

Skagit County Conservation Futures Advisory Board
Meeting Summary
July 11, 2023

Members in Attendance

Scott DeGraw Jim Glackin Audrey Gravley Margery Hite Owen Peth Andrea Xaver

Members Absent

Keith Morrison Trisha Logue (ex-officio) Jack Moore (ex-officio)

Staff and Others in Attendance

Jenn Johnson, Skagit County Public Works
Kai Ottesen, Belle Bean Services
Sarah Stoner, Skagit County Public Works

Scott called the meeting to order at 7:30AM.

Review Agenda

Agenda approved.

June 13 Meeting Summary

Jim made a motion to approve minutes; Andrea seconded. All were in favor.

Looking to the Future: Skagit Farmers

Anna Chotzen, Director of Farm Viability for Viva Farms, introduced as guest presenter. Anna provided an overview of Viva’s current services, as well as the history of Viva Farms’ founding. Discussion included potential barriers for beginning and first-generation farmers in Skagit County. Anna invited the recognition of the key shared goal between Viva and Farmland Legacy—supporting the future of farming (and farmers) in Skagit County.

Owen pointed out that the two main crops in the county require a three-year field rotation, so the opportunity to access land is there. One suggestion was to start a resource list of small parcels available. Since Viva farmer farm organic, a key element would be longevity of land leases, for the three years needed before ground can be certified organic.

Easement Status, Property Updates

The group discussed updates on the properties currently in queue for agricultural conservation easements. The queued applicants encompass 730 acres and 14 development rights.

Marketing & Application Process

Land Trust Alliance, Seeding Next Generation of Conservation Appraisers

Sarah noted that a recent article shared from the Land Trust Alliance titled [“Developing the next generation of easement appraisers”](#) outlines the issue of an acute shortage of qualified appraisers to conduct conservation-related appraisals.

Closing Costs: Review of Escrow and Closing Fees Paid

Sarah shared information on what fees, by amount and type of fees, are charged by the title company and that are paid by the county program. Sarah requested input from the committee on these fees—their amounts and the payment of all of them in the conservation easement process.

The program has a new escrow representative, so she and Sarah have been working on figuring out these fees together. Sarah noticed earlier in the year that title fees are not consistent from transaction to transaction. The other key reason to be aware of closing fees paid for by the program per farmland protection project is the potential bottom-line impact on costs as the Subcommittee looking at FLP Enrollment Criteria and the protection of smaller farmland parcels with no development rights to extinguish.

Audrey volunteered to work with Sarah on this title fee review.

Subcommittee Report

Valuation Process Review Subcommittee (Members: Scott, Margery, Audrey, Jim)

Purpose: make recommendations, if needed, to improve the overall valuation process (keeping in mind that the appraisal process is simply one tool for valuation). Evaluate barriers to participation: Is it our appraisal amounts that is the issue? Or do we need to have our appraisals approached differently? Process includes need for FLP Property Ranking/Scoring Process Review—how the scoring process relates to valuation.

Subcommittee chair: Scott.

Scott shared with the group his findings in reviewing the scoring data from the last five years. The top three tiers ranged from 76 points up, 66 to 75 points, and then scores below 65 points. The group discussed potential models, and pros and cons of these ‘multiplier tool’ models.

Sarah and Scott will work on a proposal drafted for the group to review in October.

Easement Monitoring Updates

Kai reported on the annual monitoring notice letters scheduled to mail later this month. An annual monitoring letter is mailed to all existing easement holders, approximately 200 easements in total, notifying them of monitoring activity and providing contact information for questions or concerns.

New for this year: This year’s notice letter will also include—for the handful of easements at or over their impervious surface—a calculation of Planning’s best estimate of the current percent of impervious surface on their easement land.

For next year’s monitoring notice letter, Sarah and Kai will work to configure a mail merge process with the database data to include existing impervious surface of each easement. This means landowners might receive multiple letters, one per easement when they hold more than one easement. Three different databases will have to be in synch to make this happen.

Kai notes that there’s not always a communication from landowners with Farmland Legacy staff regarding a notice of increases to impervious surface. Not all activity requires a permit.

Discussion also included defining on the Farmland Legacy application, what is considered ‘impervious surface.’ Driveways, gravel, etc.

Member Updates

None at this time.

Financial Summary

The financial summary is updated for 2023.

Administrative

Reminder that no meeting held in August due to low attendance.

CFAC 2023 Meeting Dates

September 12	November 14
October 10 (tbd)	December 12

The meeting adjourned at 8:55 AM