

Meeting Notes

Cascade Charter Township Planning Commission

Farmland Preservation Sub-Committee

Thursday, August 31, 2023

7:30 am

5920 Tahoe Drive

ARTICLE 1: Call the meeting to order

Chairman Scott Rissi called the meeting to order at 7:32 am. Members in attendance included Joe Engel, Ryan Bruneau, Ralph Moxley, and Planning Director Brian Hilbrands.

ARTICLE 2: Approve the Agenda

Motion to approve the agenda was made by member Engel. Motion seconded by member Bruneau. Motion is approved.

ARTICLE 3: Approve the minutes of August 17 meeting

Motion to approve the minutes was made by member Engel. Motion seconded by member Bruneau. Motion is approved.

ARTICLE 4: Disclose any Conflict of Interest

No "Conflict of Interest" was noted by any member of the sub-committee.

ARTICLE 5: Acknowledge visitors and those wishing to speak

No visitors were present at this meeting.

ARTICLE 6: Review of current ARC and FP Zoning Districts

Planning Director Hilbrands noted that all existing housing sub-divisions in the eastern part of the Township are in **ARC Zoned** districts, with no sub-divisions located in **FP Zoned** districts.

The difference between "Open Space" and "Farmland" is a gray area. This is one area we need to look at for a clear definition.

Kent County analyzed the acreage in the FP zoning district and found there are approximately 944 acres and 35 parcels categorized as a farm use in the district out of approximately 1,564

total acres. The 944 acres make up approximately 60% of the Farmland Preservation Zoning District. About 10% is open “woodland” area, 19% is residential and 10% is “Other Uses” (church property).

Cascade Township had used the **Grand Valley Metro Council (GVMC)** map of desirable locations for agricultural preservation. That is background information the Township used to draw our boundaries for the FP Zoning District. This grew out of serious concerns voiced by citizens about possible loss of farmland in the 2009 Master Plan.

By establishing a **Farmland Preservation Zoning District**, Cascade Twp. property owners in the FP Zone can apply for **Michigan Agricultural Fund** thru the **Kent County Farmland Preservation Program**. We had to have that FP Zone in our Zoning map and/or the Master Plan to qualify for application of support funding. This funding source is available to farmers in Cascade Twp., but as yet we know of no applications that have been made. Planning Director Hilbrands will do more research on the funding program before our next meeting.

Chairman Rissi asked: What is our goal? Allow the development of residential areas, or keep the FP areas strictly as farmland?

Planner Hilbrands said that the Farmland Preservation Zone became official in 2010.

Ada Bible Church came in about 1998, before the **FP Zone** was established in Cascade Twp. They were “grandfathered” into the FP Zone. Chairman Rissi stated that they used to have a large garden on the east side for providing food to church goers and those in need. Shortly before the Pandemic they closed down this garden operation.

Chairman Rissi asked if we should go back to the Planning Commission to ask a specific question for direction of the sub-committee? What is our charge here? What do they want to see us steer towards? Planning Director Hilbrands suggested also reviewing the Strategic Plan for the specific objectives that led to formation of the Farmland Preservation sub-committee.

Member Engel asked what if we were to change the remaining **ARC Zoned** areas to **FP Zoned** areas, what impact would that have? Planning Director Hilbrands said it would allow a little less flexibility for residential subdivision planning going in.

Chairman Rissi also noted there are many special uses allowed in **ARC Zoned** districts that are not allowed in **FP Zoned** districts.

Member Engel asked if part of our charge as a sub-committee is to make it more difficult to bring more residential subdivisions into Cascade Township? Planning Director Hilbrands stated that preserving the open space we have left is a goal from the Strategic Plan. We do want to allow growth in select areas like business districts. Preserve a rural character in certain select areas and allow higher density development in more central areas.

Chairman Rissi asked if it would be a good approach for us to reach out to the local farmers in Cascade Twp. and ask them what they would like to see in the future. Do they want to be able

to carve up their property? Do they want to see us implement rules that require larger parcels sizes? It would be good to get their input and perspective.

Member Engel is concerned that this separate forum may provide us with biased opinions that do not help us. We really need to run this past the Planning Commission first before going out and soliciting opinions of local farmers that may just want to subdivide their own property. Planning Director Hilbrands stated that it depends on how you ask the question. We could ask "Are you interested in preserving the farmland," and not "Are you interested in developing the farmland."

Chairman Rissi asked if we should contact the **Grand Valley Metro Council** and ask if they would want to update their recommendation for the **Cascade Township Farmland Preservation** area. The original study mapping was done in 2003. Planning Director Hilbrands will follow up with **GV Metro Council** staff. Hopefully, the original staff member that focused on this issue is still with GVMC. Chairman Rissi would like to hear from them on suggested updates and changes to the Farmland Preservation Zone based on what is now known twenty years after the original study.

Member Bruneau asked if we could reach out to the Cascade Community Foundation, or other organizations like it, and see if they would want to set up a fund that residents could give towards to preserve farm land and open space.

Member Engel asked if we could give the Planning Commission members a white paper that summarizes the issues in an organized manner. For instance, what portion of the Township is FP Zone? Note that GR Ford Airport is about 17% of all Cascade Charter Township land. Also, where is the GRMC recommendation today? Is the farmed area still at 944 acres or has it been reduced in size?

It was discussed that perhaps property owners should be educated on **Kent County Farmland Preservation** funding and services that they may be interested in pursuing.

Chairman Rissi asked if the goal of the sub-committee is to preserve farmland, or are we just trying to make it harder to develop farmland into residential subdivisions? Member Engel asked if we are just making it harder to develop middle class neighborhoods in Cascade Twp. by requiring larger parcels sizes for homes? Will we just end up with 10-acre parcels with million-dollar homes on them?

Chairman Rissi asked if we can determine what parcels are actually usable farmland, not just open land. How do we identify "Farmland"? What is the basis and metric for defining true "Farmland." Once we define what is truly Farmland how can we communicate with those property owners on how to preserve that land as Farmland, and who can they can talk to at Kent County about preserving that land. He also feels that many people in Cascade Twp. would rather see farmland preserved than a new factory or warehouse.

Planning Director Hilbrands will reach out to the **Kent County Farmland Preservation** staff to see if they can come to a meeting in September to talk with the sub-committee members and answer some of our questions. We should plan on a meeting with the Planning Commission sometime in October. Planning Director Hilbrands will discuss with Chris Noordyke to find a good date that will work.

ARTICLE 7: Review of Zoning in Neighboring Communities

Chairman Rissi noted that Lowell Township is aggressively limiting development of **Farmland Preservation** zoned areas. They will only allow one building permit for a 40-acre parcel. You can split into two parcels, but you are allowed only one building permit. This was a change that occurred in 2012. (Note: Building permits are not required for agricultural use buildings that do not house humans such as barns, chicken coops, silos, etc.)

ARTICLE 8: Goals of the next meeting

Planning Director Hilbrands to reach out to a **Kent County Farmland Preservation** staff member to attend our next meeting. He will also reach out to a **Grand Valley Metro Council** staff person to see if they have updated the agricultural preservation map.

Planning Director Hilbrands to find out a good day for the Kent County staff member to attend and will get back to us. He asked if everyone was flexible on meeting days.

ARTICLE 9: Any other business

Member Engel mentioned that **Grand Traverse County** has a web site that clearly spells out what to expect for **Farmland Preservation** limitations and standards. One key focus is that it limits on areas that can be used for dairy farms and setbacks from streams and rivers to prevent water pollution caused by manure runoff. He will get Planning Director Hilbrands a copy that can be sent out with the next package.

ARTICLE 10: Acknowledge visitors and those wishing to speak

No visitors were present at this meeting.

ARTICLE 11: Adjournment

Motion to adjourn made by member Moxley at 8:37 am. Motion seconded by member Engel. Motion approved.