

HALFMOON TOWNSHIP OPEN SPACE PRESERVATION BOARD
REGULAR MEETING-MINUTES
APRIL 1st, 2015

1. CALL TO ORDER

Chair Ron Hoover called the meeting to order at 7:05pm. Other members present were Patti Hartle, Joe Tylka, Bob Strouse, Ben Pisoni and Christine Bracken-Piper. Staff present was Susan Steele, Manager, Amy Smith, OSPB Administrator, D.J. Liggett, Centre Region Planner and Rebekah Laird, Recording Secretary. Audience present was Sara Walter, senior planner for Centre County Planning Community and Development Office.

2. PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE

3. MINUTES

- *MOTION: Mr. Tylka moved to approve the meeting minutes of January 7, 2015 as submitted; Mr. Strouse seconded; Vote 6-0-0; Motion carried.*

4. PRESENTATION BY SARA WALTER, SENIOR PLANNER FOR CENTRE COUNTY PLANNING COMMUNITY AND DEVELOPMENT OFFICE

Ms. Walters introduced herself to the board and gave a brief overview of her involvement in Centre County Agricultural Land Preservation Programs. She stated that her goal was to reach out to the municipalities about updates and changes to the program. Ms. Walters stated that her focus for the meeting would be on the agricultural conservations easements currently in place and the Municipal Partnership Program. Mr. Tylka asked that if the funding for land preservation came from the State or from federal funds. Ms. Walters answered that there is no federal funding it is a State and county funded program. Mr. Strouse questioned what the benefit would be for the landowner. Ms. Walters commented that there is a tax break of income of 30% over 6 years. Ms. Walters stated they are hoping to get an enhanced incentive for a tax break on 100% of income for 16 years.

Ms. Walters briefly overviewed the two current agricultural conservation easement options of purchase via the PACE program (she pointed out that this option would be the focus during the presentation) and by donation through Centre County Farmland Trust. Ms. Walters continued and gave an overview of the history of Farmland Preservation in Pennsylvania since 1981. Mr. Tylka questioned if she knew of any impact on funding for programs with the new governor. Ms. Walters stated she was unsure if it would have an impact but with the 2 cent cigarette tax and funding from Act 13 they had gotten a boost recently in funding. Ms. Walters explained that clean and green rollback taxes also goes into the funding pot.

Ms. Walters went over current easement guidelines and pricing to purchase the development rights from landowner. She further explained that under these easements the county is responsible to monitor and take action for violations and also pays the costs to establish and maintain the easement (i.e. appraisal, survey, title search, title insurance, closing, recording, inspection, etc.). Ms. Walters explained the County focuses on farmland mostly for easements. Ms. Walters stated the soils have to be class 1-4 soils, be in ag production and enrolled in the Ag Security Area to be eligible for the program. Ms. Walters explained if the municipality commits a certain amount of funding then the County is able to tell the State and the State will commit monies if the municipality commits at least 50% funding for a property.

Ms. Walters went over PACE program guidelines for eligible landowners to apply and how the properties are ranked through the LESA guidelines to determine top ranking farms for purchase. She further stated that there was no cost to apply for the program. Mr. Tylka asked about how many applicants did the program receive and of those how many were purchased. Ms. Walters answered that recently they had 44 applications submitted and usually have the funds to purchase 2-3 farms. Mr. Tylka asked how much funding they generally receive. Ms. Walters answered that they usually get about \$1.2 million for a 2 year cycle and they have to use that money within those 2 years or they lose it.

Ms. Walters went over the LESA or “Land Evaluation and Site Assessment” guidelines to rank properties objectively based upon certain factors. Ms. Walters explained how the guidelines have changed to reflect changing Board priorities and land use trends. Mr. Pisoni asked what had prompted the change in weight categories. Ms. Walters replied that it was felt they were outdated and offered to send a more detailed chart of each of the different factor weights by category.

Ms. Walters went over the new Municipal Partnership Program to help municipalities with committing funding to preserving farmland. Ms. Walters explained how the program holds funds for a municipality and receives match dollars from State to help use toward conservation easements within the municipality. Ms. Walters further explained how the State match dollars can help work through the waiting list faster for the programs. The board questioned how different funding affected the process of going through the program (i.e. would the properties have to pass LESA guidelines or the municipality guidelines to be eligible for the funding). Ms. Liggett explained that if local municipality money is used than the local rules apply, if local municipality and State money is used than the local rules still apply and if local municipality, county and State money is being used than the county rules apply which would include putting the property through LESA. Ms. Walters explained that the County and State rules are consistent. Mr. Tylka questioned if there was a required use of the property when it was in the program. Ms. Walters stated it could be used for conservation or agricultural as well as there can be one subdivision (must not be less than 50 acres) and one additional residential structure on the property.

Ms. Smith stated there were several properties under 11 acres in the Open Space Preservation program and questioned whether they would qualify or not? Ms. Walters explained that if the property is adjoining a 50 acre property it can qualify if it is at least 10 acres.

The board held a discussion over possible benefits for future and current applicants with the municipal partnership program and to best proceed to “get the word out” about them. The board directed staff to put together guidelines/talking points and mapping (with the help of Ms. Liggett) and asked Ms. Walters to send them more detailed guidelines to look through about the different programs and guidelines to which Ms. Walters agreed to send them.

5. OTHER BUSINESS

No other business was discussed

6. CITIZEN’S COMMENTS

There were no citizen’s comments

7. ADJOURNMENT

The meeting was adjourned at 8:41pm.

- ***MOTION: Mr. Tylka moved to adjourn the meeting at 8:41pm; Mr. Pisoni seconded; Vote 6-0-0; Motion carried.***