

**Ad hoc Gully Hill Committee
Meeting #1
March 1, 2022
Approved meeting minutes**

In attendance:

Committee: Councilor Jennifer Kretovic (Chair); Councilor Candace Bouchard; Councilor Stacy Brown

Staff: Deputy City Manager Carlos P. Baía; Assistant City Planner Beth Fenstermacher; Local Government Management Fellow Crayton Brubaker

Meeting called to order at 5:30 p.m.

Councilor Kretovic asked the committee and staff to introduce themselves.

Councilor Kretovic noted that the committee was convened as a result of the current lease relationship with a farmer on the City land being set to expire at the end of this year.

Ms. Fenstermacher provided a summary of the history of this land since the City's acquisition.

Councilor Kretovic stated that Kris Tardiff, chairwoman of the Conservation Commission, couldn't attend this evening but she had informed Councilor Kretovic that the Commission was going to review this matter at their March 9th meeting. Ms. Tardiff will be invited to the next committee meeting to report back.

Councilor Kretovic also informed the committee that the current leaseholders, Sloping Acres Farm, will also be invited to the next committee meeting to provide testimony. Councilor Kretovic asked the committee if they had suggestions for others to invite.

Councilor Brown referenced an organic farming group that had been around in 2017. She believes that today there is a group called Fresh Start Farms.

Councilor Kretovic outlined three possible objectives of the committee. The committee could:

1. Recommend to provide the current farmer with another lease extension;
2. Recommend that an RFP or bid be issued to gauge the marketplace for farming tenants;
3. Recommend that the farming lease be allowed to expire.

At this point, the committee opened the floor to public comment.

Dot Currier stated that she practices birdwatching on the land in question. She noted that flooding is common and with climate change only likely to worsen. She questioned if these conditions would be appropriate for community gardens who may wish to plant when the land might be unusable due to water. She would like to see the property remain natural and was supportive of solar arrays as well.

Councilor Brown stated that she had received an email from a Mr. Quinn advocating for trails on these lands.

Rob Morrill, a local farmer, recited a brief history of farming in Concord. He noted that his family was one of the first in Concord to protect their land via a conservation easement. He noted that the common theme for much of the best farmland in Concord is that it's located along the banks of the Merrimack River. He expressed that it would be a shame to see these fertile lands lost.

David Murray, a local nursery owner, urged the committee to think of themselves as "stewards" of the land rather than owners. The committee members' existence is short relative to the history of this property and any decision could have far-reaching implications for future generations. He noted that if the land were converted to outdoor space, the land would likely be lost forever to agriculture. He cited that 2% of the country's population feeds 100% of the people. He also mentioned that agricultural activities can help locally noting that his business' partnership with 20 high school teams has produced \$1.2 million in funding for those organizations.

Councilor Kretovic asked Mr. Murray how his land is utilized. He noted that scale is a significant economic factor for agriculture. Having the right amount of land is important to be successful. Councilor Kretovic asked how long land could remain potentially productive for agriculture if it were not tended. Mr. Murray answered that it was like parking a car. The longer you leave it parked, the harder it is to re-start; albeit not impossible.

Hannah McBride, a Concord resident, stated that she is a master gardener and wants the City to use the land in a community-friendly manner. She expressed support for turning the monoculture land into small plots acknowledging that not all the land would need to be converted to this use. She also supports solar arrays sharing spaces with crops.

Councilor Bouchard stated that Concord already has two community gardens. She questioned if Ms. McBride was proposing a 3rd. Ms. McBride answered that only a small section of the City's land would need to be used for community gardens. Most community gardens, she stated, are less than 2 acres.

Brad Cilley, a Concord resident, noted that he grew up on a dairy farm. He felt it was important to keep this land in some form of food production. He didn't think it needed to necessarily be monoculture but cautioned against community gardens. He is presently forming a non-profit to take over the management of the Birch Street community gardens from the State. He explained that if there were to be community gardens on this land the City would need to manage them. This type of management is time-intensive and requires a tremendous amount of oversight, to regulate plot allocation, the policing of lots and to ensure proper gardening practices.

Mr. Cilley explained that the Birch Street gardens total 8 acres with 209 plots; it is the largest community gardens in New Hampshire. The State presently leases a 25'x50' plot for \$15/year and a 100'x100' plot for \$60/year.

Sherry Morrill stated that the Gully Hill land was bought with Conservation dollars and felt that it was shameful that the Conservation Commission hadn't pushed harder to have the Council place a conservation easement on the land.

Ms. Morrill stressed that the City should talk to farmers about what is practical for farming this land. As a farmer herself, she felt that at minimum 5 year lease would be needed to make it cost-effective. As for community gardens, Ms. Morrill stated that there is a lot of land at NHTI for gardens but if the City wanted such gardens on Gully Hill it should only be a small piece and off to one side. The prime land should be for commercial farming. She also stated that solar arrays are ugly and she recommended against such installations at this location.

Councilor Kretovic asked if the Gully Hill property is considered a large parcel by the farming community. Ms. Morrill replied that for Concord, yes, it is a large property.

Ian McGregor, a Concord resident, stated that he moved to Concord from Wisconsin in 2017. He said the smell from the cow manure in the spring is a downside to farming in a city like Concord. He also observed that farming is dirty and messy and wondered how this would affect the Merrimack River Greenway Trail that is proposed to be built alongside the farm land. He observed that it might make the trail unusable during certain periods of the year. He also noted that the Heights has limited outdoor recreational areas compared to other parts of the city.

Mr. Murray spoke for a second time and expressed that the committee needs to be cautious if it considers community gardens for this site. The community gardens would be an investment of valuable land that might not be successful due to the lack of adherence by inexperienced gardeners who might be interested at first but might tire of the gardens or not maximize the land's productivity. He noted how his best-selling vegetable combinations are now packs of two whereas years ago it had been much larger quantities.

This concluded the public comment period.

The committee set Tuesday, March 15th at 5:30 p.m. for their next meeting. Councilor Kretovic stated that she would invite the Conservation Commission spokesperson to attend as well as the current tenant farmers. She also advised the other committee members that if they had parties they wish to invite to coordinate with Deputy City Manager Baía. Councilor Kretovic also confirmed that the committee will provide a public comment period at their next meeting again.

Councilor Bouchard moved to adjourn the meeting. Councilor Brown seconded the motion.

Meeting adjourned at 6:35 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Carlos P. Baía