

Harvard Agricultural Advisory Commission (HAAC)

Town of Harvard, MA

Minutes of Meeting January 18, 2022 Approved March 30, 2022

Meeting was called to order 9:18am

Members Present: Kerri Green - Chair, Rob Traver, Matt Varrell

This meeting was called outside of the regular monthly schedule to discuss some agriculturally related bills that are being considered at an upcoming state public hearing before the Joint Revenue Committee Friday, January 21, 2022.

Green explained she had reached out to members of the Select Board as a resident asking them to consider writing in support of the three bills being considered. In response to her email the Chair of the Select Board offered to testify on behalf of Harvard at the hearing, and in order to do so the Commission would need to discuss the bills in an open meeting and vote to ask the Select Board to support the bills on behalf of Harvard & it's agricultural community.

Summary of bills being considered provided by MA Farm Bureau.

HB 3059 – *This bill would allow parcels of less than 5 acres to qualify for Chapter 61a so long as 1) the same landowner has a total of 5 or more acres in production. The 5 acres may be comprised of separate parcels; 2) The parcels making up these 5 acres would not have to be contiguous, so long as they are within 10 miles of each other or in the same municipality and are farmed by a single farm entity.*

Chapter 61a provides for an agricultural property tax rate that is commensurate with the value of the agricultural product being grown or raised. Without 61a many farmers would be paying a commercial or residential tax rate which challenges the financial sustainability of producing livestock or crops. 61a helps farmers to be more profitable, creates an incentive for landowners to lease land to farmers, and helps to preserve open space.

Currently, a parcel of land needs to consist of at least 5 contiguous acres in order to qualify for protection under Chapter 61a. As the demand for farmland has increased and supply has diminished, we have increasingly seen farmers (particularly new farmers) forced to take on parcels of less than 5 acres. Presently, these farmers are suffering through very high property tax rates which severely challenges their ability to be viable.

HB 3061 – *This bill would change the deadline for filing for Chapters 61, 61a and 61B to Dec. 1. Presently, the deadline is Oct. 1 – typically a very busy time for farmers who are often involved in harvest activities in the preceding months.*

SB 1833 - *Modeled after a New York law, this bill would exempt new and renovated farm buildings from property tax for a period of 10 years. While farmland is taxed at an agricultural rate under Chapter 61a, there is no analogous program for property taxes on agricultural buildings. They are often taxed at a commercial rate which is challenging with seasonal farm businesses. This bill would ease the tax burden on farmers and create an incentive to invest in the agricultural infrastructure of the Commonwealth.*

Traver posed being specific as to the context of the testimony that the SB chair will provide. Discussion as to what points/position we would like to be said. Supporting topics related to a self-sufficient local food systems, climate resilience, reinvestment of funds into agricultural business helps ensure viability. Members pointed out that it would be important to speak to Harvard and the Commonwealth rather than just Harvard specifically.

In regards to the expansion of agricultural members, this bill would allow a broader mosaic of agriculture, strengthening the agricultural sector in the Commonwealth. Talking points that aren't just commenting in principle, but actual points that will get us to where we want to be.

In regards to chapter lands HB3061 language that appeared to help fix loopholes that allow the program to be taken advantage of. Varrell said he supports that. Green said she would compare the law enacted to the one with the amendments, but believes that language is already part of what is on the books and the only amendments were the deadline date. But would confirm.

Green said she would put together a list of talking points as discussed to send to the SB chair to use in his testimony.

Varrell made a motion for the Harvard Agricultural Commission to support all 3 bills presented/discussed and request the Select Board to provide testimony to the legislature with that support. Traver seconded. All were in favor.

Traver made a motion to permit Green to compile a set of talking points for the SB to use in their testimony. Varrell seconded. All were in favor.

Green said she would speak to the SB at their meeting that evening and encouraged other members to join her if they were available. But would provide and update at the regularly scheduled meeting at the end of the month.

Traver made a motion to adjourn - Varrell seconded - All were in favor - Meeting adjourned 10:03am

Submitted by: Kerri Green