

## **Draft Notes from Ag Community Forum Zoom Webinar**

August 19, 2020 from Noon-1:30pm

**Purpose:** To convene representatives of the Skagit Ag Community to continue to discuss the issue of Agritourism in an open and transparent way and record feedback from the farming community. To provide input from this forum to the SPF Board of Directors and Skagit County Planning and Development Services.

### **Participants**

Kari Parks (FLOURISH Organic Farms); John Christianson, (Christianson Nursery); Terry Gifford (Willowbrook Manor English Tea House & Chamomile Farm); Robin Crandall (own/operate small farm); Brandon Roozen (WWAA); Cindy Verge (Tulip Festival); Melissa Correia (Tangle Thicket Farm); Linda Sanford (American Dream Real Estate), Jennifer Smith (SPF Board/farmer); Everett Chu (Azusa Farm & Gardens); Kim Rubenstein (SPF Board); Andrew Miller (Tulip Town/farmer); Rachel Sorrels (SPF Dev. and Admin.); Terry Sapp (Hoehn Bend Farm); Ron Extract (Garden Path Fermentation); John Roozen (Board member of SPF and Save Fam Farming); Peter Gill (Skagit County Planning & Development Services); John Anderson (SPF Board President/farmer); Allen Rozema (SPF); and Lyn Wiltse (facilitator, PDSA Consulting)

### **Action Items**

- All: Let Allen know if you have suggestions for additional participants for these Agritourism forums. Also let him know if interested in being a member of the Tourism Advisory Council that SPF is forming.
- Allen: Send out notes from this meeting to participants, Skagit County Planning and Development Services, and the SPF Board.

### **Welcome by John Anderson, SPF President**

John opened the meeting by sharing how excited SPF is to host this forum. He thanked everyone for attending, especially those who also attended the July 23 forum. He noted that agritourism is growing in Skagit County, bringing with it many benefits and challenges. SPF sees itself as conveners/collaborators in support of Skagit County Agriculture. To that end, the purpose of this meeting is to gather information and ensure all the voices that represent the business and ag interests in the County are heard. Through these discussions, SPF hopes to tease out what those might be in a way that translated well to the Skagit County planning process. To that end, SPF will be hosting additional forums as they want to convene a broad representation of stakeholders to help inform these preliminary discussions. Information from these sessions will inform all stakeholders around this important issue.

### **Review of July 23 meeting**

Allen explained the last meeting included some polling to gain an understanding of how folks are feeling about various types of agritourism activities, as well as how agritourism should be treated from a regulatory standpoint. Discussions included types of permits and whether they should be for primary or accessory uses. By contrast, this meeting will be a “deeper dive” based on input received at the last meeting. SPF will pose 5 open-ended framing questions with the aim of

listening deeply to various perspectives. The SPF Board is very committed to understanding stakeholder hopes and concerns relative to agritourism.

**Framing Question #1:**

*In the online forum last month, 79% percent of the participants indicated agritourism activities within the Ag-NRL zoned lands should be an accessory use to an existing farming operation. Given that agritourism activities include direct sales of crops and livestock produced on the farm (farm-based business) – What tourism activities should be considered accessory to the farming operation?*

Discussion:

Terry Sapp: Operated a farm stay (like an BNB but no food was provided). Most of their guests were from the Seattle metropolitan area and came with their kids. They also had visitors from 17 countries. Guests participated in farming activities to the extent possible and were invited to explore the cattle and “accessory” animals. Many children witnessed calves being born. These activities were directly involved in their farming. They stopped offering the farm stay as it became too much work. They decided to use their energy to focus on farming. They are now evaluating how to start something like this again in the future.

Terry Gifford: Appreciates SPF providing the forum for this discussion. Agritourism is not written up in the Skagit County code. As a rule follower, she wants to feel like what she’s doing is okay. The County has the opportunity to gift city folks with the experience of coming up here for a beautiful change of scene. She sees the tea experience offered at Willowbrook Manor as part of that. They also operate a licensed bakery – serving people in what would be considered a retail setting. The flour they use is locally milled. Everything served is grown and baked on site to the extent possible. She doesn’t want to feel like she is breaking the rules (e.g., a teenager sneaking out on a date).

Brandon Roozen: Were there non-farm-related aspects to the examples you both offer?

Terry Sapp : Absolutely not.

Terry Gifford: She thinks this as very subjective. She sees it as all related.

Allen Rozema: Appreciates the discussion. Farm stands, retail store selling farm produce, etc. are all primary use. The direct sales component is tied to Schedule F income. What about activities such as a hayride and corn maze? Should those be considered farm activities? How far from direct sale of produce/livestock should folks go? Rock concerts? What tourism type activities should be considered an accessory to ag?

Robin Crandall: Accessory activities that are tied to production on a farm and some that are tied to the product. What about a rock concert with local farm-grown flowers in the background?

What if you tie in an educational component? Does the intent count?

John Roozen: What we need to ask is whether the activity contributes to strengthening the farm. Could the tourism activity exist without the farm? This is where the rubber meets the road. SPF is a group that cuts to the chase – when taking a position, they have to feel good about it.

Cindy Verge: When folks visit the Tulip Festival, they are there to experience an ag product and the beauty of the valley. Large groups of people require services, like food, port-a-potties, handwashing, etc. They should also be able to buy trinkets to remember their visit. This serves those who come to see the farming operation. What about art shows at Christiansen’s Nursery?

Should they be allowed at Everett's place or Schuh Farms? The Grange? These other things allow people to enjoy the tulips – riding bicycles through the farming areas.

Ron Extract: Great models are out there. An art show is an interesting example as it could take place independently of the farm. Well, it could unless we have rules in place to say that it can't. Same with brewing and wine making. If it supports the ag use, then yes. If not, then no. If it could potentially stand independently, then that becomes problematic,

### **Framing Question #2**

*Should non-farmers be allowed to hold tourism-related events and activities within Ag-NRL zoned lands?*

Discussion:

Cindy Verge: Enforcement and regulation would be very difficult. Would this apply only to folks living on that property?

Allen Rozema: The Gorge at George as an example. What is it?

Terry Sap: Of course, we could let anyone do whatever they want because they own the land.

What we are talking about here is ag-NRL lands. People may not farm on all land in the ag zones, but they are in an ag zones. We must be careful to preserve ag and ensure that those activities that take place in this special zone don't abuse the notion of preserving land for ag. It's a slippery slope. More and more profitable non-ag activities might lead to more and more reasons not to farm. Large multi-hundred person parties are not compatible with being on the other side of barbed wire fence where the cattle are.

Terry Gifford: Bought a tractor and became a farmer because she was told she had to farm – that was the rule.

Ron Extract: If the property is large enough, should you be able to do other things? There are rules against subdividing in Skagit County now, but there are some small parcels of 4-5 acres.

What are the options there? Activities that support ag should be considered.

Melissa Correia: Lots of folks are farming successfully on less than 5 acres.

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Terry Sap: The other parcel of his neighbor's property, which was an old dairy, has been broken off and is now a professional-level motocross course. Because his neighbor does not charge money it is not considered a commercial business.

### **Framing Question #3**

*If agritourism activities need to be subordinate to farming operations, what is the best measure to ensure the tourism activity doesn't become the primary use of the land?*

Discussion:

Allen Rozema: The measure could be money, number of employees, land size, etc.

Brandon Roozen: What infrastructure is needed onsite to facilitate the activities? Care must be taken not to interfere with dike and drainage district requirements.

John Roozen: We have strict zoning and still enough open space to support infrastructure. There are rules saying you must farm it in order to build a house, etc. Small plots seem to be fulfilling the 5- and 10-acre tracts. Also, Skagit County has around hundreds of retail businesses – many of which were dependent on the Tulip Festival to survive. We need to consider the seasonality of needs vs. allowing restaurants to be allowed to operate year round on farms, possibly competing with established restaurants in town.

Ron Extract: To say that activities such as restaurants directly compete with what is offered in town doesn't make sense. A restaurant in ag is a unique experience. Check out Stone Barns Center in New York [www.stonebarnscenter.org](http://www.stonebarnscenter.org) as an example of something we could offer here in Skagit to showcase what we are. Maybe we could regulate how much of the land can be physically developed. Businesses are subject to regulation and licensing. The County has to sign off or this can't be maintained. We need requirements to include maintaining open space and using products from the land that support ag activity. New York and Virginia are examples we can learn from.

Terry Sap: King County is another example in terms of how to handle wine tasting in places that did interfere with ag operations. Almost none of the product was produced there on the farm. This is a big zoning problem for King County. He is now making less money than if he had continued to operate the other activity. If they made the decision based solely on profit, they would have stopped farming.

Melissa Correia: I think that's an important consideration - some proportion of the products sold should be produced on the farm and/or within x miles of the farm.

John Roozen: We are a subtidal delta. In the wintertime, the infrastructure that would be needed for year-round facilities, would be overwhelming. We can't have infrastructure in the flood zones. Take it back to seasonal ag.

Melissa Correia: We're looking at agritourism so we can AFFORD to farm, so it's possible that the tourism component could make more money than the farm. I think that's an important consideration - some proportion of the products sold should be produced on the farm and/or within x miles of the farm.

Robin Crandall: I agree with Melissa. I also think that a majority percentage of land should be undeveloped (except for ag use).

Ron Extract: I agree.

Linda Sanford: Thank you for this conversation. I agree with Melissa and Ron on % of products. Educate, educate, and educate folks on the value of local agriculture.

#### **Framing Questions #4 and 5 (combined)**

*What do you see as the opportunities and challenges of a restaurant /other events/ activities operating within Ag-NRL areas of Skagit County?*

Discussion:

Cindy Verge: Preserving our farmlands is imperative. We don't want to become another Kent. The more folks know, the more they can truly appreciate and value the land.

John Anderson: Yes, education is critical – the more they understand, the more that can appreciate its value.

Ron Extract: Agrees. He and his partner moved to Skagit County from out of the area. What we have here is very special and unique. Those in big cities don't have the opportunity to experience this every day. Regarding restaurants, water and wastewater have to be dealt with. Seasonal? 15-20 seat capacity?

Linda Sanford: Can we bring Farmer's Market into the conversation?

Terry Sap: There are current limits to the number of employees working for non-ag operation that is within the ag zone. An example of this is a landscaping business on a small parcel that became successful, hiring 12 employees (the limit was 3). All the business was conducted off farm. Should the 3-employee limit be changed for restaurants?

Allen Rozema: What are the opportunities / challenges associated with wedding venues?

Brandon Roozen: It would be good to discuss non-conforming uses as different from agritourism. Might a wedding venue be considered a non-conforming use?

Allen Rozema: Should these events be required to be related to ag production? Or is it enough if the events don't cause harm to ag production?

### **Closing / Next Steps**

John Anderson thanked everyone again for taking time out of their busy days to participate in these discussions. While the primary focus of these forums is to inform the SPF Board, in a spirit of transparency, notes from these forums will be shared with participants and also with Skagit Planning and Development Services.

Allen explained that the aim of the Tourism Advisory Council (TAC) that SPF is in the process of forming is to help the SPF Board better understand issues relative to agritourism in ag-NRL lands. He anticipates the TAC being formed by early November and meeting quarterly to address questions from the SPF Board. This information will also be shared with Skagit County.

Lyn thanked all for their open and vulnerable sharing. Such discussions are critical to teasing out critical issues associated with agritourism. Allen will send out notes from this meeting early next week.