

Agri-business Community Work Group 2014
Meeting Notes
June 9, 2014

Location: 300 Monroe Avenue N.W.

Members Present: Commissioners Saalfeld (Chair), Jones, and Ponstein; Steve Grimm, Patty Birkholz, Bert Bleke, Rick Chapla, Mimi Fritz, and Dr. Paul Isely

Members Absent: Bryan Harrison, Rick Baker, Bryan Posthumus, Ed Robinette, and Steve Wilson

Staff Present: Assistant County Administrator Mary Swanson; Management Analyst Kevin Travis

Media Present: *None*

Public Present: Albert Calderon

- I. Chair Saalfeld called the meeting to order at 4:34 p.m.
- II. **Introductions:** Members present and County staff introduced themselves to the group.
- III. **Review Mission and Charge:**

Commissioner Saalfeld stated that while the PDR Program may have served as a catalyst for the work group, this project is about more than that and will focus on what can be done to help agri-business in our region. He expressed his confidence that the group would be able to discuss issues thoughtfully and resolve differences.

Commissioner Saalfeld read the charge:

To consider what steps can be taken to help support, expand, and attract agri-business (including both agricultural production and processing) in Kent County. This should include consideration of (i) what tools can be reasonably applied to ensure sufficient, suitable land for plant- and animal-based production, (ii) what efforts can be used to encourage local market outlets and processors to be located close to the product point of origination to enhance efficiency in delivery of product, and (iii) what steps can be taken to further promote Kent County for its agri-business on a regional and national scale. Recommendations should be mindful of the limited resources local governments have to fund non-core/discretionary matters, and should address the likely means for funding recommended actions now and going forward.

He noted that the inclusion of section (iii) was not intended to have this group duplicate the economic development activities of The Right Place, Inc., (RPI) but instead to identify ways that may assist in or support its efforts. He stated that RPI

CEO Birgit Klohs will be presenting to the group on the organization's work in promoting agri-business in the region.

IV. Discuss Work Plan

Commissioner Saalfeld distributed and reviewed the preliminary work plan and opened the floor for comments and discussion.

Mr. Chapla asked what the time frame is for the group.

Mr. Saalfeld stated that he wanted to meet monthly for 90 minutes. He wanted to interview about 12 people from different segments of agri-business and issue a report with recommendations. The report can then be provided to others for action.

Mr. Grimm expressed concern over China and the apple market because they have no regulations. He wanted to make sure that West Michigan has a part to play in the global market, and would like to be sure we get input from growers.

Commissioner Saalfeld concurred that apple growers were on the list of possible presenters.

Commissioner Jones asked what the State Department of Agriculture is doing to promote agri-business and asked that more information be provided.

Mr. Bleke questioned if there would be enough time and said he believed that the group should look at a broader picture.

Commissioner Saalfeld concurred and noted that the timeline was not set in stone. He also noted that we would likely bring in someone from the MSU Extension with local knowledge.

Ms. Birkholz stated she wanted to make sure that there was a person on the interview list with a background on West Michigan. She noted we need to understand needs specific to West Michigan (products, processing, challenges and markets) in order to make good conclusions.

Commissioner Saalfeld said that the plan was to bring in persons in those areas.

Mr. Chapla suggested a SWOT (strength weakness opportunities and threats) analysis may be a useful tool for the workgroup.

Commissioner Saalfeld thought SWOT was a good idea.

Ms. Fritz said SWOT would bring out all the components. She would like to see how agriculture relates to tourism, retail, production and manufacture.

Mr. Bleke said it would be good to look at other models and learn from them.

Commissioner Saalfeld indicated that benchmarking is important and that the group would plan on looking at other models.

Mr. Chapla wants to be sure we focus on the role of the County.

Dr. Isely noted that the agriculture is highly regulated and involves regular innovation. These are factors to consider.

Commissioner Ponstein noted that this is a topic that can very political.

A discussion ensued on the role of the County and local government in economic development and specifically agri-business promotion. It was acknowledged that there are many competing philosophies.

A discussion also ensued regarding the market forces behind development and agri-business.

V. Public Comment

Mr. Albert Calderon addressed the workgroup to express concern about farm labor housing and said that housing was exempt from housing code and is causing a public health threat. He said that agri-business cannot thrive under such conditions. He also expressed concern about illegal immigrants being taking advantage of by growers. Mr. Calderon invited members to visit or stay overnight at migrant labor houses to become familiar with the issue.

VI. Determine Meeting Schedule

There was discussion about when the next meetings should be held. The group agreed that the meetings should be held on the second Monday of each month and will begin at 4:30 p.m. and last until 6:00 p.m. Additional meetings may be scheduled if needed to complete the work by May 1, 2015. Staff will survey the members to determine if the schedule will begin in July or August.

Members asked if meeting materials will be available electronically. Staff responded that they would, and a link will be provided when it is established.

VII. Adjournment: Mr. Saalfeld adjourned the meeting at 5:37 p.m.