

Agricultural Commission Meeting Minutes

Meeting Date: September 18, 2019

Commission Members Present: Sighle Philbin (Chair), Daniel Mercurio, Kate Simmarano, Mollynda McArthur, Amy Marold (Amy waiting to be confirmed)

Commission Members Absent: None

Others Present: Don Varney, Bob Barrell, Jr.

Called to order 7:02 pm (move to order: Sighle; second: Daniel)

1. **Topic:** Discuss possible responses to the Board of Health proposed regulations regarding back-yard animal keeping
 - a. Sighle shared a document previously created by the Agricultural Commission (AgCom). The document outlined the commission's potential role in conflict resolution between animal owners and their neighbors. She noted that this would require us to contact the complaining party, investigate the complaint, and submit recommendations to the West Boylston Board of Health (BoH), the complaining party, and the animal owner.
 - b. Daniel shared handouts with his ideas about a possible course of action for the AgCom, which were reviewed. In brief, he suggested updating the AgCom web page with recommendations for animal keeping and links to educational resources (Right to Farm Bill, 4H, MSPCA, etc.) Further, a protocol for cooperative actions by the AgCom and BoH (and Animal Control Officer, if needed) could be created so as BoH receives complaints both committees are informed of the issue and can act appropriately.
 - c. Amy affirmed that educational resources are important as misinformation is common. For example, some believe that animal regulations would not apply to larger properties.
2. **Sub Topic:** Responsibilities of various town boards and comities
 - a. Don asked for clarification of the responsibilities of the AgCom vs. BoH vs. Animal Officer (AO) adding that clarifying these roles for the public may help those who are making complaints.
 - b. Don asked if animal complaints should first go to the BoH or the Animal Officer. Bob noted that the AO is spread very thin in his position. He clarified that the BoH is the appropriate body to handle nuisance animal complaints. It was discussed if there might be value in giving the AO a larger role in mediating animal nuisance issues, but it was felt the current AO would not likely be willing.
 - c. Amy noted that part of the value of requiring a permit for animal keeping is that it might give the AgCom an opportunity to make recommendations to potential animal keepers before they purchase animals.

3. **Sub Topic:** Current Protocol for BoH when complaint is received

- a. Bob noted that the BoH usually sends a letter to the offending party describing the complaint. Leveraging the multi-town alliance West Boylston is part of they will send investigators, as appropriate, to the site of the complaint. Possible action is limited for informal complaints but all formal complaints are acted on. They attempt to mediate between parties; in only a few extraordinary situations required intervention from MSPCA to remove animals.
- b. Discussion continued regarding what is and is not permissible during an investigation. BOB noted that it is not permissible to trespass on the offender's property. Don noted that photos of areas visible to the public can be taken, but must not identify any individual.
- c. Sighle located minutes from a 2011 AgCom meeting which noted that the commonwealth has (or had at the time) an Office of Dispute Resolution, which could be called upon to aid in mediation in animal complaint cases.

4. **CONCLUSIONS:**

- a. General consensus that the AgCom can and should take a more active role in settling conflicts regarding animal keeping. They were unanimous in feeling comfortable taking steps and appropriate action(s) to promote "conflict resolution" where applicable.
 - b. They are willing to cooperate closely with BoH to contact complainants and animal owners to mediate a solution.
 - c. Also, more information about responsible back-yard animal keeping should be made available on the AgCom web page, especially in regards to the Right to Farm Bill.
 - d. Bob invited the AgCom to speak at the next BoH meeting (The next BoH meeting will be October 9, 2019 at 6:00 pm). Bob noted that he believes such a cooperative approach would be welcome by BoH and he will recommend that the BoH hold off on voting on the regulations. Bob stated that he does not want/need farm animal issues on their plate as they have EEE and other serious concerns to deal with, and that he would much rather see the AgCom deal with farm animal issues.
5. Kate proposed an AgCom meeting should be scheduled after the date of the BoH meeting to discuss results. Thursday, October 17, 2019 at 6:30 pm was decided on)
6. The meeting adjourned 8:03 pm (Move to adjourn: Daniel, Second: Sighle)