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COMMUNITY PLANNING & ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT DEPARTMENT

Creating Solutions for Our Future

Joshua Cummings, Director

August 2, 2023

Thurston County Board of Commissioners
3000 Pacific Avenue SE, 110
Olympia WA 98501

Subject: Planning Commission Recommendation on Agriculture Zoning Update, a component of CPA-16 Community Driven Review of Agriculture

Thurston County is required under the Washington State Growth Management Act (RCW 36.70a.040) to designate agricultural lands and adopt development regulations to conserve these areas.

The Planning Commission reviewed this item over 6 work sessions and a public hearing on June 21, 2023. The Planning Commission received fifty-six (56) written comments regarding the Agriculture Zoning Update and twenty (20) oral comments at the hearing.

The Planning Commission made several decision points on the July 5, July 19, and August 2 meetings before producing a final recommendation. These decision points were made by a threshold vote, polling for a majority of Planning Commission votes to move forward. Some items received consensus, but not all.

1. No additional public hearing or comment period at Planning Commission level, but ensure new people affected by any revisions are contacted early before the Board's review.
2. Delay clustering concept until time of periodic comprehensive plan update.
3. Exclude existing mines based on USDA NRCS comment that existing mines are classified as "pits, gravel".
4. Revise policy language that determines where accessory uses can occur on co-designated lands.
5. Review Farmlands of Statewide Importance more thoroughly at the time of the periodic comprehensive plan update.
6. Use refined soils list for map series and agricultural designation.
 - Exclude soils of a land capability classification 5 and below.
 - Exclude soils of a land capability classification 4w.

- Exclude soils of a land capability classification 4s if productivity is below 0.5 on the National Commodity Crop Productivity Index (NCCPI) rating.
- 7. Revise designation criteria for agricultural lands of long-term commercial significance.
 - Require that properties include 75% or more prime soils using refined list to be included.
 - Maintain a predominant parcel size of 20 acres.
 - Reduce the agricultural block size to 40 acres.
- 8. Recommend approval of the code changes that increase flexibility for agricultural operators, streamline regulations, and clarify procedures.

The Planning Commission produced the following recommendations (5-2) on August 2, 2023.

“Move to include the three 4s soil types that have a NCCPI rating of 0.5 or higher.”

“Move to recommend approval of the agriculture zoning update and amendment to designation criteria as discussed by previous PC decision points. Further move to recommend approval of associated code changes to Chapters 20.03, 20.08A, 20.08G, and 20.54 to increase flexibility for agricultural operators, streamline permit processes, and clarify procedures.”

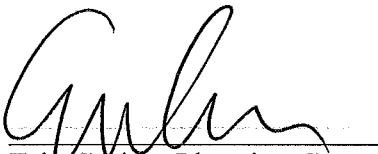
The Planning Commission produces the following findings of fact.

1. This item was included on the 2022-2023 Comprehensive Plan Docket as Item # CPA-16.
2. This item was first docketed in 2020.
3. The Thurston County Planning Commission held a duly noticed public hearing on June 21, 2023, as required by Thurston County Code Chapter 2.05 Growth Management Public Participation.
4. The Planning Commission’s recommendation reflects consideration of significant written and oral public comment received and extensive review of the proposed amendment.
5. The Board of County Commissioners will hold an additional public hearing on agriculture zoning update to receive further input on any revised options.
6. Delay of review of the clustering concept until the time of the periodic comprehensive plan update will allow the county to review the concept holistically with required updates to the housing element and consider other concepts, like density bonuses.
7. Review of Farmlands of Statewide Importance until the time of the periodic comprehensive plan update will allow a thorough review and the county to consider other innovative options to protect agriculture beyond the Long-Term Agriculture designation and zoning.
8. Existing mines that are classified as “pits, gravel” may have soil surveys that predate use as a mining operation. Farmland soils are unlikely to be conserved properly onsite unless the reclamation plan is specific to agriculture.
9. Accessory uses to mining operations should be allowed to locate on the same property as a mining operation in the event of co-designated mineral and agricultural land. Underlying agricultural soils should be protected.

10. After extensive review of public comment and stakeholder group work, the Planning Commission finds that revision to some agricultural designation criteria, like the soils list, percentage of a parcel that must have prime soils and agricultural block size criteria should be revised to consider alternatives in order to conserve the appropriate lands for agricultural lands of long-term commercial significance.
11. A refined soils list using land capability classification, land capability classification suffix, and productivity levels based on the National Commodity Crop Productivity Index (NCCPI) rating was used to inform the Planning Commission's decision on which soils should be protected as Long-Term Agriculture for long-term commercial significance. This refined soils list further excludes some prime farmland soil types based on severe limitations to agricultural production without intensive management and additional inputs.
12. The Planning Commission finds that zoning as long-term agriculture is one tool to protect agricultural lands for future us, and that other incentives and protections for farming are equally or more important, to include reducing regulatory burden, streamlining permit processes, reducing startup costs and permitting fees, increasing availability of processing and farm equipment, and more. While this docket item is narrow in scope and not intended to address all other tools that to support agricultural operations, it is important that the County continues to improve in other areas to support agriculture in order to maintain and enhance the local agricultural industry.
13. The Planning Commission finds that the County should consider reviewing cannabis and hemp regulations as a future docketed development code item.

If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me.

Sincerely,



Eric Casino, Planning Commission Chair

