

January 6, 2020

The Lincoln Agricultural Commission partnering with local farmers would like to discuss the agricultural water rate that had been in effect for years but was rescinded with a decision from the Water Commissioners at the June 12, 2019 meeting. The elimination of agricultural water fees was announced in July 2019, and took effect on September 30, 2019.

As indicated in the vision statement for the Town of Lincoln, our community cherishes its rural history and agricultural character. The Agricultural Commission was formed with the mission to preserve, protect, and promote agriculture in Lincoln. As part of our mandate, we work closely with all town boards and commissions as well as with regional and state agencies to ensure that all initiatives are consistent with promoting a sustainable agricultural community.

The Agricultural Commission hosted a discussion on January 2, 2020, to review the water usage rate changes and the importance of affordable water for the livelihood of farmers. Farmers in attendance included representatives/owners of Raja Farm, Flint Farm, Codman Farms, Lindentree Farm, Kanner orchards, and the Bergeron-Furman homestead. In addition, Stacy Osur from the Agricultural Commission and Sara Mattes attended. Karen Seo from Wesson Farm could not attend but was involved in prior discussions. The rescinding of the agricultural water rates came as a surprise to many farmers in Lincoln. A notice of the rate change was included in the July water bill, but most only realized that changes had been made when new water bills came out in November. Outreach from the Water Department directly to the farmers who qualified for agricultural rates would have been helpful. The Agricultural Commission would have welcomed the opportunity to provide input and present alternatives if invited to the June 12 meeting of the Water Commissioners where deliberation about water rates occurred. Also, the Agricultural Commission could have assisted in communicating with the affected farmers.

Agricultural water rates are important to the viability of farms in Lincoln. Farmers use town water to wash vegetables, maintain community gardens, and water crops when wells are not available or treated water is required. Building wells is a significant expense that many small farmers cannot absorb and would discourage small startup agricultural operations. Furthermore, drawing from the aquifer via private wells does not provide an appropriate solution to water conservation.

The Lincoln Agricultural Commission, representing Lincoln farmers, would like to discuss the recently rescinded agricultural rates and possible alternatives. The reasons for rescinding the AG rates were never made clear to farmers or the greater Lincoln community.

Questions that arose among farmers include:

- How does the agricultural rate affect water usage and Water Department finances?
- How much do farmers use over the course of an entire year compared to residential use?
- Who qualified for the agricultural rates fee structure that was temporarily established on March 8, 2017?
- What type of farm registration was required to be eligible for the agricultural water rate and was this officially announced to local farmers so they would know if they qualified and what steps to take if necessary to qualify?

If water conservation or the need for increased revenue for the Water Department were significant drivers of the decision to rescind agricultural water rates, we would like to have the chance to examine alternatives that are less damaging to the farming community.

The Agriculture Commission and represented farmers support the creation of a working group composed of members of the Water Department and the Agriculture Commission to clarify the consequences of water usage from farming in Lincoln as well as the importance of favorable rates for farmers.

We propose a vote today, January 7, 2020, during the meeting of the Board of the Water Commissioners to form a subcommittee charged with exploring and making recommendations on how we can work together to manage our water resources in a manner consistent with sustainable agriculture practices and water conservation.

The Lincoln Agricultural Commission  
Ari Kurtz and Louise Bergeron, Co-Chairs