



## Land Use

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### Agriculture and Sustainability Study Session Summary Planning Commission March 20, 2019

Link to recording: [http://bouldercountyco.igam2.com/Citizens/Detail\\_Meeting.aspx?ID=1834](http://bouldercountyco.igam2.com/Citizens/Detail_Meeting.aspx?ID=1834)

On Wednesday, March 20, the Planning Commission (PC) held a study session and panel discussion related to agriculture and sustainability. The PC recommended the study session in November 2018, as a follow up to [recent agriculture-related Land Use Code Updates](#). The discussion will inform future work planning for staff, as well as agriculture-related content in Boulder County Comprehensive Plan (BCCP) updates currently underway (e.g., Public Health, Housing, Economics, and Sustainability). The discussion also deepened the PC's and staff's understanding of the multifaceted issues facing the agricultural community in Boulder County. Staff is monitoring and evaluating the recently adopted Code updates to determine whether further amendments are needed.

Nicole Wobus, Long Range Planning Manager with the Land Use Department, introduced the staff presentation and provided background for the study session. Tim Broderick, Sustainability Specialist with the Sustainability Office, presented on the Sustainability Office's efforts related to agriculture and sustainability, including initial plans for the Sustainability Tax (passed in 2016). Jeff Moline, Resource Planning Manager with the Parks and Open Space Department, presented an overview of the Agricultural Resources Division and the Division's work on improving sustainability on open space agricultural properties. Blake Cooper, Agricultural Resources Manager with the Parks and Open Space Department, also participated in the study session and assisted with answering questions about the Parks and Open Space Department's programs.

The PC then initiated the panel discussion, as no members of the public signed up for the public hearing. The panel included four members of the agricultural community: Brian Coppom, Executive Director of Boulder County Farmers Markets; Wyatt Barnes, owner of Red Wagon Farm; Elizabeth Black, owner of Your Neighborhood Christmas Tree Farm; and Philip Taylor, Executive Director and Co-Founder of Mad Agriculture.

The panelists introduced themselves and briefly described what they perceive to be the biggest challenges facing farmers and ranchers in Boulder County. Elizabeth Black talked about the important three-way relationship between the people doing the growing and struggling to make a living doing so, access to ample water resources, and promotion of healthy productive soil. Brian Coppom talked about the county's unique opportunity to be a leader in promoting the intersection between agriculture and sustainability while recognizing local cultural challenges of balancing prioritization of land for active food production vs. bucolic viewshed preservation. Wyatt Barnes described his experience as a Parks and Open Space agricultural tenant. He outlined various challenges, including inefficient water delivery systems, poor soil health, limitations on his ability to build necessary structures, labor shortages, and the aging farming community. Phil Taylor mentioned the cultural rural vs. urban socioeconomic divide that many farmers experience, urban residents' lack of connection with food production, and the critical need for agricultural worker housing in the county.

After listening to the panelists' initial comments, PC members asked how the county can help farmers and ranchers. The panelists identified strategies including: increased investment in efficient irrigation infrastructure, partnerships with organizations such as NRCS, investment into cooperative community-scale agricultural infrastructure projects such as grain mills and legume processing centers, allowance for season-extending agricultural structures and vegetable packing stations on open space agricultural properties, and grassroots risk-sharing investment and philanthropy endeavors.

Staff explained the opportunities and limitations regarding the PC's ability to address the challenges discussed by the panel. The PC can apply their perspective on agricultural topics to BCCP updates (such as the Public Health, Housing, Economics, and Sustainability Elements updates underway). The PC can also direct Land Use staff's workplan and make recommendations for policy priorities and resource allocations to the Board of County Commissioners (BOCC).

The panelists acknowledged resource constraints for county staff, yet reiterated the importance of prioritizing food production and connecting community members with the land as the primary purposes of open space. Until food production is prioritized, Brian Coppom explained, county staff will be limited in the ways they can support the agricultural community.

Responding to further questions from the PC, Nicole Wobus talked about the balance between policy updates (e.g., BCCP element updates), regulatory amendments (e.g., in the Land Use Code or Parks and Open Space Cropland Policy), and programmatic work (e.g., Sustainability Tax funding). She also explained that updating the BCCP Agricultural Element is not on the Land Use Long Range Planning Team's work plan at this time. Staff believes existing policy language in the Agricultural Element is sufficient to provide guidance for Land Use Code amendments. An update to the Agricultural Element of the BCCP could be considered for a future workplan, and that is a topic on which the PC could provide feedback. Tim Broderick noted that the Sustainability Office is exploring hiring a consultant to complete a county-wide comprehensive agricultural analysis. He also said that the PC is welcome to provide the BOCC with input on funding allocations for Sustainability Tax revenue.

The PC members then had more discussion amongst themselves. They pointed out that these issues are regional in nature and that staff should look to other counties for examples of successful policies or programs. The PC acknowledged that many challenges facing the agricultural community are larger than can be tackled by one program or one county department.

The PC then asked operational questions relating to Parks and Open Space budgeting, as well as revenue earned from agricultural leases on open space. Jeff Moline answered these questions, with input from Blake Cooper. There was additional discussion of the possibility for a cooperative county-built processing/distribution center for agricultural products. PC members and staff also discussed how the BOCC's strategic priorities relate to ongoing collaborative efforts between Land Use, Parks and Open Space, the Sustainability Office, and other county departments.

The PC then asked for the panel to comment on the recent agriculture-related Land Use Code changes. Wyatt Barnes explained that though the Code changes are a step in the right direction, Building Code requirements and Parks and Open Space lease requirements can be too onerous;

farmers often end up constructing season-extending structures without going through any review process. Elizabeth Black concurred that season-extending structures are essential for farmers, especially organic farmers who utilize them for vegetable starts. Agricultural operators need more flexibility in Code requirements and utility configurations to ensure they can make the most out of their acreage.

Lastly, the panel thanked the PC and staff for the opportunity to share their expertise and experiences. PC members thanked the panelists for their time and encouraged staff to continue to work across departments on these issues, and to keep open dialogue with the agricultural community.