

HARFORD COUNTY ENVIRONMENTAL ADVISORY BOARD

APPROVED MEETING SUMMARY – January 21st, 2025

Members Present

Jackie Koehn
Sally LaBarre
Roland Beckman
Michael Charlton
Paul Gartelmann
Reese Jones
Dennis Kirkwood
Dan Spiker

Ex-officio Members Present

Terry Hanley
Matt Kropp
Adam Lanphear
Jeff Schoenberger

Guests

Jen Wilson, Harford County Planning & Zoning
Kaitlin Lee, Harford County Planning & Zoning

Welcome / Introductions

Jackie Koehn welcomed the EAB. Everyone introduced themselves.

Review / Approval of December 2024 Meeting Summary

A motion to approve the December 2024 meeting summary was made. The motion was seconded; the Board unanimously approved the meeting summary.

Ms. Jen Wilson, Harford County Planning & Zoning, Agriculture Land Preservation Update

Maps of agricultural land preservation were presented to the EAB. Currently, 64,500 acres (26%) of Harford County land is permanently preserved. Harford County is among the top 5 counties in the nation for total acres preserved. The first easement was established in the late 1970s, but at that time, the county faced challenges in securing sufficient funding. By 1991, Harford County citizens voted to approve a new tax to fund land preservation, with 60-70% of voters in favor.

Three main programs are used to preserve land:

1. Maryland Agricultural Land Preservation Foundation (MALPF or the “State Program”) which is ran through the Maryland Department of Agriculture
2. Rural Legacy which is ran through the Maryland Department of Natural Resources
3. Harford County Agricultural Land Preservation Program (“the County Program”) ran through the County’s Department of Planning & Zoning

All the programs place a Permanent Easement on the land and Landowners are compensated through funds generated by the tax for erasing their development rights. A rewrite of the County Program was Approved in early 2024. The focus shifted from just ag-zoned areas to additional zones, with updated definitions and smaller farm size eligibility. The new minimum farm size is 20 acres, or 10 acres if adjacent to preserved land.

A new spreadsheet was introduced to accurately price land, along with an incentive map, both of which are important due to the broader focus beyond ag-zoned areas. The spreadsheet assigns points to properties to evaluate their value. Tree production is also prioritized when crop production is not relevant. Mr. Hanley and Mr. Jones inquired about the Deer Creek watershed and its potential special conditions. Ms. Wilson explained that special conditions could apply in various cases, such as estate planning or future land use, with risk factors also considered.

Mr. Lanphear asked about current events and Ms. Wilson shared that 2,000 acres are pending easement. She also noted that the application cycle occurs annually on May 1st. The program currently only operates with one cycle per year, and funding is in a good position.

Mr. Kropp asked about the Rural Legacy Program, and Ms. Wilson clarified that it is a grant-based program run by the Department of Natural Resources (DNR), which offers about \$1 million annually. Properties must be within designated Rural Legacy areas to be eligible. Rural Legacy can sometimes offer quicker action than the County program and may provide higher offers, depending on negotiation. Regarding the County Program, the maximum payout is \$7,000 per acre. Ms. Koehn asked about the number of applications, and Ms. Wilson confirmed they received 40 last year and expect around 35 annually. Mr. Kirkwood inquired whether active farmers are prioritized over absentee landowners, and Ms. Wilson responded that the agricultural community has emphasized making this a factor.

Mr. Jones asked about forest habitat connectivity and green infrastructure. Ms. Wilson explained that properties can earn points if they contribute to green infrastructure as part of the County's Green Infrastructure Plan. Mr. Hanley asked about the 26% land preservation figure and whether it includes county-owned land like parks and open space. Ms. Wilson clarified that most parks are not included, though properties like Harford Glen, owned by the school system with preservation restrictions, are counted. Harford County is ranked among the top 5 in the nation for agricultural land preservation and 2nd when considering only county programs. Unlike other Maryland counties that rely heavily on state funding, Harford County's program is distinct in its approach.

Mr. Jones asked whether the point system, introduced this year, would lead to increased interest from forested land. Ms. Wilson acknowledged the possibility but noted that smaller properties

(around 18 acres) have seen the biggest increase in interest. Though these smaller properties require similar effort, their collective impact will grow over time.

Mr. Gartelmann asked about staffing levels, and Ms. Wilson mentioned that the program has two employees, which can be insufficient to manage the workload. Consultants are occasionally brought in for site inspections. Ms. Wilson emphasized the importance of spreading awareness about the program, as it helps increase its impact.

Mr. Jones asked about the types of activities allowed on preserved land. Ms. Wilson clarified that most agricultural uses under special development are permitted but not special exceptions.

Departmental Updates

Mr. Schoenberger from the Department of Public Works reported that the MS4 FY2024 annual report was submitted to MDE. The County Council approved the financial assurance plan for the MS4 permit. The public hearing for the Solid Waste Management Plan was held. The next Household Hazardous Waste collection event is scheduled for February 4 at Harford Mulch and Compost Facility. 3.31 tons of pumpkins were collected for composting by their annual program.

Mr. Lanphear from the Health Department said the new fees have been implemented at the new year. This was the first increase in 15 years. There are weekly monitoring of groundwater wells, and they are hoping to begin wet season percolation tests. It has been dry, and the wells are very low, but hoping to test by mid-February if precipitation and snow melt increases.

Mr. Hanley from Parks and Recreation reported they completed the Mariner Point Stormwater Management project. They are expanding the low-mow zone. They are constructing more pollinator gardens. The Ma+Pa trail is coming along well. The Oakington summary report is posted on the Parks and Rec website and there will be another public session in the fall. They are leaning towards preservation as much as possible. The deer creek conservation planting will be completed by the end of the year. The Abingdon business park stabilization has been completed.

Mr. Kropp from Planning & Zoning said the planning advisory board met in the first week of January and voted on Comprehensive Zoning applications. They are down to 65 applications after one was withdrawn. The County Executive is meeting to discuss issues. The Planning & Zoning report will be done in about two weeks and will be sent to the Council at the end of February. Public hearings will likely be held in April.

New Business

Mr. Kropp and Ms. Koehn are working on lining up speakers for 2025. Please send any topics you are interested in for 2025. There will be no meeting in February.

Mr. Jones noted that the streams are cloudy during precipitation events, and it makes pumping at the farm very difficult.

Ms. Koehn sent the 2024 annual report to the EAB and the County Executive. She volunteered to hold a meeting with the County Executive's office if they have any questions.

Adjourn: Meeting was adjourned at 7:00pm.