

EAST AMWELL PLANNING BOARD MINUTES
7:30 PM East Amwell Municipal Building
June 9, 2010 - Meeting

Call to Order, Attendance and Pledge of Allegiance

This meeting of the East Amwell Planning Board was opened on June 9, 2010 at 7:30 PM. The following notice was read, "In compliance with the Open Public Meetings Act, this is a regularly scheduled meeting pursuant to the annual meeting notice as published in the January 21, 2010 issue of the Hunterdon County Democrat, a copy of the agenda for this meeting was forwarded to the Hunterdon County Democrat, filed in the Township Clerk's Office and posted on the bulletin board on June 2, 2010."

Present: Fred Gardner
Rob Gilbert
Gail Glashoff
Linda Lenox – (*arrived at 7:48 PM*)
Don Reilly, Chairman
Michael Weis
Joe Wolfgang
Roger DeLay
Planner Slagle

Excused: Bela Kamensky
Peter Kneski
Dart Sageser

Citizens' Privilege to Speak on Items Not on the Agenda

Chairman Reilly opened the floor to public comment. It was noted that no members of the public came forward and he closed the floor.

Review of Minutes

A motion by Rob Gilbert, seconded by Gail Glashoff to approve the Board's minutes from 5/12/10 was approved with a minor revision noted and Fred Gardner abstaining.

New Business – Other

Public Hearing: Comprehensive Farmland Preservation Plan

Present for the public hearing was the Farmland and Open Space Preservation Committee (FOSPC) Administrator Judy Conard, Chair Glorianne Robbi, Vice Chair Dick Ginman and Committee Member Fred Gardner who stepped down from the Planning Board dais and joined the FOSPC group.

It was noted that the Comprehensive Farmland Preservation Plan (FPP) has taken 4 years to reach this point. Ms. Robbi commented that the Township's 2006 Master Plan cites preserving farmland and open space as "...the most important policy goals for the Township." She explained that this is achieved through maintaining the prevailing agricultural character of the community by promoting the industry of farming and preserving the productive agricultural land base.

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Ms. Robbi said that in 1983 a State wide farmland preservation program began and as a result of this, County agricultural boards were created to administer the program at the local level. She indicated part of this program was to identify agricultural development areas (ADA's) which were land areas most suitable for sustaining agriculture. Ms. Robbi commented that East Amwell's ADA is considered the Amwell Valley Agricultural Zone and the basis for determining ADA's is good soils. She said the backbone of farmland preservation is purchasing the development rights from property owners for the sake of having agriculture continue.

Ms. Robbi explained that the Farmland Preservation Planning Incentive Grant Act of 1999 established the Municipal Planning Incentive Grants (PIG). The following criteria must be met in order to meet municipal eligibility and eligibility to receive funding from the State and County:

1. A property must be identified that is reasonably contiguous and located in the ADA.
2. An Agricultural Advisory Committee must be established composed of at least 3, but not more than 5 residents with the majority of the members actively engaged in farming and owning a portion of the land they farm.
3. A dedicated source of funding for farmland preservation must be established and maintained—in East Amwell that includes the open space and farmland tax.
4. A Farmland Preservation Plan Element must be prepared in consultation with the Agricultural Advisory Committee.

Ms. Robbi explained that in 2007 the guidelines and criteria for farmland preservation were expanded upon. She noted that the components of the Farmland Preservation Plan are in 8 chapters which were summarized by Ms. Conard, Mr. Ginman, Ms. Robbi, Mr. Gardner and Ms. Lenox - (*representing the Agricultural Advisory Committee*).

It was noted that in May 2010 East Amwell's draft FPP was approved by the SADC. It is anticipated that the SADC will formally approve it at their June 24, 2010 meeting. Ms. Robbi indicated FOSPC will need approval from both the East Amwell Agricultural Advisory Committee and the Planning Board which is why they were presenting the plan this evening. She noted that once approved by SADC, the Township will be entitled to a grant of \$750,000.00 which must be used within 3 years. Ms. Robbi commented that the property they intend to use the grant on is the Zuegner parcel which consists of about 80 acres.

Ms. Conard summarized Chapter 1 which focuses on the agricultural land base. Ms. Conard provided some interesting facts:

1. There are approximately 18,000 acres of land in East Amwell, 62% of the acreage is farmland assessed – about 296 farms in 1997.
2. There are approximately 13,500 acres in the Amwell Valley Agricultural Zone and 54% of those acres are actually in agriculture.
3. Between 1986 and 2002 East Amwell lost 12% of its agricultural acres.
4. There are 8 soil classes defined by the Department of Agriculture, the higher the number the worse the soil is. There are no class 8's in Hunterdon County.
5. Approximately 77% of land devoted to agriculture in 1980 was under farmland assessment, in 2005 it was 63%.
6. There was approximately 61% of land under farmland assessment in 1980, and 49% in 2005.
7. According to the 2006 farmland assessment data, East Amwell ranks 3rd in the County and 15th in the State based on the number of active agricultural acres – which means land harvested or pastured.

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8. Approximately 52% of the farms in East Amwell are between 10 and 49 acres, with the average being 39 acres.
9. In 2007, 65% of acres under farmland assessment were rented to farmers with many of the tenants being East Amwell residents.

Ms. Conard summarized Chapter 2 which focuses on an overview of the agricultural industry. Ms. Conard provided statistics based on her study of agriculture within the Township between 1990 and 2005:

1. Acreage that has been dedicated to corn or grain has declined.
2. Dairy farms have declined. The County lost 4% of its dairy animals during 1990-2005. East Amwell lost 54% of its dairy animals during that same timeframe.
3. Wheat and soybean acreage has declined.
4. Alfalfa acreage has declined, but all hay crops have remained fairly constant within the County at about 29,000 acres planted. Acreage devoted to hay in East Amwell has declined 25%.
5. Traditional field crops in East Amwell were valued at \$832,000.00 in 2000 and at \$815,000.00 in 2005.

Mr. Ginman summarized Chapter 3 which focuses on land use planning. He explained that it is essentially a verbatim analysis of what the Planning Board has already laid out. Mr. Ginman stated they traced the history of how land management got to where it is today in East Amwell. He remarked that one issue that continued to come up was why more innovative land use techniques are not being implemented, such as the transfer of development rights (TDR). Mr. Ginman commented that conditions have not changed. There is still no sewer service within the Township, the receiving districts have long since disappeared, the sentiment in Ringoes regarding development has not changed and the zoning structure and financing program that has been implemented has been quite successful so TDR has not been pursued.

Chairman Reilly commented that a thorough job was done several years ago of identifying why TDR was not practical for East Amwell to pursue. He said it may be a viable technique for other Townships, but it did not offer East Amwell any advantage from a planning perspective and it was questionable as to whether or not the infrastructure support was even available to make it work.

Ms. Robbi summarized Chapter 4 which focuses on the overview of the farmland preservation program in East Amwell. She explained there are essentially 3 program levels: State, County and Municipal. She said the State program has changed in the past few years. Most recently, the State has decided to hold off on direct purchases—fee simple purchases of parcels. The County is where most of East Amwell's farmland applications have gone. Ms. Robbi noted that the earliest farms preserved in the Township were in 1989 and consisted of the Manners farm, the Totten farm and the Hill farm. Subsequently other farms followed. Ms. Robbi explained that each program has its own criteria for ranking parcels which includes acreage, soils, road access and location to contiguous preserved farms.

Ms. Conard summarized Chapter 5 which focuses on funding preservation. She noted 16 farms (approximately 1500 acres) are targeted for preservation over the next 10 years. The cost breakdown is 60% funded by grant(s), 20% funded by the municipality and 20% funded by the County. She provided the following statistics:

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1. 38% of the Township is already preserved farmland.
2. East Amwell has a dedicated open space tax; to date the Township has collected \$2,718,000.00 through the open space tax.
3. The total cost for all of the preserved farmland in East Amwell is \$27 million, the State paid \$19.5 million, the County paid \$4 million and East Amwell paid \$3.6 million.

Mr. Gardner summarized Chapter 6 which focuses on economic development and what the actual agricultural activities are. He noted that the two principal activities in East Amwell are field and forage and equine uses. Mr. Gardner commented that the other farming activities within the Township include vineyards, ornamental horticulture, organic produce and livestock and poultry.

Mr. Gardner summarized Chapter 7 which focuses on natural resource conservation. He explained this chapter takes into account the direct concerns of the Planning Board with specific attention being given to matters like erosion, the preservation and use of good soil, water quality and conservation, wildlife and wetlands. Mr. Gardner noted that energy conservation and water resources are important elements of this chapter.

Ms. Lenox summarized Chapter 8 which focuses on agricultural industry sustainability, retention and promotion. She mentioned the following areas:

1. Right to farm
2. Rutgers—who help with manure management plans and farm management
3. Farm credit
4. Public outreach—the Farm Forum which is scheduled every year
5. Amwell Valley Trail Association
6. 4-H Fair
7. MidAtlantic Equine Center—Ms. Lenox commented on how fortunate the Township is to have such a widely recognized facility operating locally.

Ms. Lenox personally thanked FOSPC and especially Judy Conard for the time and dedication they put into the FPP. Ms. Glashoff agreed.

Mr. Wolfgang asked if anyone knew how many homes could have potentially been built on the acres that are now preserved in East Amwell Township. Mr. Ginman commented that Banisch Associates did create a “build out” analysis at one time but no one at this moment remembered the results of the study. Mr. Gardner stated, “That in order for the Township to justify its 10 acre zoning you have to have the preservation of land, in good conscience, to be able to say to the land owner that you have a mechanism for compensating them for the value of the land.”

A motion by Linda Lenox, seconded by Gail Glashoff to open to the public was unanimously approved. Nancy Cunningham of 14 Wertsville Road came forward and echoed the sentiments of appreciation for all of the work FOSPC put into the FPP. A motion by Linda Lenox, seconded by Gail Glashoff to close to the public was unanimously approved.

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Chairman Reilly noted that FOSPC put in a tremendous amount of effort into the FPP over the past 4 years and said it's quite a credit to them and mentioned several years ago people had the foresight to recognize what could happen to the Township if zoning and planning issues were not addressed and remarked that he thought of Glorianne Robbi as a pioneer saying he knows a bit about the history and what she went through and he thanked her publically for her efforts.

A motion by Linda Lenox, seconded by Gail Glashoff to approve Resolution PB2010-05: Adoption of Amended Comprehensive Farmland Preservation Plan Element to the Master Plan of the Township of East Amwell and Recommendation to the Township Committee was unanimously approved by roll call vote.

Roll Call Vote: Linda Lenox: Yes, Gail Glashoff: Yes, Fred Gardner: Yes, Rob Gilbert: Yes, Don Reilly: Yes, Michael Weis: Yes, Joe Wolfgang: Yes, Roger DeLay: Yes

Oral Reports

There were no reports given from any of the Board Members.

Open to the Public

It was noted there were no members of the public at the meeting at this time.

Presentation of Vouchers

A motion by Fred Gardner, seconded by Linda Lenox to pay the vouchers as listed on the Board's 6/9/10 agenda was unanimously approved.

Adjournment

The meeting adjourned at 8:51 PM.

Maria Andrews, Administrative Officer