consider it thorough.

Christie DeBoer offered to assist us with outreach and we as a group have to decide if we want to share information and accept that assistance.

We discussed briefly whether it would be suitable for us to apply in tandem with WVLT for this grant. It could be helpful long term to have them as a partner, especially in terms of the stewardship end of holding the easement.

Does the Town of Gardiner want to hold more conservation easements or would the preference be to have WVLT hold them?
We need to discuss this further.

Laura R said she would like to start direct outreach from the top down of the CPP scoring, so maybe each of us willing could take 5 farms, look at their size, soils, etc. and then do direct outreach. We don't have to offer anything, just see how they feel about conservation easements and get an idea about willingness. Take a first step towards beginning relationships.

Jean expressed concern that since we're merging with a different group, and even if many of the members of this group do join that one, the new group may make different choices.

Linda said she doesn't think we should wait for a merger to take action.

Jean said we could consider a workshop meeting in which we would all look at the criteria together. She also asked where to access all of the information that needs to be reviewed; Tara to send links for this to the group.

Next Public Education Session is scheduled. (Kay)

March 13, 2023, 7 PM in Town Hall and via Zoom.

Group reviewed planning details for the event, which is coming up in a week. To encourage participation, Tara wrote to Every farmer in Gardiner, sending a flyer and personal notes; the town sent out an email blast and press releases have been sent to local papers.

Meeting ran late; other agenda items held to next meeting.