

Fairgrounds Subcommittee
Tuesday, February 16, 2021 - 9:00 pm
VIRTUALLY HELD

Roy Holzer - Chairman

Chairman Holzer called this Task Force to order at 9:00 pm with the following in attendance: Clayton Barber, Robin DeLoria, Jim Dougan, Shaun Gilliland, Roy Holzer, Ken Hughes, Steve McNally, Mike Mascarenas Jim Monty, Dan Palmer, Jeff Subra, Ike Tyler and Davina Winemiller. Dan Manning was absent.

Also Present: Lynn Donaldson, Becky Provost and Dina Garvey

HOLZER: Okay, we'll call this meeting to order, thanks Ken.

It's been awhile since we met, the Fairgrounds Task Force, so I wanted to get back on track with a few things. As some of you guys may remember, last fall, the County Board of Supervisors approved the longer term contract for the Essex County Ag Society that enabled them to, hopefully, through New York State Ags and Markets get some of the grants that have been in limbo for quite some time. I'll have to say that we have new players in Albany on the Ags and Markets Organization and so they were giving us a tough time in getting access, Community Resources, getting access to all the grant information. Hopefully, we're back on track with that. Time will tell. There's a certain amount of things that the Essex County Ag Society need to do in order to get these grants. I can tell you from our end, we're covering everything that we need to do. I am concerned about one of the grants not being awarded, because of a timely issue. They, they've changed direction a couple of times, so time will tell on that. Any questions on that, before I get going onto the next thing?

Okay, so I wanted to talk about, because we've been spending a lot of time talking about the agricultural building over in Westport and just the fairgrounds, in general and prior to my becoming a supervisor, you guys had already put in motion, the Board of Supervisors, an idea of putting in a fairgrounds position and I'd like to get our Task Force Committee's approval or support to really get this moving forward now, before we do anything rash over there, any thoughts on this, guys?

TYLER: The only thing that I'd like to say is, I agree with this, we've got to move ahead with this. I've had quite a few meetings with Jim McKenna and was the determination that we need, we need somebody to advertise, publicize the fairgrounds, get more uses out of it and the only way you're going to do that is to have somebody dedicated to do that. I agree with moving ahead with that.

HOLZER: Any other thoughts?

MASCARENAS: Yeah, thank you. I'm pretty certain that that position is already budgeted. Jim and Mr. Palmer could confirm that, but I'm 99% sure it's already budgeted. We simply haven't filled it, because of the pandemic. You know we cut costs were we could and held off on hiring

people and those types of things. That was one of the positions that we decided not to fill, because of that. I'm all for moving forward with that position. There's really a reason why we did budget it to begin with. I think to determine, long term we could set some goals for this position and what we want it to be and determined as a group what the metrics would be to determine success for that position. You know, maybe not just at the fairgrounds, but some of those other events in the southern part of the County. We could start figuring out how this person may be able to help promote those things, whether it be the Champlain Corridor or whether it be our Fish Hatchery that we're trying to get up to speed with, hopefully, long term, allowing visitors to return or schools to return there, those types of things. So, I think there is a lot of potential in a position, such as this. I don't know if this is something that we want it to be short-term, but make, make those metrics realistic in terms of determining success, would be my only concern.

HOLZER: Right, right, well, it's clear, we need someone in this position advocating for the fairgrounds. It will be a point person to help keep us all focused, you know, living up here in Wilmington, I don't have that same emotional connection, for example, Ike Tyler might have or Shaun or other people that live in that general area, but I do think we need someone who's on staff that's going to advocate for, for those facilities. It's kind of like, it's time to really commit to it and then decide after a while if it's where we want to go with the fairgrounds, as far as a County asset. Anyone else have anything?

GILLILLAND: Yeah, I mean when we put this thing together, we took a look at the fairgrounds as an asset that's never really been fully developed for, as an economic asset. We had, you know, certain events during the year, the fair, other things like that, but take a look at other fairgrounds around the State and other counties and things, they, you know, they go full bore marketing on events and stuff and when we started that task force, which Ike talked about, you know, we're taking a look at, let's look, let's try to make these fairgrounds a year around venue and market and target events and vendors and other things like that that could come in and use it. Since that and that was the thought process, starting initially, but since then and talking to a number of people and Mike and others and you know, and Jim Dougan, as well and there are other County facilities out there, as well, that we can also try and develop. One is being the Fish Hatchery, that really is kind of a tourist attraction out there, that could be, that could also be developed to bring people in. And then on top of that, as Mike alluded to, the other types of events and particularly in the southern and eastern part of the county, that we can do, one thing that we in Essex County, I think lack, unlike some of our neighbors do, is a point person that can lead our economic development agencies and stuff is kind of useful moving forward. So, that was kind of my vision, I thought as we moved forward with this, not just somebody worrying about where to park the boats when you run them in the wintertime over there, but it's a large, larger portfolio as it were for them and I know that Jim had interviewed, pre-COVID and he hasn't shared who his favorite candidates are or whether they're still available or not. But, I do believe that we need to move forward with this. The other person that we put in there was kind of a maintenance person at the fairgrounds to do work and take care of the issues and problems and you know, fix it, so it's a little bit more, you know, inviting for people to come in to rent or use the facilities.

HOLZER: We definitely have to work on some curb appeal at those facilities.

In regards to when the interviews were originally done for this position, I personally would like to see us start fresh. Let's put out some advertising, let's see who we can get there, because we want, it's so important that we get the right person for this position, that they have a fire in their belly, they understand the dynamics of the fairgrounds, that they know that they'll be working out of DPW, because I know that this position should have some kind of supervision and goals and things like that. So, from my standpoint, I'd like to see us just start the whole process over again, as far as Dan, go ahead and advertise it and let's see what, what comes out of the work.

TYLER: We need a job description or something for this?

HOLZER: We do have a job description. Yeah, Mike, could you get him a fresh copy of that?

MASCARENAS: Yeah, I can send it to the entire Board.

HOLZER: Okay

MASCARENAS: Everybody's probably interested in seeing it.

MONTY: Yeah, Roy, I think, I agree with everything that everybody's saying here. I think we really need to get ROOST involved more with promoting all of our entities, things that we have in the southern part of the County. Nothing against Wilmington, Lake Placid, Keene, but let's get some of that interest in the Champlain Corridor in the southern parts. I have nothing here, other than, hopefully, my bike park will come to fruition, in Lewis. So, I just wanted to see more ROOST involvement with that. That also being said, this position at the fairgrounds, do we want to, I don't know if we definitely want to keep them as a maintenance person/promoting type of person? Maybe it should be two separate entities?

HOLZER: It should be two separate, because you're not going to want a marketing person repairing the building. But, that gets back to the other thing we need to consider Jim and everyone, is we really need to be really accounting for expenses out there. Right now, it's my sense, just being this task force chairman for the last year, actually since the beginning of the year, that we're not really identifying the expenses. I think if there needs to be repairs done out there Jim Dougan just sends someone out there and it gets absorbed into the DPW budget. I think if we're going to make a real analysis of whether this position is a success and what we're doing out there, we gotta have all those expenses accounted for so we can see what we need to decide going further. If that makes sense? I'm not sure I'm explaining it right, but I do think we need better accounting when work does need to be done out there.

HUGHES: Roy, I'm not on the committee, but I just have a question, if I may? Does the fairgrounds have a business plan? Has the County created a business plan for the fairgrounds? Because my thinking is, if you're going to go out and advertise for somebody with a job description, that's great, but if you want to draw somebody who's of caliber, they might expect that this work has already been done.

HOLZER: So, you're absolutely right. Actually, Shaun can probably speak to this better than I can, but, in learning this position that I'm in now, I see where extensive meetings were done through ROOST where committee members came up with different ideas. There's actually a report, we can get that to you, just so you can review it. Shaun, did you want to speak anymore to that?

GILLILLAND: Yeah, the closest thing to a business plan was the Fairgrounds Task Force report that was put out. It's kind of more of a vision statement. The problem is, we don't have anybody that thinks of these facilities 24/7 on an economic basis, you know, unless you're Ike Tyler in Westport, you know that thinks about it a lot and stuff and you know, we have just, have not done a very good job at managing and I also just have one other quick thing and I think it's important to realize that we have to look at these facilities, and particularly the fairgrounds facilities, is not going to be a dollar for dollar return on investment; okay? It's just not going to happen. Because, if you take a look at the Lake Placid horse grounds, like, you know, North Elba and Lake Placid maintain those horse grounds, up there. The rent that they get for it does not pay for the maintenance and operation of it for the full year. But, the advantages they get, the secondary advantages from having those several horse shows up there and the thousands of people who come in for them is where you really cash in and I think if you take a look in that venue of where we can go with our county facilities, that should be the goal. Yeah, we're going to charge rent those kind of things, but, you know, we can't sit there and expect, wait a minute, we were \$20,000.00 below what it costs us to run that facility. We also need to look at the secondary economic effects.

HOLZER: Agree

DELORIA: Yes, I wholeheartedly support the two positions over there. I see where you're going with that. I do want to share that Newcomb recently employed a Parks and Recreation individual that works with ROOST on a day to day basis. The individual also handles our social media, Facebooking, the Discover Newcomb website and promotes all the various events that we have, as well as, the New York State holdings, such as, the Great Camp Santanoni, snowshoeing and cross country skiing, the Essex Chain Lakes and the whole picture down there, and I can tell you, it's working out very well and what Newcomb did is we used a portion of the ROOST funding; okay? That came to us for publicity and basically, we're using that to supplement the salary that we paid this individual and it's working out great, so you're heading down the right path, in my opinion, we need these positions.

HOLZER: Thanks, Jim Dougan, do you have anything to add?

DOUGAN: Yeah, I've been raising my hand here, but none of you can see it, so my arm's getting a little sore. But, the Facilities and Events Coordinator position that is in the 2021 budget, about 70% of that salary is Fairgrounds and the other 30% is under Fish Hatchery. The maintenance type position over at the fairgrounds is not in the budget this year, just to clear those things up and I can send you both a report in that Task Force that was led by Jim McKenna a couple of years ago and the description for the Facilities and Events Coordinator. I see Ike had his hand up, that's really all the clarification that I had for you, right now.

HOLZER: Okay, anything else?

TYLER: Yeah, just to piggyback off of what Robin said, ROOST really is the expert here. They're our facilitator, you know, my memory is getting worse and worse, but we have a woman down here on the Lake Champlain Corridor, Shaun probably knows, I can't think of her name, I should, I worked with her years ago, well, anyway, I think maybe we can look into using her and/or getting some feedback from her. Maybe ROOST can supply the person we need for the fairgrounds and we could just supplement that pay or I don't know how that works. But, you know, I don't think we need to reinvent the wheel here. I think there's people out there, I think to just go out and advertise and think there's one person that can do this job and do it correctly. I don't think we're going to get that person, I think we really need to look at ROOST and see what we can use from them, too.

HOLZER: Well...

GILLILLAND: ROOST is already paying for part of this.

HOLZER: Yeah, yeah, so I think definitely ROOST should be involved in the process, but if we could get a local down there, like, in your general neck of the woods, that really has a connection to the fish hatchery, the fairgrounds and knows the history of those facilities, I think that's going to be much better than any employee coming from the Lake Placid area to advocate for those facilities. That's only my opinion, I'm totally open minded, but...

TYLER: You're correct. That can work, I'm hoping who that person is, we'll find out, I guess.

HOLZER: Well, I don't have anyone in mind, that's why I want us to start fresh, so we can really see what comes out of the, out of the woodwork for, hopefully, someone dynamic.

DELORIA: The only thing that I wanted to add is that before we brought our Parks and Rec person to handle this area, because ROOST didn't have the physical presence in Newcomb, they don't have boots on the ground, they're great in perhaps putting information together and facilitating, but we're the ones sending the information to them and without that person on the ground, you're not going to get the product that you're looking for. So, I can assure you that from what Newcomb's going through right now, with our guys who happens to be Ken Hughes, brother, Dave, that's who we hired, it's working rather well and ROOST is very receptive to have the information coming from us; okay? So, I just wanted to add that.

HOLZER: Anyone else?

MASCARENAS: Yeah, I just wanted to add and in you'll get this, is that the work activities of the job description that this person works directly with ROOST. So, ROOST will absolutely be open to share their expertise and what they want to do. So, I just want to ease your mind in terms of that.

HOLZER: Dan Palmer, do you have anything to add?

PALMER: No, I mean, again, we've had this discussion before and it certainly, you know it's what we kind of planned on. Part of it, of course is going to be what happens with the pandemic and whether we get this thing under control. You know, it's hard to open events and those kinds of things, if you're still in that same mode that we're in.

I guess the other concern is where we stand, in terms, you know, in case nobody has noticed, the State's in kind of a mess and I don't really know what they're going to do come April 1st when the budget passes. You know, they kind of promised us that the, that the 20% that they took last year, it was going to be reduced to only a 5% cut, but there are many factors that play into that. So, in terms of funding I think, you know what you have to look at, but in terms of getting going, I think you got to get started and hopefully, whatever you decide on in terms of events are going to be able to occur, hopefully in the later part of the summer, because that's probably what you're looking at in terms of getting things started.

HOLZER: Anyone else have anything?

So, Mike where do we stand, as far as, will you and Dan get together and just start advertising this position and informing our committee when we do the interviews?

MASCARENAS: Yeah, I don't think you need formal Board approval. You absolutely can go that route if you want to, again, the Board approved the position in terms of approving the budget, so that, that position is there. Jim would simply put in a request to fill, being that it was, it's underneath his department and that advertising would, would start, pick a date in terms of how long he wants to advertise for, then interviews would follow.

So, going back to some of Dan's concerns that the timing's probably good around that, that you would have a good idea around that April deadline of what the State's budget is looking at. Jim's probably going to advertise a minimum of a couple of weeks, I would think, but for a position like this, maybe longer, maybe you reach out a little further, because those people, you know are hard to find, sometimes.

HOLZER: Okay

DOUGAN: Yeah, I'd like to jump in, if I can. Again, I'm raising my hand here. Yeah, I think we should advertise a little bit longer, maybe put it on Indeed and a couple of other places that our Personnel Department sometimes uses to see if we can reach out a little but more than just the local paper.

And if the Fairgrounds Task Force or if this group could, you know, work a little bit with Mike, what Mike said early on and that is, we should develop goals for this person, you know goals that can be met and both short term and long term, for me to use when we do have the interviews.

You know there's a lot in that task force report that Jim McKenna and that group came up with, but, I don't, I'd like a little more clarity on goals, if we could develop those.

HOLZER: Okay, well I think the goals will be around the individual you hire, as well, what kind of skills that you bring to the table.

So, really briefly and then we'll wrap this up. This maintenance position that was discussed before, was that going to be like a part-time position? What was the thought process on that, Jim?

DOUGAN: The original plan was that one the things that came of the task force was that we're not, we haven't been real coordinated with the Community Resources Department taking phone calls and filling out lease agreements and things for the fairgrounds, now, and then DPW sending somebody out to show the buildings or to unlock the buildings, so that the original maintenance position was going to be full-time, kind of boots on the ground, if Community Resources continued to do the limited marketing that they did, they'd have somebody there to call to walk things through. So, it was mostly just a maintenance position, but a little bit, you know, the ability to provide tours and things like that.

HOLZER: Okay

PROVOST: So, my question is, because, I've been doing a lot of research on how to use the fairgrounds safely and what have you. Is it going to be possible to start having, say, horseshows or a craft fair or anything in the spring, before our fair is supposed to be held?

HOLZER: I, honestly, Becky, I wouldn't, I wouldn't think spring would be a realistic goal, maybe summer. Let's see how the vaccine rollout goes and things like that.

PROVOST: Okay

HOLZER: But, there's still a slew of precautions we're all, I mean there's a reason we're doing this zoom meeting instead of meeting in person right now.

PROVOST: Oh, definitely and I totally understand all of that. Again, you know, like I said, I've been doing a lot of research on it, Florida started opening all their fairs and I've reached out to all of them to see how they have done it safely and what have you. So, I've have been bringing back, along with other members of our board, safety ideas and what kind of things we can put in place for the fair itself to make sure that everybody is safe. You know, we want everybody safe, as well. So, you know, whatever it takes, you know, we're willing to do that.

HOLZER: And just bear in mind, a lot of these, these decisions will be made from people beyond our pay grade. But, Shaun, you had a question or comment?

GILLILLAND: Becky, my recommendation would be that maybe your Board go ahead and start putting together a safety plan, and you know, as a draft and how you want to do it and then you push it through to Public Health and have them take a look at it, just to get ahead of the curve, and Roy is correct, I mean a big event right now would be shut down by the State Department of Public Health. So, but, if you want to put together a safety plan and stuff, then at least you start working toward that.

PROVOST: So, Shaun, do you want us to do a safety plan with the Health Department and present it to the Task Force?

GILLILLAND: No, No, Public Health is the one who approves, would have to approve a safety plan. So, but, right now, the State is not going to let you have a big event. But, start working toward it now by putting together a safety plan that would be approved, maybe it's a couple three months down the road.

HOLZER: Okay, guys we're running into DPW, Ike, real quick.

TYLER: Roy, real quick, I was just thinking the person that we hire to do the marketing, probably a segment of their job should be looking for grants to improve the fairgrounds, too and I would just like to end this meeting with, you know, to thank everybody that's on this committee, but also all the people that were on the committee before, we did a bunch of meetings before and I believe this is very much needed and I think we're moving in the right direction and thank you.

HOLZER: Thanks, all right, we stand adjourned.

**THERE WAS NO FURTHER BUSINESS TO COME BEFORE THIS TASK FORCE IT WAS
ADJOURNED AT 9:28 AM.**

Respectively Submitted,

Dina Garvey, Deputy Clerk
Board of Supervisors