

PENINSULA AND AREA AGRICULTURAL COMMISSION

Held at Saanich Municipal Hall, Committee Room 2 and via MsTeams

Thursday, October 10, 2024, 7:00 p.m.

Present: Chair Katie Underwood; Linda Geggie; Jenni Michell (via Teams); Terry Michell; Larry Sluggett; Robin Tunnicliffe (via Teams) Dianne Williamson; and Isobel Hoffmann, Recording Secretary.

Guests: Noah Brotman, CRD; Megan Halstead, Regional Agrologist; Mike Doehnel; Councillor Graham (C. Saanich); Anita Bull; Kathleen Zimmerman; Bob Maxwell;

Regrets: Councillors De Vries (Saanich), Marshall (N. Saanich) and Paltiel (C. Saanich)

APPROVAL OF MINUTES

MOVED by Linda Geggie and Seconded by Dianne Williamson: "That the Minutes of September 12, 2024 be adopted as circulated."

CARRIED

CHAIR'S REMARKS – Robin Tunnicliffe (via zoom)

- The TOR review by Central Saanich is now entering its second year.
- Last week Central Saanich sent a letter to the CRD Board suggesting PAAC become a committee of the CRD. Several PAAC members indicated this is not a preferred route for PAAC with valid reasons: no strong legislated CRD mandate to protect agriculture; most member municipalities don't have farmland; becoming part of the CRD would keep us at arm's length from the member municipalities; location has drawbacks. (more discussion page 4).
- The time and effort spent by PAAC members advocating for PAAC has been hard on morale.
- Central Saanich has promised a revised TOR by the end of the year.
- Plans for the illegal fill dumping workshop are being finalized (see discussion on page 2).
- The need for this workshop was recently re-affirmed by a denial from a municipality that there is no illegal fill dumping in their area, but she had documents indicating that hundreds of thousands of cubic metres of all kinds of waste and fill has been dumped on a site 10 minutes from the Municipal Hall.
- In Italy the Mafia is now trading in garbage and illegal dumping as there is money to be made; toxins being dumped on farmlands have caused cancer.
- The timing of this workshop is relevant as the problem continues to grow and if we can provide municipal staff and councillors the tools they need to address the issue it will pay in the long run to save farmland.

COUNCIL REPRESENTATIVE REMARKS – no Councillors Present

TREASURER'S REPORT – Jenni Michell

- PAAC funds have been reinvested in a GIC in the amount of \$12,805.
- The checking account has a balance of \$950.

SPEAKER'S BUREAU:

Councillor Chris Graham, CPA, Central Saanich – CRA Lifetime Exemption for Farmers

Councillor Graham stated:

- Rules regarding property purchases before 1987 are different from present day rules.

- The current lifetime exemption is \$1,116,000; next year it will be \$1,125,000.
- Normally the residence and the building lot are exempt.
- With purchases before 1987, you must have farmed the property in the year prior to selling it.
- If you purchased after 1987 and plan to sell, you have to prove the farm revenue was your principle source of income for the previous two years, and you farmed consistently.
- If you can prove these qualifications, it is not such a huge hurdle.

Larry Sluggett stated his farm has been in the family for generations and they have now incorporated the business. The Ministry of Agriculture has a land matching programme to help young farmers lease land because it is too expensive to buy; this policy works against farmers because if you lease your land you lose the exemption.

General discussion ensued regarding fluctuating farm income from year to year which could affect the threshold for farm tax, but if the farmer has expenses showing he has bought equipment, fertilizer, seed, etc. that should be taken into account.

Councillor Graham advised if there are concerns with the lifetime exemption, a lawyer should be contacted to plan a tax strategy before you die to ease the transition. He acknowledged there are a lot of grey areas in the CRA rules.

CORRESPONDENCE: None

AGRICULTURAL ISSUES: New and Ongoing

Dumping Fill on Farmland Workshop

– Wednesday, November 13, 2024, Saanich Fairgrounds

Plans are progressing well:

- Speakers confirmed; meeting rooms and kitchen booked at the Saanich Fairgrounds and supplies ordered – AV equipment, dishes, coffee pots, etc.
- Most of the invitations have been emailed to various groups: municipal councils and staff; CRD, Ministry of Agriculture and Ministry of Environment; First Nations; community associations; farmers; trucking and hauling companies; Urban Development Institute; the Planning Institute of BC; agricultural groups and a few others.
- Agreed to email development companies as well so there is a good cross section.
- Given the current issues with organic compost (see discussion page 3), perhaps we should consider inviting soil suppliers to the workshop.
- Registration has been set up through EventBrite, although this has not been without problems as some people are unable to register.
- The poster has been reformatted; a couple of minor changes still to be made.
- The Agenda has been drafted, with timelines. Basically allowing 30 minutes for each speaker (4 presentations), which includes Q&A time.
- Breakout round-table discussions immediately after lunch, with a final speaker and then closing remarks.
- Rental rate for the rooms is \$2,185. As we don't know exact number of attendees, we have to keep both the smaller and larger rooms booked. Questioned if a lower rate could be negotiated as we are a farm organization. Suggested to check with the North and South Saanich Agricultural Society.

- Estimated rental of AV equipment, dishes, food, and incidentals could be \$3,100+.
- Regarding marketing the event, PAAC members were asked to send information to their networks .
- We will need volunteers for the event, including facilitators at each table during the breakout session.
- Megan offered to arrange for a video of the speakers, which could then be circulated to attendees after the meeting and she will also help with an application for funding to the Knowledge Transfer Program offered through the Ministry.
- Details such as lunch, refreshments, and equipment rentals required can be discussed at a separate sub-committee meeting.

MOTION: Moved by Robin Tunnicliffe and Seconded by Linda Geggie: “That PAAC approve up to \$3,500 in expenses for the Illegal Fill Dumping Workshop on November 13, 2024, with funds coming from the PAAC Education Fund held by the District of Saanich.”

CARRIED

Issues with Local Compost & Testing: Katie Underwood

Anita Bull stated:

- She purchased compost from the same supplier as Katie Underwood and now has a high toxic level in her soil.
- The damage from the compost just about wiped her farm out and she has considered filing a lawsuit against the supplier. The greenhouse and the pots are also contaminated.
- Lab testing was done; the soil contains black root fungus as well as other contaminants. The soil was high in salt and boron.
- Most of her plants had root rot and no-one seems to care about how we stop it.
- They have to finish the farming year so she can calculate the total loss for 2024.
- She has a record of costs and profits for the past five years as a baseline.
- Germination rate is usually 95%. With this soil it is 50% at the most. She kept re-seeding until the seed ran out. Those squash plants that did germinate turned a lemon-yellow and then didn't green-up until 3 weeks ago.
- For someone who farms as their primary income this could be devastating.
- There has to be someone we could speak to about this as the company doesn't seem to care, other than they offered to refund the money for the soil.
- She has purchased from this same company for many years and partly because they said that Saanich Organics uses their soil – she thought that was a good recommendation.
- She is concerned about protecting other farmers from this experience. Soils should be tested by the Ministry of Agriculture.

*****Dianne Williamson left the meeting at 8:00 pm*****

General discussion ensued, noting the following:

- Soil starters should not be used without having a full report of what is in the soil.
- A certain amount of boron is needed in the soil, but too much makes it toxic.
- Noted many soil companies have the same supplier.
- Should the province (ie. the Ministry of Agriculture) not take on the task of soil testing?
- Testing is done in other parts of Canada, but not on the Island. It is expensive to test for elements and heavy metals.
- Perhaps this is something Country Life Magazine could investigate.

Farm Tax Rates

- This issue was discussed at the UBCM in September.
- The BCAA is the the provincial authority who oversees and enforces the farm tax rate.
- It appears there are many “farmers” who meet the minimum threshold (\$2500) in order to claim farm tax status. This could be met by having a few chickens and selling eggs for \$8 a dozen.
- There is definitely abuse of the system.
- The threshold was reviewed years ago and was raised from \$1,000 to \$2,500
- The push to review this again should come from senior levels of government, such as the Ministry of Agriculture or Ministry of Finance - not PAAC.
- SIFI had a meeting about Farm Tax Rates in the spring, with senior management attending from BCAA. A suggestion at that meeting was the threshold should be raised to \$10,000; the first year of operation would not count as the farm is being developed.
- The threshold should be tied to land classification as the crop yield depends on the condition of the land.
- Farm tax status should also be tied to leasing: if you need to get a five year lease to get farm status, it will not only help the farmer, but provide food security too.
- Also up for consideration could be hay lands, hedgerows etc. These lands provide food to 80% of insects who live in the soil, as well as food and shelter for migratory birds in the winter. Also, this land would not have had illegal fill or boron piled onto it.
- Why do we have to have just one threshold level of \$2,500, and should land that is being held for agriculture use qualify for exemption?
- If the rate was increased there will likely be massive opposition.
- Consideration should be given to asking the Ministry of Agriculture to revisit the issue of the farm tax threshold.

Governance Review

Current status: Central Saanich submitted a resolution to the CRD Board suggesting that the CRD assume the governance and administrative duties of PAAC; this goes to the Board on Wednesday, October 16, 2024.

General discussion ensued, noting the following points:

- PAAC was generally not supportive of Central Saanich's resolution for several reasons:
- The original CRD Foodlands Task Force, which included 3 PAAC members, was disbanded without notice or due process by the CRD Board. This happens to a lot of CRD committees.
- Most CRD member municipalities do not have farmland; the connection between PAAC and current member municipalities would be lost and it will water down the voice of agriculture.
- It was raised at the Central Saanich Council meeting that membership should be expanded and PAAC has previously discussed this. However, there are only a few other areas with farmland (Sooke, Langford and Colwood).
- The only regional issues are water, geese and drainage; most other matters PAAC considers are direct referrals from the member municipalities or directly from farmers (eg. Farm Worker Accommodations).
- Attending daytime meetings downtown was not well received and had many drawbacks.
- This review, now in it 13th month, has taken so much time with no results.
- PAAC was planning to review the Terms of Reference in 2024 and it was questioned whether the Commission should start its own review now.

- Noted PAAC's TOR are 'timeless' and other than the section regarding new appointments, very little change is needed.
- Progress could have been made earlier if Central Saanich had spoken directly with the Chair and perhaps one other member. Communication has been sparse.

Noah Brotman has been asked to look into whether the new Foodlands Service could incorporate with PAAC. Within the proposed bylaw (not officially approved yet), it is possible to expand it. Now that there is an Agricultural Service at the CRD, other agriculture-based committees can be established.

Discussion continued:

- Looking at the pros and cons: a pro would be more focus on regional issues (eg: geese) and the con would be losing direct contact with local governments and ALR issues.
- Issues discussed around the PAAC table require an understanding of agriculture and farming – which we get from farmers – and this is why PAAC works so well.

Action:

Recommended the November meeting focus on a TOR review. The secretary will circulate a copy of the current TOR and members were asked to come to the meeting with suggestions.

REPORTS FROM KEY SECTOR GROUPS

Water Update: Mike Doehnel

- The Saanich Peninsula Waste Water Commission meets next week and will consider combining this group with the Regional Water Supply Commission.
- Kathleen Zimmerman, Vice-Chair of the Water Advisory Commission, advised that staff had recommended hiring a consultant to review the agricultural water rate, but the Commission agreed to leave the current rate as it is for the time being.
- There has also been a push for amalgamation with the Regional Water Commission, which still sells water to the Peninsula. Coming from Sooke, it costs more to deliver to the Peninsula. Regional infra-structure costs are shared by everyone.
- If the pricing model stays the same, Central Saanich and North Saanich would get more money from the CRD because the wholesale rate would go down and they would be paying the same rate as Saanich.
- This would be a good time to review as the equity debt to pay for the regional infra-structure has now been paid off.

South Island Farmers' Institute Update – Katie Underwood & Shellie MacDonald

- A very successful 4-hour field day was held at Madrona Farm in the Blenkinsop Valley.
- SIFI hosted an all-candidates meeting; all parties were represented.
- About 45 people attended. Some uncomfortable questions were asked.
- Eleven small scale producers took advantage of the Cover Crop Program (SPEC).
- This was half as many as last year because the funds were reduced.
- Participants have been asked to report twice during the growing cycle.

- The Seed Cleaning Trailer has been set up at Haliburton Farm. Available for use by donation to anyone who wants to clean their seeds.
- Plans are underway for the 2025 Farmer2Farmer workshop on January 23. The main focus will be on mid-career farmers.
- In addition to the workshop there will again be week-long field visits.
- Funding has been received from the municipalities – except for Saanich.
- The biggest cost is the room rental and they are hoping that PAAC will again pay the deposit.

MOTION: Moved by Linda Geggie and Seconded by Robin Tunnicliffe: “That PAAC support the 2025 Farmer2Farmer event, hosted by SIFI, by paying the room deposit at the Saanich Fairgrounds in the amount of \$1,500.”

CARRIED

CRD AGRICULTURAL SERVICES

- **CRD Foodlands Access Program** – Noah Brotman
The bylaw is with the Inspector of Municipalities for official approval after which the CRD will prepare a report to initiate the service.
- **CRD Goose Management Strategy – No updates from CRD**
 - Terry Michell noted that there are thousands of geese at Butler's Pit.
 - He lost \$30,000 worth of cabbages in 1.5 days.
 - He tried using cannons but the neighbours complained.
 - Pictures were taken and sent by email to Jody Watson.
 - Crop insurance doesn't cover damage from wildlife.
 - Larry Sluggett stated he has had over a 1000 geese around his pond as well.

Vancouver Island Adaptation Group (Climate Change) – Bob Maxwell

- Max completed the Farmers' Survey that was circulated this summer.
- A copy will be circulated to all members.
- The Ministry is still holding workshop sessions on Salt Spring Island and Comox.

Vancouver Island AgriService Newsletter – Meghan Halstead

- Link to sign up for the newsletter – published quarterly:
- New link: <https://confirmsubscription.com/h/y/EF5CA661750438AD>

Megan stated there are many workshops planned; she will send an email to the secretary for circulation. The highlights are:

- Islands Region Soils 101 Workshop Series, Soil Sampling and laboratory analysis part 1: The What, how, and why with DeLisa Lewis (Green Fire Farm, Cowichan Valley / UBC Sustainable Agricultural Landscapes Lab)
Offered at 3 locations:
 - October 17, 1-3 pm at Sandown Centre for Regenerative Agriculture
 - October 24, 1-3pm at Green Fire Farm, 3793 Gibbins Road, Duncan BC,
 - October 25, at Lentelus Farm, Courtenay BC

- Other workshops include :
 - Livestock Productivity through Rotational Grazing & Rotational Grazing and its Impact on Sustainability and Environment: Canadian GHG Emissions. Oct 22 & 24 @ 12-1pm, online

CR-Fair – Linda Geggie

- The monthly newsletter has been circulated to members noting several workshops.

Saanich & North Saanich Flavour Trail

- There was a good turnout for the Saanich and North Saanich Flavour Trail this year but still not up to the pre-Covid levels.
- We try to get people out to the farms and meet the farmers to see where their food comes from.
- Central Saanich has expressed interest in joining the Flavour Trail.
- If PAAC hears of anyone who might be interested in participating let her know.

Farm Hub and Food Hub

- \$130,000 in sales so far this year.
- Twenty-one processors using the food hub.
- Seedy Saturday will be coming back to Victoria next February.

OTHER BUSINESS

Councillor Graham noted that the UBCM will be held in Victoria next year. For the first time, there were no agricultural tours at this year's conference. He suggested this was something PAAC should consider.

Upcoming Events / Webinars

- Dumping of Fill on ALR land Workshop – Wednesday, November 13, 2024
- PAAC Christmas Gathering – Thursday, December 5, 2024

ADJOURNMENT

The meeting adjourned at 9:50 p.m.

NEXT MEETING

The next meeting is scheduled for Thursday, November 14, 2024 in Committee Room #2 at the Saanich Municipal Hall.

Robin Tunnicliffe, Chair

I hereby certify these minutes are accurate.

Isobel Hoffmann, Senior Committee Secretary