

**ST. LAWRENCE COUNTY  
AGRICULTURAL AND FARMLAND PROTECTION BOARD**

Public Safety Complex, 2<sup>nd</sup> Floor, 48 Court Street

Canton, New York 13617-1169

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**MEETING MINUTES**

Thursday, September 29, 2022

2<sup>nd</sup> floor conference room, County Public Safety Complex

49 ½ Court Street, Canton

and

Zoom Meeting ID: 884 7347 6220

Passcode: 214289

**I. Call to Order**

**A. Members present:** K. O’Neil for P. Ames, R. Andrews, L. Denesha, D. Fisher, B. Green, J. Greenwood, M. Kelly, S. McKnight, J. Pfothenauer and J. TeRiele. **Absent:** M. Finen. **Staff present:** M. Larson. **Others present:** John Burke, County Legislator District 12; Dan Huntley, County Planning Board member and Farm Bureau President for St. Lawrence County; Todd Schmit, Cornell University Professor; Patrick Kelly, St. Lawrence County IDA; Bob Beckstead, Watertown Daily Times; Rachel Hunter, Gouverneur Tribune Press; Bryan Tripp and Darren Suarez, Boralex; Glenn Bullock, USDA Farm Service Agency; Priscilla Darling, County Planning Board member.

**Roll Call and Determination of a Quorum.** Andrews called the meeting to order. A quorum was established. Andrews asked all those in attendance to please introduce themselves.

**B. Adoption of the Agenda.** Larson reviewed the agenda. The meeting agenda was unanimously adopted (Fisher/TeRiele).

**C. Approval of the Minutes.** The April 7, 2022 meeting minutes were unanimously adopted (TeRiele/Fisher).

**II. New Business**

**A. Measuring the Economic Impact of Converting Farmland for Solar Energy Facilities.** Larson began the presentation with an overview of County Resolution No. 132-2020 which encourages land owners and municipal planning boards to site solar energy facilities on marginal lands. Larson also reviewed tabular data of prime soils by town, and the displacement of prime soils to accommodate solar arrays. Larson said Schmit was invited to help quantify

the economic impact of converting farmland to accommodate solar arrays. Schmit began his presentation with an overview of terms used in his economic analysis, and reviewed economic data for the seven-county North Country region. Schmit's data indicated the North Country was responsible for 15% of the state's agricultural production in 2019. In the same year, the region accounted for 20% of total dairy output for the state. Larson confirmed for Schmit that the regional data serves as a reasonable approximation for county data. Between 2019 and 2020, the cost of inputs for the region rose by 9% while output production only rose 1%. In total, the region's agricultural industry's economic impact totaled \$1.9 billion, and has a regional economic multiplier of 1.23. This means every \$1 of sales in agriculture induces an additional .23 cents of economic activity in the region. Schmit also said the agricultural jobs output multiplier for the region is 1.29, which means every agricultural job in region yields an additional .29 jobs.

Schmit said calculating the net economic impact of converting farmland is complicated. Schmit said measuring farmland conversion needs to take the following variables into account: changes to the labor market, input markets, net returns (e.g. profits and earnings), and changes to land markets. Schmit said compiling all the relevant effects and their distribution to the regional economy is important and difficult. Schmit reviewed a list of activity changes and whether those impacts are positive or negative. Schmit said economic multipliers between different industries are not comparable to one another, and projecting future economic impacts requires speculating monetary values. A discussion ensued about whether the county will see a trend in the purchase of farmland as an investment by non-residents. Larson asked whether productivity of farm operations remain the same after leasing some of their farmland for solar energy facilities, as the County Planning Board has heard statements from farmers that solar leases allow them to continue farming. Darren Suarez from Boralex said they have seen production increase, and in other instances where production decreases.

Larson added that more often than not, the solar leases allow farm operators to retire, and the farm operation ceases to exist. Darren Suarez said among the ten projects Boralex proposes in the state, they are signing leases for land from estates, indicating a death and the discontinuance of a farm operation. Fisher said that situation makes it difficult for neighboring operations to acquire or lease those lands. Because remaining operations have to use lands farther away, Fisher said the costs to run farm operations goes up. Schmit added those are the indirect economic impacts of this scenario. O'Neil said the County Planning Board is concerned about the displacement of farmland for solar arrays, the discontinuation of a farm operation, and the former farm operator relocating out of the area, and the economic leakage that is caused as a result. Andrews said the Agricultural and Farmland Protection Board is not in opposition to solar panels, but the Board advocates the siting of these facilities on marginal lands. Andrews referenced the recent approval of a large scale solar array at the former Benson and Mines site in the Adirondack Park. Fisher said developers are not siting solar facilities on marginal lands because that is not where three-phase power is available. Fisher said three-phase power is located in areas where dairy operations are situated and are using the most productive lands for agriculture. Andrews said developers are also looking for proximity to substations. Boralex confirmed this was the case for community solar arrays. Andrews thanked Schmit for his presentation.

**B. Two Rivers Solar Project Proposal in Helena, Town of Brasher.** Suarez and Tripp thanked the Board for an invitation to deliver a presentation at tonight's meeting, and explained Boralex is in the preliminary planning phases for a proposed project in Helena. Tripp reviewed Boralex's current projects elsewhere in the world, and its current efforts in the US. Suarez said Boralex is the owner-operator of the facilities they develop, and look to integrate their facilities with nearby agricultural activities. Tripp described the Two Rivers Project, which is 200 MW facility that will be located in the towns Brasher and Massena. Tripp said the company chose this area for its proximity to high voltage transmission lines that will be upgraded by NYPA, and the size of the parcels. Tripp said desktop and field studies would occur through the end of the year, and they will submit a bid to NYSERDA in February 2023. Boralex anticipates construction to begin in the third quarter of 2025, and be in commercial operation at the end of 2026. Suarez said their company adopted a policy to place profitability and responsibility on equal pairing. Because of the amount of land that is required to accommodate their facilities, Suarez said Boralex will examine existing agricultural uses that are compatible with its facility, and to engage with area stakeholders on these uses. Suarez referenced a similar demonstration project that is underway in Jefferson County. Suarez said Boralex will establish an agricultural co-utilization group to have a discussion about the best way to integrate the site. Suarez said Boralex will also adhere to Ag and Markets guidelines, and guiding principles developed by the co-utilization team when operating the facility.

Larson shared a project locator map, satellite imagery, real property and soils information for the facility. Fisher asked whether Boralex is monitoring the permitting progress of the North Side Energy Project and its impact to state wetlands. Tripp noted that project is undergoing an Article 10 review and Boralex does not anticipate a similar outcome for its project which will be reviewed under 94-C. A discussion ensued about competing values between farmland preservation and wetland conservation and the siting for solar facilities on marginal soils that are within 100' from state wetlands. Green noted solar projects that are put online will require the Moses Power Dam in Massena to decrease its hydroenergy output, and asked whether this project will displace power that is generated by NYPA. Bullock asked about energy production when there is snow. Suarez said the panels will be mounted on an axis-tracking racking system, and the panels can tilt to 90 degrees during snow events.

Larson asked who Boralex is asking to serve on the co-utilization group; Suarez identified local stakeholder agencies and property owners. Tripp said the project will not extend to the waterfront portions of the leased lands. Fisher asked whether a facility would be designed to accommodate large livestock. Suarez said a racking system would need to be strong enough to withstand rubbing, and they are challenged with the height of the panels as they become less stable. O'Neil said she was happy to hear the discussion about accommodating dual uses. Denesha noted the County passed a resolution encouraging developers to purchase American made solar panels, and asked whether the company can purchase panels that will be manufactured in Watertown. Suarez said Boralex had conversations with the manufacturer about the availability and extended warranty of their product. Both Suarez and Tripp noted the recent passage of the Infrastructure Reduction Act includes incentives for buying domestic. Andrews thanked both presenters for attending tonight's meeting and reiterated the Board's position to not lose its most productive agricultural lands to non-agricultural uses.

### **III. Old Business**

A. None.

### **IV. Reports**

A. **Eight Year Review for Agricultural District 2.** Larson said she finalized the Agricultural District Review submission to the Commissioner of Agriculture and Markets this week.

B. **Updates from AFPB Members.** Green said the Real Property Office hired a new aid, and said Donna Brown will be retiring from the office in January. Kelly said the IDA continues to have discussions with farm operators and Liberty Utilities about the installation of manure biodigesters. Kelly talked about a potential hydrogen production facility in Massena; the IDA's participation in Massena's Downtown Revitalization Project; and their involvement with investments in rail projects for Dunn Paper and Alcoa. Kelly also listed a variety of recent activities including equipment leases and bond issuances, and the administration of ARPA funds on behalf of the County. Kelly said the IDA has approved 24 community solar PILOTs, which total 100 MW, and will generate \$460,000 in the first year of PILOT payments. Kelly answered a question for TeRiele about a Restore NY application for a possible brewery in Canton. Denesha said at Monday's last Finance Committee meeting, County Administrator Doyle reported the County scored zero for fiscal stress in 2021. Denesha said the County allocated \$900,000 of ARPA monies to remove hazard trees in County rights of way, and plant native replacement trees. Andrews said the County Forester is doing a GPS inventory of hazard trees, and will go out to bid for tree removal with the aid of boom trucks. Andrews said Soil and Water has been working with the County Highway Superintendent to accurately delineate roads rights of way. Andrews said also discussed the District's implementation of a cover crop program.

### **VI. Other Items**

A. **Correspondence.** None.

B. **Announcements.** None.

C. **Next Meeting Date.** The next Agricultural and Farmland Protection Board meeting will be held on Thursday, December 1, 2022 at 6:00 pm.

### **VII. Adjourn**

The meeting adjourned at 8:27 pm by consensus.

Respectfully submitted,

*Matilda Larson*