

Harvard Agricultural Advisory Commission (HAAC)

Town of Harvard, MA

Minutes of Meeting January 29, 2020
Approved February 26, 2020

Present: Kerri Green (chair), Frank Carlson, Laura McGovern, Nicole Schmidt, Rob Traver, Christiane Turnheim, Matt Varrell

Guests: Scott Hayward, Marc Seigny

Meeting called to order 7:05 pm. Minutes of 10 December were approved.

Green presented an update of the HAAC proposed FY21 budget. Green met with the Finance Committee and they are reviewing the proposed numbers. It is unclear if the budget will be funded as proposed (\$26,000). No commitments were made by FinCom. A "District Land Technical Assistance Program" grant application has been submitted by the Town to cover the cost of the planned Fiscal Impact Study for the Town. If the grant were to be awarded, it would supplement the HAAC budget. Green stressed the need for a town-wide agricultural brochure if the MVP grant is not awarded. The brochure is a \$9,000 line item.

Marc Seigny was in attendance to discuss the possibility of modifying the town bylaw pertaining to marijuana cultivation setbacks. He was advocating for a change of the property line setback from 200 to 300 feet. The Town previously adopted the cultivation bylaw, although the HAAC was not involved according to Carlson. The bylaws that were created focused on commercial and private cultivation. The state has established requirements for security and visibility restrictions. Per Seigny, the bylaws were not well thought out and were rushed through the process due to deadlines established by the state. The Bylaw currently dictates a 200-foot setback for cultivation. The proposal is to increase the setback to 300 feet in order to reduce visual and odor impacts. McGovern stated allowing greenhouses (which are currently prohibited) would solve the issue. Turnheim stated most towns currently allow a less than 200 foot setback. Green asked if a bylaw change is made, would it affect current petitioners. Seigny stated petitioners who have submitted their application would be grandfathered. Turnheim raised the topic of hemp cultivation. It has the same odor issues but is not regulated in the same manner as marijuana. Turnheim stated she would oppose any new regulations that further restricts agricultural uses. McGovern advocated for allowing greenhouses for cultivation to support farmers, not create additional barriers. She stated she believed the town had previously rejected the use of greenhouses for no good reason. Traver indicated a concern of light pollution from the use of greenhouses. Varrell raised the question if the entire bylaw is in need of revamping, rather than just modifying a single component such as setbacks. The current bylaw requires a Special Permit from the Planning Board so an application can be rejected for any reason. Green expressed a concern over the Planning Board fully researching topics before making their recommendations and making decisions. Green offered that the HAAC can speak directly to the Planning Board, as needed.

Scott Hayward was in attendance to discuss revamping the town's farmers market. Hayward stated he wants to improve the town's "social cohesion" and promote a shared vision of collaboration between established farms and non-agricultural residents. He wishes to promote a renewed farmer's market that promotes Harvard-based farms but understands there are challenges because many farms in town already have their own stands and participation can add cost and time constraints. Hayward wants local farms to have a larger presence and visibility in the town center – something that makes everyone prosper. Schmidt stated she met with the existing farmer's market board and they stated their challenges have been a lack of volunteers in addition to other obstacles. Hayward wishes to move the market into the "downtown area," to either the big, little or small town common. Green stated that she felt previous markets were "socializing markets," not shopping markets and that made participation by local farms challenging. Hayward stated that, to be successful, the market needs to draw people from outside Harvard and it could take several years to be successful. Varrell suggested Hayward look into the "Backyard Bolton" markets as a possible model and considering signage on Routes 2 and 495 to draw non-residents in to the market. A discussion ensued about effective and attractive signage being an important component of publicity. Green suggested speaking to the Board of Selectmen about signage considerations. The Massachusetts Department of Agriculture has a farmer's market program guide and offers materials that may be of value. There was a discussion of why the town is not doing a better job of promoting existing farm businesses, rather than trying to bring in new businesses that need to build infrastructure to become established. Hayward stated the first planned market event is "Spring Fest," scheduled for May 9. The format will be based on the successful Decemberfest event and will occur on the same day as the Apple Blossom Festival.

HAAC discussed the next "Ag Gathering" event(s). There was discussion of a possible movie night to show "The Biggest Little Farm." A suitable venue needs to be found (possibly Fivesparks). Schmidt will evaluate possible suitable dates at Fivesparks. Turnheim suggested holding other discussions at or apart from the movie night, such growing season questions.

Turnheim stated she will distribute an update on the Community Resilience Working Group to members.

McGovern stated she is interested in giving up her full member status in HAAC to become an alternate member. After a brief discussion, it was decided that Turnheim will become a full member and McGovern will change to an alternate member of the Commission.

There was a discussion of the need to establishing a co-chair of the Commission in the event that Kerri is not available to attend a future meeting. The members decided appointing a co-chair was unnecessary at this time.

It was announced that the Town of Bolton is hosting a Farm Succession Workshop on February 19th.

The next HHAC meeting was scheduled for February 26, 2020.

Meeting adjourned 9:11 pm.

Submitted by Varrell