

THE COMMONWEALTH OF MASSACHUSETTS
EXECUTIVE OFFICE OF ENERGY AND ENVIRONMENTAL AFFAIRS



Department of Agricultural Resources

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MEETING MINUTES
MASSACHUSETTS AGRITOURISM STUDY COMMISSION

Monday, March 15, 2021
Via Zoom

Board Members in Attendance: Chair John Lebeaux, Tyler Cotta on behalf of Rep. Fiola, James Ostis on behalf of Senator Edward Kennedy's office, Brad Mitchell, Erin Williams, Keiko Orrall, Colin McDonald on behalf of Rep. Dykema, Nathan L'Etoile, Michael Moore, Caroline Sherrard on behalf of Sen. Rausch, Karen Schwalbe

Also in Attendance: Yael Langer from Sen. Anne Gobi's office, Sen. Anne Gobi

MDAR Staff in attendance: Christine Smith, Ashley Randle, Mary Jordan, Rick LeBlanc, Phu Mai, Delia Delongchamp

1. **Call to Order:** The meeting started at 1:02 pm, with full remote participation.

2. **Approval of the minutes from the last meeting on February 8, 2021.**

Keiko Orrall made a motion to approve the minutes from the last meeting, which was seconded by Nathan L'Etoile. The vote to approve the minutes was unanimous.

3. **Industry Updates.**

Chair Lebeaux shared that it was Maple Month, which had gotten off to a great start. There was a kickoff last Friday in Royalston. Last Monday there was touring of sugar houses in Western part of the state. There was not as big a crowd as typical due to COVID but they were able to hold these events socially-distanced.

Erin Williams noted that she was already receiving inquiries around harvest tours from out-of-state tourists. She is hearing that hotels are being booked. Their bog tour dates are not typically released until July. She also attended the virtual conference on agritourism, which noted increase in weekday participation of events due to remote work and remote school.

Karen Schwalbe reported that Farmer's Markets are starting to report opening dates. Non-food vendors are being held off. No big events being planned yet.

4. Old Business

a. An Act to Promote Agritourism Report (“Report”)

Gerard Kennedy had sent out APR staff comments on the report. Ashley asked if the members had a chance to read the report, with comments, which had been attached to the meeting invitation. Ashley stated that Gerard was on another meeting but hoped to join when that one was done.

Brad Mitchell stated that he had not had a chance to read completely yet.

The matter was tabled to discussion at the next meeting to give everyone a chance to read it.

5. New Business

a. Legislative Update

James Ostis reported that there was a consensus decision to file a bill that would add language defining agritourism. There is some concern that a definition alone would not reach the entire scope of what the Commission is doing. The anticipation is that there would be further legislation filed. Senate Docket 1325 – An Act Defining Agritourism has been filed; no bill number has been assigned yet. James read the text of the filed legislation. Sen. Gobi & Sen. Kennedy and Rep. McMurtry & Rep. Kennedy filed the legislation prior to reconfiguration of Commission. There are 10 cosponsors of the legislation.

b. Ag Promotional Signage Presentation

Phu Mai, Agritourism Coordinator from the MDAR Markets Division gave a presentation on the Massachusetts Agricultural Directional Signage Program. This program was put together as a means to promote agritourism in the Commonwealth. The program is done in collaboration with Mass DOT. The signs feature the Mass Grown and Fresher logo, along with product icons appropriate to the relative farm. The program started in the late 1990s. There is no cost to the Commonwealth for the program. If approved, the farm incurs the cost to create and install the sign. Challenges exist around municipal by-laws which might prohibit signs in urban areas, where Mass DOT rules do not allow signs. MDAR is in early stages of meeting with Mass DOT regarding these challenges.

Chair Lebeaux asked if there was a population requirement. Phu answered that municipalities with a population of less than 20,000 are deemed non-urban. However, there are some municipalities with a lower population where part of the town is considered urban and signs have been denied in those situations.

Keiko Orrall asked if the fee structure was a one-time fee. Phu answered that it was a one-time fee for installation and maintenance.

Brad asked about the rule regarding urban or non-urban. Phu said that when the program started it used the existing tourism. Brad was curious about why the rule exists. Brad also asked whether farms could share signs and share the costs. Phu stated that if there is an existing sign and someone wants to add on to it that sometimes the initial fee is waived.

Chair Lebeaux stated that Brad raised some good points about what appears to be an arbitrary standard to promote only rural farms. He noted that we have many traditional farms located within cities, not to mention the Urban Ag farms. He re-stated that MDAR is re-engaging with Mass DOT over these issues. He stated that the Commission could consider taking some action of support regarding the program.

Colin McDonald asked whether it was completely within Mass DOT's power to change this restriction or is established by statute or otherwise? Chair Lebeaux stated that the program was established as an MOU between the two agencies so he thinks it can be changed. The Commissioner also stated that Mass DOT may not be aware of the limitations, which is why they are reaching out to Mass DOT.

Brad Mitchell stated that MDAR should let the Commission know if they can help.

Keiko Orrall asked how the decision was made – whether it was state-wide or on the district level? Phu answered that it was made on the district level. Keiko Orrall replied that any new guidelines would have to come from above the district level.

c. Subcommittees

Ashley stated that the subcommittees would try to meet before the next meeting and would be able to provide updates from those meetings.

Brad Mitchell stated that the Regulatory Subcommittee needed to meet to discuss zoning.

d. Other Topics

Brad stated that there has been a lot of discussion around breweries and farms and thought it would be helpful to have further discussion around this, asking Nathan L'Etoile to comment. Nathan said it would be a good topic for another meeting but would be happy to have as an agenda item for a future meeting but that he had to leave this meeting shortly for another meeting.

Erin Williams asked about food preparation and food service and the concept behind "cottage kitchens" and food trucks as part of an ag-related operation. She said that different answers/level of knowledge exists between Boards of Health in different towns. She wondered if there were existing resources that could be shared.

Brad Mitchell agreed with Erin that many towns are not sure how to handle these matters.

Yael Langer stated that there is a bill filed regarding cottage food opportunities and provided the link in the chat. It is SD 806/HD1298.

6. Next Meeting

Chair Lebeaux suggested April 26 for the next meeting date. He stated that a notification would be sent out.

7. Adjournment

Karen Schwalbe made a motion for a vote to adjourn. The motion was seconded by Brad Mitchell. The vote to adjourn was unanimous. Meeting was adjourned at 2:00 pm.