Meeting Minutes

Cascade Charter Township Planning Commission

Farmland Preservation Sub-Committee

Thursday, October 26, 2023

8:00 am

ARTICLE 1: Call the meeting to order

Meeting called to order by Chairman Rissi at 8:01 am.

All members of the Sub-Committee were present, including Scott Rissi, Joe Engel, Ryan Bruneau, and Ralph Moxley.

Also in attendance were Planning Director Brian Hilbrands, and Zoning Administrator Madison Smith-Jacoby.

ARTICLE 2: Approve the Agenda

Member Engel moved to approve the agenda. Member Moxley supported the motion. All members voted to approve the agenda.

ARTICLE 3: Approve minutes from the October 11 meeting

Article 3, last paragraph, change: Member **Bruneau** seconded the motion.

Article 7, 3rd paragraph, change the word **planned** to **plotted.**

Member Engel noted that we should state in Article 1, paragraph 2: "**Also** in attendance were…"

Member Engel asked that we clarify Article 3, second paragraph: "Mr. Channing stated that the historical cost of purchasing development rights in Kent County is $4,000/acre."

Member Engel asked that we change Article 6, paragraph 6, to say: The developer **may** ask for exceptions but **needs** to be flexible in other areas.

Member Engel asked that we change Article 6, paragraph 8, to say: "We need to see if Dennis Heffron (Grattan Township Trustee) has a template that we can utilize in Cascade."

Motion to approve with changes stated by Member Engel. Supported by Member Bruneau. All members voted in favor of the motion to approve.

ARTICLE 4: Disclose any conflicts of interest

No conflicts of interest were noted.

ARTICLE 5: Acknowledge visitors and those wishing to speak

Visitors include the following: **Matt Channing**, Kent County Agricultural Preservation Specialist, **Dennis Heffron**, Grattan Township Trustee, and **Josh Spencer**, Kent County Administration Specialist.

Dennis Heffron noted that his maternal family homesteaded a farm in Cascade Township in the early 1800s. The deed was on sheep skin. Kent County had no Register of Deeds so they had to go to Ionia County to register the property. His mother (age 98) said "Hi" to the Sub-Committee. His family immigrated from Ireland. The family farm in Cascade was in the middle of the airport. Dennis currently has a farm in Grattan Township that has been in the family for 100 years. Dennis stated that Cascade Township has very good soils!

ARTICLE 6: Discussion with Dennis Heffron, Matthew Channing, and Josh Spencer

Dennis: The older a farm becomes the more likely that the children will take possession of the property and will not farm the land. They are less interested in preserving it. Grattan Twp. takes money out of the general fund every year for a **Farmland Preservation Rights** program. There is public support for this program. They are currently taking out **$10,000** a year for Farmland Preservation Rights purchases. This money can be used to match state and federal funding. Kent County Farm Bureau also has funding that can help.

Matching funding is crucial because major donors will want to see that the local folks have "skin in the game". In a survey done as part of the Grattan Twp. Master Plan for community taxpayers, they saw overwhelming support for setting aside matching funds for Farmland Preservation.

Dennis is on the Board of Trustees in Grattan Township and on the Township Planning Commission. He is the only farmer on the Township Board of Trustees.

Timing for Farmland Preservation is critical. Not all will be ready for Preservation Rights purchase at the same time. Many factors will come into play.

The PUD/open space can be non-contiguous. The farms can be separate and do not have to be immediately adjacent to one another. The Township identifies target areas designated for open space.

Prime Agricultural Land can be preserved with the developer and the farmer working directly with one another. Open space is part of the PUD. As part of the process, Kent County, or a land trust, places a **Conservation Easement** on the land being preserved.

For land to be preserved it has to meet all of the Kent County requirements. Kent County then can assume responsibility as holder of the **Conservation Easement**, not Grattan Township. Enforcement and monitoring is now provided by Kent County staff members. Grattan Twp. does not have the staff to monitor this preservation program.

Farmers may build a house on the land, but must have a carve-out from the Preserved land for that house. Preserved land is kept separate from a house parcel.

Conservation Easements, in theory, can be extinguished for the original Owner. But all money provided by government agencies must be returned. This is rare and it would be very difficult to accomplish this reversion. This has never been done in Kent County.

Paul LeBlanc worked with Grattan Township to develop the **Farmland Preservation** plan and **Conservation Easement** language.

Courtland Township is now requiring 40% open land in any new PUD developments. Caledonia Township may also require open area in any future PUDs.

Dennis Heffron stated that they look at the soil type to determine whether the land is A-1 or A-2. Prime soil is needed to be considered for A-1. Farmers have to agree to the soil type early in the negotiation process. USGS mapping will determine what areas are "prime soils". Determining soil overlays over a wide area in a Township is a difficult and time-consuming project.

Grattan Township has farmers that have signed up for the **Conservation Easement** program. When developers inquire about who is interested, Grattan can give them a list and encourage the developers to go talk to the farmers.

Matt Channing stated that applications for **Farmland Preservation** are available starting November 1. There will be an Open House meeting in Cascade Township for farmers on December 7 at 10 am., in the Friends Room at the Cascade Library. Matt will send out a PDF to sub-committee members (Madison Smith-Jacoby) so that we can see what will be discussed at this meeting.

There is a question on the Federal application that asks what the current zoning is for the property in question. Listing the property as **ARC** is not necessarily a deal breaker.

Grattan's PUD Ordinance was first passed about 15 years ago. It was updated in January of 2020 by Paul LeBlanc. Four people have taken advantage of it. Four PUDs have resulted from this Ordinance. Grattan Township has less than 4,000 people. Grattan has more lakes than any Township in Michigan, and 50% or more of the people live on a lake.

Member Bruneau asked that if we came up with a proposed **Zoning Ordinance** similar to the Grattan PUD Ordinance, would our visitors be willing to review this document and give us their feedback. They all agreed Yes!

Matt Channing mentioned that Chambers of Commerce will push back on this type of Zoning Ordinance because they see it as a challenge to development.

Matt will send us information on the Lancaster, Pennsylvania, PUD Ordinance. All information is to be sent to Madison Smith-Jacoby (Zoning Administrator). She will then distribute that info to the sub-committee members.

ARTICLE 7: Review and discussion of Agri-business/tourism

Table discussion on this issue until the next meeting of the sub-committee.

ARTICLE 8: Goals of Sub-Committee for next meeting

Master Plan will probably not be done before the end of the year. It is doubtful that this sub-committee will be done before the end of the year.

Try to get the Lancaster County Ordinance for the next meeting.

Next meeting will be Thursday, November 2 at 7:30 am.

ARTCLE 9: Any other business

No other issues were discussed.

ARTICLE 10: Acknowledge visitors and those wishing to speak

Members thanked our visitors for taking the time to meet with us.

ARTICLE 11: Adjournment

Member Engel moved to adjourn at 9:45 am. Member Moxley supported the motion. All members voted to adjourn.

Ralph W. Moxley, AIA, LEED AP

Recording Secretary