

MINUTES OF THE MERCER COUNTY AGRICULTURAL DEVELOPMENT BOARD
MEETING HELD MONDAY, MARCH 4, 2024
IN THE EXTENSION SERVICE BUILDING
1440 PARKSIDE AVENUE, EWING, N.J.

I. CALL TO ORDER

Vice-Chair D'Amico called this meeting to order at 19:29.

II. COMPLIANCE STATEMENT WITH THE OPEN PUBLIC MEETINGS ACT

Vice-Chair D'Amico announced that pursuant to the Sunshine Law, notice of this meeting was mailed to the Trenton Times on February 15, 2024 and posted on the County Planning Department's website.

III. ROLL CALL

a. Voting Members:

Mr. Steve Jany, Chair – not present
Mr. Frank D'Amico, Vice-Chair – present
Mr. Scott Ellis – present
Mr. Gary Mount – present
Ms. Theodora Wang – present
Ms. Emily Blackman – not present

B. Non-voting Members:

Ms. Meredith Melendez/Rutgers Cooperative Research and Extension – present
Mr. William Agress, County Planning Board Liaison - present

C. Others Present:

Ms. Leslie Floyd/Mercer County Planning Director
Mr. David Zaback, SADC
Ms. Susan Bacso, MCADB Attorney
Ms. Cindy Taylor, Mercer County Land Preservation Coordinator
Ms. Diane Kottas, Mercer County CADB Administrator

IV. APPROVAL OF MINUTES

On a motion by Ms. Wang and seconded by Mr. Mount, the minutes of the February 5, 2024 meeting were approved unanimously with Mr. Ellis abstaining due to his absence.

V. PUBLIC COMMENT: None

VI. CORRESPONDENCE:

Letter from Robert Merenich, attorney for Quaker Valley Farms, to the SADC concerning proposed Soil Protection Standards was emailed to the Board prior to the meeting.

VII. COMMITTEE AND STAFF REPORTS

a. SADC

Mr. Zaback from the SADC pinch hit for Mr. Kimmel.

Soil Protection Standards: The public comment period for the proposed Soil Protection Standards closed on February 23rd. The SADC will be reviewing and responding to all of the comments. A special in person hearing has been scheduled for March 15th. Mr. Ellis stated that the SPS subcommittee will make a presentation on their recommendations for the full committee.

State Formula Value: An interim policy has been passed to provide flexibility for preservation applications pending adoption of the Statewide Farmland Preservation Formula. A remote meeting was held with the SADC's preservation partners to review the interim policy and get feedback. Mr. Zaback and Mr. Ellis stated that farmland preservation applications should continue to be processed with the option to pause the process until the SFV has been developed. A real estate firm will be hired to help devise the formula. Mr. Zaback reported that the formula will consider the rate of inflation, the value of natural resources and other variables resulting increased values.

SADC preservation: Mr. Zaback reported that the appraisals for the Ossowsky and Katz/Leake farms are imminent. The Patricelli farm acquisition is in closing review.

b. Land Development

There are no Land Development applications on the upcoming County Planning Board agenda within the Agricultural Development Area (ADA).

c. Farmland Preservation Updates

Ms. Kottas and Ms. Taylor gave updates on the two recently auctioned county-owned farms:

Closing on the Wert farm occurred on February 27, 2024

Closing on the Chowdhury farm is tentatively scheduled for March 27, 2024.

VIII. OLD BUSINESS

a. SSAMP Policy Discussion

Ms. Taylor introduced the draft policy for SSAMP requests. Mr. Mount suggested changing the procedure for approval to build more flexibility into the process. This would allow the Board to vote on the night of the hearing or via email if needed instead of waiting until the next regularly scheduled Board meeting. Ms. Floyd pointed out that many of the details that go into the resolution are not heard until the night of the hearing requiring some turnaround time. Ms. Bacso stated that if something comes up during the hearing and the Board wants to make a specific determination, that language can be written and circulated to the Board prior to an email vote. It was discussed if the commercial farm determination could be combined with the public hearing and decided against. Mr. D'Amico expressed concern that if only a small portion of the farm unit was being used for the SSAMP would that make the farm ineligible due to the commercial farm size/income requirements. It was determined that the entire farm unit is considered as a whole in commercial farm determination. On a motion by Mr. Mount and seconded by Mr. Ellis, the Board unanimously approved the adoption of the policy with the proposed changes.

b. Ag Labor Housing Application Discussion

Ms. Kottas presented an application and procedure “road map” to be used with the previously adopted Ag Labor Housing policy. Ms. Floyd explained that the goal is to add all of the Board’s policies, procedures and forms to the Planning Department website making it easier for applicants to navigate the process. Addition of language stating that it is the applicant’s responsibility to submit the application to the SADC was suggested by Ms. Bacso. On a motion by Mr. Mount and seconded by Ms. Wang, the Board unanimously approved the use of the application and procedures with the proposed changes.

IX. NEW BUSINESS

a. John Hart SSAMP Commercial Farm Determination

Documents supporting the commercial farm determination portion of Mr. Hart’s SSAMP request for a farm brewery were previously distributed to the Board including: a completed application, the latest Farmland Assessment, a tax map, a zoning map, a map showing the location of his ag production, a notarized commercial farm certification form and IRS schedule F. Ms. Kottas and Ms. Taylor reported that their site visit confirmed that Mr. Hart is operating a commercial farm, growing crops and raising beef cattle. On a motion by Ms. Wang and seconded by Mr. Mount, the Board unanimously confirmed that Mr. Hart does operate a commercial farm and is eligible to move forward with his SSAMP request. A formal site visit was discussed for mid-March. Members of the Board and representatives from the SADC, the NRCS and Rutgers Extension Services will be asked to attend. Ms. Kottas will schedule the visit.

X. DISCUSSION: None

XI. PUBLIC PARTICIPATION: None

XII. EXECUTIVE SESSION: None required

XIII. ADJOURNMENT

a. Vice-Chair D’Amico adjourned the meeting at 20:23. The next scheduled meeting of the MCADB is April 9, 2024.

Respectfully submitted,

Diane Kottas

Diane Kottas
Secretary to the Board