

Knox Agricultural Advisory Committee
Meeting of August 18, 2021
Knox Town Hall

Summary

Present: Gary Kleppel, Joshua Rockwood, Ken Saddlemire, Brian Wilson
Absent: Jay Francis Resigned: Jessica Gaige

This was the first meeting of the Knox Agricultural Advisory Committee (AAC) since February 19th, 2020. The committee took up the old business from than date.

7:00 **Convene**
Old business

Follow-on to the Farm Transition Workshop – Committee members were pleased with the results of the farm transition workshop (February 8th, 2020) and expressed an interest in sponsoring a similar event in the future. The committee discussed several possibilities for a follow-on event, including:

Repeating the transition workshop

Reaching out to participants of the first event to find out what kind of follow-on event would be useful to them

Sponsoring an event focused on transitioning in farming (in Knox) for young and aspiring farmers

Have an event to attract more small-holder farmers and to keep the farmers that we have in Knox (there is a lot of reasonably priced land available n Knox)

The committee will continue discussion of this topic at its September meeting.

Raising awareness of farming in Knox – The AAC has long been interested making people aware of the role of farming in Knox and in the things that our local farms produce. Amy Pokorny informed the committee that the Farms & Artisans Tour will need to be cancelled this year due to the spread of the delta variant of covid-19.

Two steps toward increasing the awareness of farming in Knox were put forward: (1) Have the AAC chair report on AAC activities at monthly Town Board meetings (Council member Ken Saddlemire has been doing this as well), and (2) Request a small grant (ca. \$500) from the Town Board to create a newsletter that would be mailed to everyone in town. The newsletter would highlight the activities of the AAC, list and describe the farms and farmers of Knox, and include a classified section alerting residents about products that are available for direct sales from farms in town.

It was also suggested that we might try to expand the newsletter to include farms in the other Hilltowns. Ken Saddlemire noted that Bonnie Conklin with questions about the Knox AAC, possibly because she is interested in creating an AAC in the town of Berne. Our committee discussed the possibly creating a Hilltowns Agricultural Committee.

New Business

Filling the vacancy on the AAC – Jessica Gaige resigned from the AAC because she is getting married and moving away. Two names were put forward as possible replacements: Nick Tommell and Earl Barcomb. We will revisit this issue next month and allow members to nominate additional potential

candidates. Once we have a slate of potential candidates, the AAC chair will contact each to ascertain their interest in serving. The AAC members will select a candidate to recommend to the Town Board to fill the vacancy. Ken Saddlemire will present the name of that candidate to the Town Board for consideration and possible appointment to the AAC.

Our new agenda – Two important issues were considered by the committee for attention: (1) Shortages of livestock processing and meat packing facilities; and (2) Poor roadway conditions for moving farm equipment. Both of these issues directly impact Knox’s farmers, and both involve infrastructure that affect the security of our food supply-chain and the safety of farmers who must move equipment on public roads.

1. Shortages of livestock processing and meat packing facilities: Committee members described the difficulty of getting access to both USDA and non-USDA facilities, particularly during the pandemic, when large mid-western producers, unable to access large, mid-western packing facilities, flooded USDA facilities in the Northeast. Committee members also described manpower shortages that have caused farmers to lose access to processing facilities they have used in the past.

Several possible solutions were discussed. First, Pennsylvania, Vermont and Massachusetts have re-authorized their state inspection systems, which will allow producers to circumvent USDA inspection (so long as the meat is sold within that state). This will relieve some of the pressure on USDA facilities and provide greater access to packing facilities to farmers in those states, and may be a good idea in New York. Cornell Cooperative Extension agents are interested in this solution and are willing to work with us if we decided to approach the Legislature on this issue. Funds to re-implement the NY State meat inspection system may be available through the federal infrastructure bill (particularly the reconciliation bill) or through existing covid relief funds.

Second, manpower shortages plague the meat packing industry. This has created serious difficulties for farmers in Knox, who need to get animals processed on specific, relatively inflexible, schedules but cannot get appointments at processing facilities due to staffing shortages at those facilities. Several slaughtering and butchering programs exist within the state, including those at SUNY Cobleskill and SUNY Adirondack. Furthermore, artisanal butchers in New York and nearby states may have insights into workforce issues and their potential solutions. It was suggested that we invite representatives from the academic meat processing programs, and possibly butchers to meet with the AAC to consider solutions to the staffing shortages in local meat packing plants.

Third, it was suggested that the AAC investigate mobile meat packing facilities and ascertain whether these might provide relief to farmers in Knox and other Hilltowns communities. This possibility, while not successful at Glynwood Center in the mid-Hudson Valley, might be successful in the Hilltowns. The committee will investigate this potential solution further.

2. Poor roadway conditions for moving farm equipment: AAC members recounted incidences in which, while moving farm equipment on local roads, drivers behaved badly, and sometimes dangerously and destructively, with respect to the farmers and their property. The critical nature of this issue has not been lost on Albany County, which included the need to improve road infrastructure for agricultural use in its 2020 Farmland Protection Plan. Solutions as simple and immediate as signage alerting drivers to the likelihood that farm vehicles will be using certain roads, to solutions involving re-engineering of roadways exist. Funds may be available from both county and federal (infrastructure bill) sources to address this issue. The AAC should act quickly as availability of some of these funds will be short-lived.

Overarching approach: Access to the funds and programs needed to address the two infrastructure issues described above will depend in large part on State government. To that end, it was suggested that the AAC take advantage of the fact that the chair of the NY State Senate Agriculture Committee, Michelle Hinchey, represents the residents of our senatorial district, and that she is

interested in issues that involve farmers in her district. Once the AAC has a clear understanding of the issues and agreement on possible solutions to them, we will arrange to meet with the senator (and possibly invite farmers from throughout the district) to discuss ways in which New York State's resources can be applied to the solution of these problems.

Comments and discussion

It was suggested that the AAC create a list of farm items for sale (or barter) for the Town's website. It was pointed out that such a list exists, but that it has not gotten much interest. Perhaps efforts to raise awareness of agriculture in Knox, as described above, will result in great activity.

9:00 **Adjourn**