

Minutes of a Conservation Commission Meeting with TTOR/Farm Institute
24 January 2020

Members present: Peter Vincent – Chairman, Geoffrey Kontje, Lil Province, Jeff Carlson, Stuart Lollis, Bob Avakian

Staff: Jane Varkonda, Lisa Morrison

Sam Hart - Island Director of TTOR, Kevin Channell - new Agriculture Director of TTOR, Julie Richberg – TTOR Ecology Advisor, Lindsay Brown – Program Director, and Linley Robbins – Farm Camp Director.

A letter dated 17 January 2020 from Kevin Channell was distributed to the members. Mr. Channell said that grasshopper sparrows, a state-listed species, have begun to nest in the fields. He said that they need to be careful that none of their activities, such as fertilizing the fields, has an impact on the sparrow. He said that agricultural activities and grazing may need to be significantly modified to be in compliance with MESA regulations. He said that restrictions during nesting season may inhibit access to the field and impact the economic viability of the farm.

Varkonda asked if Channell had actually seen nests or if he had just heard calling males. Channell said he had just heard the calls.

Channell said that the farm has the opportunity to experiment in adapting agriculture to accommodate habitat for rare species.

Vincent asked if the Trustee's are looking to get out of their lease with the town. Mr. Hart replied that they were not.

Varkonda said that she has consulted with Rebecca Zimmerman at MESA and was assured that MESA has no jurisdiction over the agricultural fields at the farm. She said that the town is not looking to turn the farm into a nature preserve - that is what the adjacent Katama Airpark is for. She said that TTOR's plans are in violation of the 2016 Use Agreement and, therefore, the lease with the town. She said that the Land Bank and others have been aware for sometime of the

presence of the grasshopper sparrow – this is not a new development. Varkonda said that the town leased the property to TTOR to be used as a farm.

Channell said that the goal of the Trustee's plan is to provide habitat and keep an active agricultural presence as well, utilizing high intensity rotational grazing. Julie Russell commented that the way the fields would be used would be similar to crop rotation.

Lollis reiterated that the land is not subject to regulatory jurisdiction and should be used for farming. He said that the proposal to use the perimeter for grazing and manage the 60 interior acres for habitat is unacceptable.

Vincent said that he has been dealing with the farm for 40 or 50 years. He said the Trustees represented that they would be running the farm in a certain way that was acceptable to the Commission and he is dismayed to now find out that they have changed their plans without first consulting the Commission or submitting a new use plan.

A discussion ensued about the total number of animals that would be on the farm year-round.

Carlson was concerned that the Trustees had contacted the state about the sparrow prior to discussing it with the town. He said that by not utilizing the fields for farming, the Trustees seemed to be making an end-run around the town and setting up the fields to become strictly a habitat. He pointed out that the town is the owner of the land and it was not a good idea to keep these plans a secret. Vincent said it felt a little like a stab in the back.

Julie Russell said that she had contacted the state. She was concerned that any mismanagement could cause liability issues. She apologized and said she was not even aware that TTOR did not own the land, because usually she is working on land owned by the Trustees. Russell said she believed that it was possible for the Trustees to safeguard the habitat and run an agricultural operation at the same time.

Channell said that there have also been problems staffing the farm. Province said she had heard that the farmer was recently let go. Varkonda commented that she thought letting the farmer go was a fatal error. She asked how many farmers had been hired on the farm throughout the Trustee's tenure. Ms. Brown said four.

There was further discussion about economics and Channell said in order to keep cattle on the farm year-round the Trustees would need to spend 60 to 70 thousand to improve both manure handling and their yardage with a bedded pack area with drainage and a cement pad feed lot.

Lollis said that it did not seem that Trustee's objectives line up with the town's. He suggested the Trustees try their model somewhere else. He said that the Commission leased the land to the Trustees in order to have a vibrant, working farm with a consistent – not a token – livestock presence.

Avakian noted that Channell's letter refers to leasing portions of the farm to other farmers. He reminded Channell that under the lease, any subletting requires prior approval from the Commission.

Vincent said that the town does not intend to lose any of this land to uses other than farming. He said that if the Trustee's are finding the operation economically unviable, they should consider terminating the lease.

Sam Hart said they are in the process of removing all the Norton Point vehicles from the farm. Varkonda pointed out that the tent that is currently housing vehicles is not allowed by zoning. She said that Norton Point trucks should not be serviced in the barn and all equipment should be moved off-site. She said that she has informed the Trustees of this numerous times.

Vincent suggested that the meeting be continued to 12 February and that the Trustees submit an agreement that conforms to the Use Plan.

The meeting adjourned at 5:00 p.m.

Approved: _____

