



# ERIE COUNTY AGRICULTURAL & FARMLAND PROTECTION BOARD

## MEETING MINUTES

April 22, 2020 | 6:00 PM | Via WebEx

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Board Members in Attendance: Brett Kreher, Bryant Zilke, Diane Held, Rachel Chrostowski, Dan Castle, Earl Gingerich, Dan Henry, Scott Bylewski

Staff in Attendance: Sarah Gatti

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### I. New Business

#### A. *Overview: Erie County Business Task Force*

Dan Castle provided an overview of the Erie County Business Task Force to the Board, explaining it was comprised of 50-55 people across all sectors of the County business sector. Mr. Castle expected the Task Force to eventually set up subcommittees and anticipates an agricultural subcommittee will be created. More information will be forthcoming.

#### B. *Discussion: COVID-19 Impacts on the Agricultural Sector*

Dan Castle asked members of the Board to outline impacts they have seen on the agricultural community. Those issues are summarized as follows:

1. Key issues are people, pricing, and supply/demand chain disruption
2. Safety of employees is important but social distancing is not always possible for every aspect of agricultural operations. The mental health of farm workers, and farmers alike, is of concern during these times and especially when working in close quarters.
3. Delays in the arrival of Temporary Agricultural Workers, also known as H2A labor, will have negative impacts on the ability of local farmers to plant and harvest fields to the extent traditionally required.
4. Late April and May are key times from spring planting, and it's likely that H2A labor will not be available. Returning workers from Mexico are being processed, but workers from South Africa and other countries are not getting processed. Even if H2A workers get here in 4 weeks, they still have to be quarantined 2 additional weeks. Will be a "Difficult Spring"
5. Farmers cannot find local labor to backfill lack of H2As since people eligible for unemployment benefits will make more on unemployment (with \$600/week COVID stimulus) than they can working on a farm

6. Price Volatility is an issue. Price of eggs were at historical lows in March up to near highs in early April, but then back to the cost of production now. Price of Milk before COVID19 was \$20/100lbs and is now approx. \$13/100lbs. It costs \$18 to produce 100lbs of milk, so clearly not sustainable for farmers.
7. Demand and supply chain disruption, including:
  - a. Demand from the food service industry (incl schools, restaurants, etc.) has declined sharply, causing an oversaturation in the market which then contributes to price volatility.
  - b. Certain commodities, like eggs, do have high demand from grocery stores but cannot be packaged appropriately for sale (i.e., there is a shortage of egg cartons).
  - c. COVID-related closing of meat packing plant in PA has impacted ability of getting meat to market
8. Many big box or chain stores remain open (i.e., Home Depot and Lowes). These stores typically have garden centers and are able to sell nursery and garden supplies while locally-owned nurseries have been deemed non-essential and are closed.
9. Greenhouses and Garden Centers need a good month of May to have a profitable year. These businesses have been hit hard by loss of flowers sales during Easter, and will be hit harder if they cannot sell plants to landscapers/public in the May.
10. For Produce growers, they rely on institution food service to take fruit/vegetables that grocery stores will not take. "Food Service takes crooked cucumbers, but stores will not". Farmers heavily rely on those sales
11. The shuttering of non-essential businesses has had unintended consequences on the agricultural sector. An example being that sawmills have been deemed non-essential and can no longer sell sawdust to farmers, which has led to a shortage of animal bedding.
12. Negative economic impact to agribusinesses and agritourism, including:
  - a. Cancellation of Maple Weekend activities
  - b. Closing of tasting rooms at wineries and cideries
  - c. Closed farm markets
  - d. Uncertainty regarding U-Pick operations
    - i. How will social distancing be enforced?
    - ii. Will these be deemed essential?
    - iii. Will there be enough workers to supervise?
    - iv. U-Pick season begins in June w strawberries, so need guidelines by then
  - e. Uncertainty regarding Community Supported Agriculture (CSAs)
    - i. How will pick-up procedures be impacted by social distancing?

- ii. Will capacity be impacted?
  - iii. Will more hours to staff pick-up be required?
13. Farmland is especially vulnerable to conversion during the COVID-19 pandemic as farmers may decide to retire/sell land due to economic distress. Farmland in 2nd ring suburbs is at most risk
  14. Re: Beef market, when restaurants close, the markets dry up. Very limited options for meatpacking in NYS as most meatpackers have closed (blame state regulations) and large packing operation in PA has closed due to COVID. Some regional meat packing operations cannot process new orders until February. They noted a need for meat packing operations in WNY.
  15. Debt load on farmers, businesses and individuals is leading to most closures. Farmers/businesses with less debt will survive. Pandemic emphasizes financial problems the person/business/farm had going in. Commended County Executive Poloncarz/Erie County for fiscal policies and surplus.
  16. Mixed messages coming from Albany about which businesses can/cannot reopen will cause problems.
  17. Perceived lack of appreciation from the public-at-large is particularly noticeable during the pandemic. Essential workers are often thanked and recognized but such accolades for farmers have been absent. Public appreciation would be meaningful to farmers and farmworkers as they represent an important group of essential workers.

C. *Presentation: Erie Grown COVID-19 Response and Map*  
Sarah Gatti demonstrated the redesigned Erie Grown website. Feedback from the Board as positive.

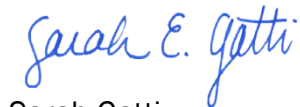
## II. Other Business

There was no other business to discuss.

## III. Adjournment

The meeting was adjourned at 7:13 PM.

Respectfully Submitted,



Sarah Gatti



## ERIE COUNTY AGRICULTURAL & FARMLAND PROTECTION BOARD MEETING TRANSCRIPTS

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*The following is a corrected transcript of the Erie County Agricultural and Farmland Protection Board Special meeting held on April 22, 2020 at 6:00 PM via WebEx. These transcripts have been prepared pursuant to Governor Cuomo's Executive Order 220.1 issued on March 12, 2020 suspending the Open Meetings Law.*

**Brett Kreher:** I'd like to welcome all to this Special Meeting of the Agricultural and Farmland Protection Board. I'll turn it over to Dan to discuss the Business Task Force.

**Dan Castle:** I'd like to introduce what's called the COVID Business Task Force, talked about by the County Executive on his briefing last week. It's a collection of about 50-55 representatives from business and various business sectors from around the County. There're some governmental folks on it. There're some non-profits on it.

**Dan Castle:** The intent is to be a conduit from the business community of Erie County - all sectors - to the County and to other parties. What can we do? What are the issues? What is needed to help lead the County out of this mess that we're in, when it's appropriate.

**Dan Castle:** On this Task Force representing the head of the agricultural sector is Diane. I'm on the panel as a representative of Erie County, but also representing the Agricultural and Farmland Protection Board and other interests for the Department of Environment and Planning.

**Dan Castle:** The Task Force meets on a weekly basis and the first meeting was just last week, so it's really in its early stages. One of the first things that the Task Force has been doing is a survey of businesses to get some firsthand feedback and data on what businesses are experiencing, what are the issues, challenges and the priorities going forward. We have forwarded that survey around to a whole bunch of people. I don't even know how many thousands of people have gotten that between the Partnership

[Partnership for the Public Good], the County, all the different NGOs and nonprofits. I know it's been sent out through our mailing list here with [indistinguishable] community, and Brett's forwarded it on to the Farm Bureau. We send it to municipal officials and planning officials, and sent it to arts and cultural organizations. The intent is to get a really broad perspective of how businesses are being affected and what can the government do to help, as it's appropriate.

**Dan Castle:** So, that kind of prompted this call tonight. The second of the Task Force calls (WebEx) is actually tomorrow. Diane and I will be on it, walking through some of these issues we are going to talk about tonight, and we will have the opportunity very early on in this process to make a statement back to this group about what the agricultural community, the agricultural businesses and the farmers in our community are dealing with. It's a fortuitous point, because we are actually the first of the sectors of the economy that will be reporting back on what some of the issues are affecting us so that is the bigger picture of the Task Force and there'll be other information that we can forward around. But what I think we primarily want us to do with the rest of the meeting is, is two things. First, I want to hear from everyone on the phone, all of you folks, about what are some of the issues and challenges and priorities you guys are seeing in the agricultural community. Sarah and I will be taking notes. We're going to be preparing a brief to distribute to the Task Force, to the County Executive and his team, and wherever else it needs to go to get these issues heard, and to make sure we have some priority when things start opening up. And that that leads to the second of the other issues that we'll talk about here. Sarah and a couple other folks in our Department have put together this Erie Grown website. We've had some really good input from Diane, and that's been helpful. It's a bit of a work in progress, but we'll be presenting it to the COVID Business Task Force tomorrow. On Friday, the plan is that the County Executive in his daily briefing will walk through a very similar presentation and walk through a live demo of the Erie Grown website. I think it's pretty cool you'll get to see it in a bit.

**Dan Castle:** I think with that, Brett, what I'd like to do is, is turn it back to the folks on the line to start getting input. I don't know if we want to just go down the line and talk about what you're hearing, what you're facing, what you're dealing with at your farm. I think it's important to, you know, kind of get some of that feedback from you guys. Brett, you want to kind of start and then we can just go from there.

**Brett Kreher:** Yes, I'd be happy to start. Thanks, Dan.

**Brett Kreher:** I've got things divided into three categories on our farm. I would say there's people issues, pricing issues, and demand supply chain issues.

**Brett Kreher:** I'll start with people. That's our primary concern - basically keeping our employees safe. On our farm, as on many farms, it's not possible to do appropriate social distancing and all occasions. For instance, out in our egg packing room, the eggs come out of our barns, they go they go through a machine and they get washed, graded, packed, put into dozens. After they're put into a dozen cartons, people have to manually grab each dozen carton and pack it into a case and we have different sized cases. It's the sort of thing that we cannot automate and those people are working not quite side by side, but maybe three feet apart instead of six feet apart. We've looked into partitions and various things that we could do, run the machine at half speed, that kind of thing and there's really just no way to do appropriate social distancing. We've implemented CDC recommendations as they've come along during this whole situation, as far as cleaning all of the high touch points several times per day like doorknobs and such. We disinfect periodically, so we disinfect lunch rooms and bathrooms periodically throughout the day, and then we

disinfect our plant kind of separately from all of our normal cleaning and disinfecting procedures. As with other workplaces, and now really every place, we've implemented masks. We weren't able to implement until everybody else did, just from an SQF standpoint. SQF stands for Safe Quality Food, and that's one of the food safety measures that we have in place on our farm in the egg packing room, SQF. Our concern is at some point one of our employees is going to come down with this. It has not happened yet, but we expect that it will occur at some point, and when that does happen, we will follow all the recommended procedures, but it will still be somewhat traumatic for our workforce, and we'll have to deal with that at that time. We've got plans in place, but it will still be a little bit difficult. Then there's also the risk of if we have a number of people come down with it and we're doing all that we can to make sure that that does not occur. But there is a risk that we could have a number of people come down with it, as has occurred in some other workplaces. We've got some plans in place if that happens, but it's still a risk that we've got and we're hoping that that does not occur. And then, of course, the perceptions, so we've been working trying to over-communicate with our employees in order to deal with all perception issues, because people have a range of concerns about this. Some people are very concerned about it, some people are relatively unconcerned and so we run the wide gamut. A lot of times people's significant others they might be somewhere else on that spectrum. We recognize that we've got people with a wide range of perceptions on this issue and we're trying to deal with all of that accordingly. So far, so good, it's gone really well. Our employees are healthy and they're happy. They're coming in. They're working hard. Things are actually going very well. That's the one people issue.

**Brett Kreher:** The other people issue, is we do use some seasonal H-2A labor. We have some people here currently, and that's fine. It's our people who are who still are yet to come in. Obviously, there's been some delays on that, and so we've got some concerns about that. We recognize that that's being, it's already recognized as a federal issue and so I think that's being dealt with. We're feeling pretty good about our guest workers coming in from Mexico and we have also some guest workers coming in from South Africa. We're more concerned about them arriving here in a timely manner. I would say H-2A delays and arrival times is a significant issue on our farm.

**Dan Castle:** Brett, when are the time periods that you need those staff?

**Brett Kreher:** Well, looking at the calendar here, it's April 22nd. Generally, in Western New York, this is when we're coming into a period where people are going to start to plant their spring crops. Some of the earliest crops have probably already been planted. As Dan Henry mentioned, most fields crops will get planted starting the last week of April and then through the month of May. Depending on how cold tolerant they are. Around here, generally what they say is you start planting corn on April 26. We are organic, so we don't plant our corn seed with a fungicide or an insecticide, and so without a fungicide or an insecticide, we can't plant on April 25th, but we might start planting the second week of May. We need to start preparing our fields as soon as weather breaks and normally weather breaks right around now. Next week, in the first week of May, we would get a lot of work done in the field. Our South African team members are still stuck in South Africa. We don't think they're going to be here for more than a month from now, and so we're putting backup plans in place, but it's going to be difficult. It's going to be a difficult spring for us. We're going to be understaffed. I think you're going to hear that some more from Dan Henry. But yeah, the time period is right now, actually.

**Brett Kreher:** The second thing is prices. I think you'll be hearing some more about that. Obviously, there's a huge amount of price volatility and eggs are certainly right in there. We went from selling eggs below our cost of production. Then the first of March, the prices shot up to the highest level that eggs have ever been and stayed there for one week, and then and then they've been dropping just as fast as they've been going up, And now they're back. They're just approaching costs of production and we're hopeful that they're not actually going to keep dropping below our costs of production. That's kind of about where they are right now. A lot of price volatility.

**Diane Held:** Can I ask really quick? Is that demand driven? Has the demand dropped off?

**Brett Kreher:** The price of eggs is in a real screwy situation. It's actually somewhat akin to the milk situation. I'll describe the third issue and then and then I'll try and give a little bit of an overview of it.

**Brett Kreher:** The third issue is demand and supply chain disruptions. We mostly produce eggs and sell them into cartons and carton markets. Tops and Wegmans and Dashes and other small chains and supermarkets. We're fortunate. But a third of the eggs produced in the United States go to [indecipherable] and most of those wind up going into further processing or to restaurants and food service. About a third of the eggs in the country go to food service. That demand is down by 80 percent, it's maybe 20 percent of what it was. All those eggs, including a lot of farms that are setup exclusively for that, those eggs have no market right now, and that's creating a big problem. Those farms are trying to trying to sell their eggs and now they're deeply discounting those. However, because similar to milk where there's where people want to buy milk, but we're having to dump milk because there's companies that are set up or, you know, their supply chain is set up to send a certain amount of milk into the schools and restaurants. It's similar with eggs. There's of these breaking plants can't break their eggs anymore. Then these farms that are setup to sell eggs on flats, to do food service, their business has gone away. The carton business has kind of picked up the slack on that. The carton manufacturers can't make cartons fast enough, essentially. We're trying to figure out how to keep Tops and Wegmans and our other customers supplied with the increased numbers of eggs at the plant, but we can only get cartons so fast. Our limitation is cartons. The price is dropping because there's all these eggs with no markets that are being sold in flats and there's just no market for them, and so they're getting kind of pushed out onto the market and they're just causing the price to go down. And yet, there's bids for eggs that are in cartons but nobody's got any extra cartons.

**Brett Kreher:** That's what's going on and on our farm. That's all I got. Maybe Dan Henry would like to go next.

**Dan Henry:** Yes, certainly. Thanks Brett. A lot of the same issues that Brett mentioned are things that we're dealing with on our farm, too. We have fresh produce and we also have floral (horticultural) products. We've got some issues that are affecting us on both aspects of the business. More one or the other. Labor now is very - there's a lot of uncertainty with the H2A program. We rely on the H2A program as well for the majority of our seasonal workers. Those workers for us don't come in from Mexico until the middle of June. We're a little way out from that point. Again, at the federal level, they are giving it quite a bit of attention, thankfully. They are still processing work visas for the H-2A and H-2B workers, and giving preference to the workers that are returning workers that have been in the country in years prior. That's at least a good sign. I'm hopeful that our date of need is still a little way off to receive our workers on time or close to it. The other third of our workforce that we rely on comes in from Puerto Rico. They come in starting mid-March and most of them are here by the first of May or mid-May. We usually get between 20 and 24 guys in from

Puerto Rico. Right now, we have four. There is definitely a situation there and we're very concerned we're not going to get those workers on time. We rely on them to get us through our spring flowers shipping season, which peaks in the month of May for Mother's Day. We also rely on them to get most of our early planting done, which Brett kind of touched on, starts in early April if the weather cooperates. We do have some sweet corn planted now and there's crops like lettuce and cabbage and things like that can go in this week, on the days we have good weather. The fact that the weather's been a little bit cooler than normal has been a little bit of a silver lining. We're not quite as busy as we otherwise would be in a normal year. We're making plans to get fill-in workers or for other workers to do the spring planting and flower shipping because we're worried people aren't going to make it here. Which, you know, another piece of that puzzle is if they do get here and we're, weeks behind in our planting season, and they finally get here and then we need to quarantine them for two weeks before we allow them to come to work and co-mingle with other employees which, you know, is going to obviously present further delays. I think the right answer is yes. You have to. You can't risk the safety of the rest of your workforce. When they do get here, they're going to be [indecipherable], as far as being able to do that. One issue that I'm running into with a lot of those workers from Puerto Rico, is they currently collect unemployment because they aren't quite incentivized to come back to work right now when they can collect quite a bit more than normal through unemployment benefits, which we certainly understand. [indecipherable]. The extra six hundred dollars a week that they're able to get out of cases and is more than they can make it a week this time of year when there aren't a lot of hours to be had. It's a complicated situation with those workers, needless to say.

**Dan Henry:** On the flower side of things, things been pretty disrupted. A lot of our customers are garden centers, florists, churches, fundraisers, school fundraisers, things like that. We just kind of got through our Easter flower season, which definitely took a hit. A lot of us were not open or not able to be open. The Easter lilies, for example, when churches started canceling masses and services, you know, we got a lot of orders canceled on us. So, that's tough. We're hopeful that the garden centers are able to and willing to be open this spring so that we can have as close to normal sales as possible. We're in agreement that it's not going to be a banner year by any means for our season. We respect that but we're doing everything we can to get creative and work with our customers, and create situations that are going to help them to move product.

**Dan Castle:** Dan, I guess it goes without saying that one of the priorities of starting to reopen the local economy would be, not only the farm side, but the florists and the landscapers. The earlier those businesses can open, the better it is for you guys, right?

**Dan Henry:** Yes, absolutely. Absolutely. Leading up to the Easter holiday, there was just a lot of confusion and uncertainty. People weren't sure if they were allowed to be open or not. At one point, they weren't. Then they redefined businesses to include horticultural garden centers, landscapers, flower shops, things like that. Then less than a week later, it was changed again and said, no, no, you're not essential. You're not allowed to reopen. So, a lot of those garden center business owners weren't clear as to what they were or were not. If I'm selling, if I have some produce or if I have some dairy products at my farm stand for sale, food products for sale - does that mean I'm allowed to be open and sell flowers or not? You had some customers calling us, saying, hey, do you guys have any lettuce or kale plants that we can buy along with tulips and Easter lilies? It was just a really confusing situation. I think any garden center will tell you that they need the month of May to make their year. That's their big month. If they've missed that, it's going to be detrimental to them. So, I think that they're going to make every attempt possible to be open, and so



again, it facilitates sales be at a drive through situation, a preorder, online sales, they're doing whatever they have to do to get plans to people. We need them to be open. We also have the big box stores, like Lowe's and Home Depot, they have the garden center sections to their stores. There was a lot of frustration coming from the independent garden centers that those places were allowed to be open and sell plant products, and yet the independents were not. A few states, Pennsylvania and Illinois, a few others have acted on that and said that, OK, a Lowe's or Home Depot, you can be open but can't sell plants and your garden center has to be closed. You can sell the home improvement products and so forth, but not the other stuff.

**Dan Henry:** So again, just a lot of confusion, a lot of uncertainty. We need to need consumers to be confident to go out to the store as well. So, it's a big [indecipherable]. As far as produce goes, we're not quite to our shipping season yet, but Brett touched on the food service side of things. A lot of the produce that we that we pack goes to food service. Probably between 30-40% of that produce in the summertime goes to the food service industry and those restaurants being closed and a lot of them probably not reopening, it's going to have an effect on that product that gets earmarked for those sales.

**Dan Castle:** Thanks.

**Brett Kreher:** What other sorts of things did you have there?

**Dan Henry:** The benefit of the food service side of the business is not necessarily because it's a lot, it's because of the cosmetic appearance of the produce. For example, a cucumber. If we get crooked cucumbers, we're not able to sell those to a grocery store chain because grocery stores want straight cucumbers and we can't control which are straight are which ones are crooked. If we lose that food service market for those types of off-grade products, that's [indecipherable].

**Brett Kreher:** That's a real good example, Dan. That's the kind of thing that nobody thinks about. Crooked cucumbers and the effect that has on your revenues, which has a huge effect on your bottom line. Do you have some other some other things? If you do, feel free to make a note of them or to talk about now.

**Dan Henry:** No, I think I think that that pretty much covers most of I will say, in talking to friends and neighbors or just people in the community, there's been a ton of, support, I think locally, at least around us for farms in general. People are really going out of their way to try to support local farms. They know that it's a difficult time for a lot of industries. But, because of perishability or production windows, because of weather, they realize the farmers only have narrow windows of opportunity to make their year, to make their crops. There's been a lot of great community support. We did a sale to the public right before Easter with flowers, which is something that we've never done before, we usually do wholesale. The turnout was incredible. We were really fortunate and thankful that the community rallied around and showed up. Things like that are good.

**Brett Kreher:** Yeah, it's good to hear. Thank you, Dan.

**Brett Kreher:** Earl, how about you? What sorts of effects have you seen on your farm?

**Earl Gingerich:** Well, I'm not going to get into all kinds of specifics. I'm sure the Task Force is there to come up with solutions. I read a little bit more about that type of stuff, but first of all, welcome to government and some of that irrational thinking, when they don't think policies through when you putting them in place. We're dealing with that in our local municipalities with mixed messaging. You're dealing with it with all businesses like Dan Henry stated. It makes no sense. Some of the policies were one to one. If you want solutions, bottom line is there are more essential businesses out there that are closed down that they don't realize they're essential. We're seeing that so many businesses are intertwined. When you talk about closing down restaurants completely, except for takeout and a lot of them closed down completely. The takeout is such a problem that they just closed down and another one went up for sale. They said they had enough of it and it was like the straw that broke camel's back. So, it's up for sale. The Iron Kettle in East Aurora. They don't realize that all these businesses are intertwined, and when you close down these businesses and don't allow them operate, and I'm not saying not to put proper practices in place, because you got to do that. Not allowing them to function at some sort of level. Dan gave good examples. I'll give you a couple of examples. The way you handle the beef market, when you closed down these restaurants they're not buying prime rib, they're not buying steaks, you know, New York strip or whatever, that kills the market. Until nice weather gets here, people aren't cooking outside. Then the problem is exasperated by New York State.

**Earl Gingerich:** If we don't learn from this, or New York State don't learn from it, and the general public don't learn from this, that's exacerbating all these problems that we had prior to this. It just emphasizes now New York State is the forty-ninth worst state for being unfriendly to business. I got people, though, buy beef locally, but there is no place to send them in New York State. There's only a few mom-and-pop operations, and some of them aren't federally inspected. One of them locally is booked up until next February- we managed to get one animal up to M&M for May 21st. It shows that we had no place in New York State because we are so business unfriendly. And that's sad, when you can't even market locally, when you've got people that want something. And I talked to the Governor's representative for Western New York, and they say they'll get it back to the Governor. The Governor isn't listening. The State isn't listening. There's no reason why we can't start opening up business with certain protections.

**Earl Gingerich:** I went to Tractor Supply yesterday and If you don't have a mask and they hand you one. There's a certain protocol. Why are we punishing these other businesses because supposedly they're not essential? You're limited on where to get clothing, you're limited on getting household items. You can go into a dollar general and buy all kinds of stuff but other stores with the same thing can't sell it because the State says so. Mixed messaging.

**Earl Gingerich:** My point is very simple. We have to forget about cutting NYC off as far as this pandemic and do our own thing up this way and start going out on our own and have our own protocol and have our own things, because this solution is worse than the epidemic. I guess you would say the cure is worse than the epidemic. My father said to me two days ago, we're going to run out of feed. We're feeding more animals because we have no market to send them. I put them on a maintenance feed. If the County and generally Western New York, wants to help local industry: start opening up with precautions, and do it in a gradual steps, and the sooner the better.

**Dan Castle:** Thank you. I do appreciate that. It is being heard and we'll pass it along. I think people would understand and agree with a lot of what you're saying. We will make sure to do that a lot.

**Earl Gingerich:** One thing I realize I didn't state which I should state, is to make it clear that Mark Poloncarz and his team have done a superb job. I talked to Mark couple of days ago. I think he's trying to do his best. He listened to some of my concerns. And I will say, because we were fortunate that this area has seen a revival, particularly the City of Buffalo that the County finances are in pretty good shape.

**Brett Kreher:** Thank you. We know we can always count on you to tell us what you're thinking and be frank. There is a lot there. I think a couple of things that maybe wouldn't be appropriate, or maybe they would, depending on how things go. But the backdrop of the fact that the agriculture is feeling kind of regulated and maybe some of it is indirect. Then a lot of people are in weakened positions going into this depending on maybe their assessment of risk and things like that and what financial position they were in going into this. Some of that is their own doing and some of it is maybe the time in their life. Like Earl said, if you've got a startup business or things like that or you've just recently expanded. People who are in weakened positions or are going to bear, they're going to feel more stress from this. Then some of the ones that hadn't been in weakened positions, they might feel like they've got to bear a disproportionate amount of the burden bailing out people, or municipalities, or states that that that are in these weakened positions. There're some feelings that that people are going to have about that. that's not an agricultural thing, I suppose, it's just a feeling thing.

**Earl Gingerich:** We can't get labor so we get dependent outside labor to come in because our people don't want to work. You can't get a high school kid or a college kid. Now you've got to go out and beg because you don't get anybody knocking on your door.

**Bryant Zilke:** Everybody's always looking for looking for help.

**Earl Gingerich:** Yeah, and that's my point. It's not that we don't have the labor, we have the people unwilling to do the labor because we made the culture that way. Like I said, this pandemic has exasperated and emphasized the problem that was already in place before we entered this. if we don't learn from it, then we're never going to learn. I will say no more. I know I've said too much, you know. I appreciate it.

**Brett Kreher:** Thanks, Earl.

**Brett Kreher:** Oh, and the other thing that you mentioned that I think it's important that that that Dan and Diane report back - and I know that they probably both captured this - so, I'm sure this is this is redundant, is some of the ways that these different businesses all affect agriculture. I think that the sawdust has an effect on agriculture. That might be an example that carry back, because a lot of times people just don't realize how there's all these things are linked. Then the garden centers, I think is another important one to mention.

**Earl Gingerich:** Dairy is in the same situation as Dan Henry is or Brett is with the poultry.

**Bryant Zilke:** Got to get this stuff opened up with appropriate precautions being taken. That's the bottom line. You're not going to get rid of this virus that quick. It's going to take a long time and we can't wait.

**Brett Kreher:** So, ease it back in. I think probably one of the questions to this Task Force is going to be what recommendations do they make? As far as prioritizing things to open up first. That's probably the

tricky thing that this Task Force is going to have to try to arrive at some consensus to make. Is that correct?

**Dan Castle:** Yes. I think there'll be some discussion beginning tomorrow but I'm certain that there will be some committees set up to look at specific segments of the economy. I fully intend to have agricultural and food service be one of those subcommittees. When we get to that point, I think Diane and I, we've already talked about trying to get some farmer representation on that on that subcommittee. I'm sure we'll be back to this group when it when it's time to get some specific recommendations on agricultural and food service, landscaping, and nurseries markets. I think there would be an opportunity for more focused input sometime in the next couple weeks.

**Earl Gingerich:** They could start opening up immediately (any outside activity). Outside construction because social distancing is a lot easier outside than inside of a building. That would help agriculture because you get the lumber mill going, the forestry sector which is part of agriculture, all that moving. The longer this plays out, the harder it is to get back to some sort of normalcy.

**Dan Castle:** Rachel, you want to talk about what you're seeing?

**Rachel Chrostowski:** Sure. A lot of the things that I've been seeing are really second or third hand or that sort of thing because I've been working at home for the last six weeks. My interactions with people have revealed concerns about a lot of stuff that people talked about already: meat packing supplies, milk supply and dumping issues, and Easter flower sales. I didn't hear anybody mention yet the impact that happened on Maple Weekend festivities in Western New York. I think a lot of that had to shut down early. So, there might be major losses or impacts to operations. A lot of that. Another thing that I saw is for wine and cider producers, not being able to have their tasting rooms open is an impact to them. There are other farms that I know of that do agritourism activities and those are obviously on hold for the foreseeable future. Those with farm stores have to make decisions about whether or not they're going to be opening, whether or not they're going to allow people to come into them. Some of them have been closed. There're obvious impacts to sales there. As the season sort of changes, we're going to be looking at the impacts to CSA operations and their pick-up procedures. I don't know if it will limit them or if they'll just have to be more careful. Then there are u-pick operations. I'm not sure how the public will be welcomed to come in and pick produce. Those are just the main things that I've been seeing in different sectors that we haven't really talked about too much.

**Diane Held:** I'll just chime in about the u-pick because the berry specialist for this half of the State has been on a few of our calls. She's working with the growers right now. Obviously, nobody's doing any u-pick (right now), but that is a huge cause of concern for them is how they're going to operate u-pick.

**Dan Castle:** What is the u-pick season?

**Diane Held:** Start in June and go right into the fall. Berries in general because you have strawberries, blueberries, raspberries, and then you do have the fall raspberries. And social distancing, I don't think we're going to be done with that anytime soon. Growers are going to have to deal with that. Whether you pick all the way through the season, they're going to have to figure out how to do that.

**Dan Castle:** You would think, though, that there would be some very easy practical guidelines for allowing social distancing for u-pick. I'm sure there's a lot of people working on. That seems like something that could be relatively easily implemented by June.

**Diane Held:** Well, I think one of the concerns is having enough staff to monitor whether people are following [guidelines]. I have a daughter works in grocery stores and people don't listen to what they're told to do. The other concern is that they're going to have a lot more people doing u-pick who haven't traditionally done it and don't necessarily know the protocols and what to pick and where to pick.

**Dan Castle:** Is that typically H2A labor? Does that vary by farm?

**Diane Held:** For anything that's picked and sold, I think it's a mix. Dan or Brad, I don't know if you know better than I do?

**Dan Henry:** I would guess that it's a mix of both. It probably really just depends on the size of the farm. Some of the smaller farms get by with local labor. Most that I know that are of any scale at this point are relying on H2A to get the volume of people.

**Brett Kreher:** Diane, anything else you want to add from the Cornell Cooperative Extension side of things?

**Diane Held:** We've covered vegetables, we've covered fruits, we've covered dairy, we've covered meat, we've covered eggs. I don't know if there's anything about maple syrup, honey. I haven't heard anything from the honey producers. I don't know if anybody has, but we actually do a fair amount of work with the honey producers. Nobody's mentioned that yet.

**Earl Gingerich:** I think the bees are still working.

**Diane Held:** They're not practicing social distancing right now.

**Earl Gingerich:** They're like our animals, I can't keep them six feet apart.

**Dan Castle:** Well, that's a good thing for the bees.

**Dan Castle:** Well, I certainly hope that we're not still talking about this when Christmas tree season comes along, but hopefully things under control by then. Is there anyone else on the phone that has anything else to add to this discussion?

**Bryant Zilke:** Nope, sounds covered to me

**Dan Castle:** OK.

**Earl Gingerich:** Thank you for your time.

**Dan Castle:** I appreciate the input of everyone. With the time we have left, I'll turn it over to Sarah. One of the things that we've done to try to take a lot of issues we've heard so far in the community and begin to prepare. One of the one of the things the County can do, there is a lot we can't control, but one thing we can do is to promote the direct sales of products to consumers by linking consumers to farms, farms to consumers, farmers markets, CSAs, and so forth. We've been working on an Erie Grown website for a while to search by produce. Over the last week or so, we've really amped it up to get into how we can help in the

post-COVID world. So, Sarah, maybe you just skip right to the website and you can walk us through what we've created and what the features of this are.

**Sarah Gatti:** One second. I meant to share and I just unshared. OK. Can you see the Erie Grown page?

**Brett Kreher:** Yes, we can.

**Sarah Gatti:** I think most of you know that I've been working on Erie Grown for months, trying to get people enrolled. When COVID hit we kind of retooled it. It will be a more comprehensive resource database and better link consumers to growers. So, that's what you're seeing is the new kind of fancy format we have. I'll scroll down and just go quickly through the features. This is our farm locator, and this was a survey that Cornell Cooperative put out and we mapped, and it's showing farms or agribusinesses that are open right now. It has what they're selling and how they're complying with social distancing, whether it's curbside pickup or online ordering or delivery. The next tool we have is the fresh produce finder. This is what I've shown you all in the past. This is Erie Grown started off as with these sorts of tiles of produce. And then scrolling down, we have agritourism. We've just mapped it and add added to it, the data came from the Soil and Water Conservation District. This is a comprehensive list of all agritourism points and we haven't verified that they're COVID compliant.

**Dan Castle:** Can you walk people through the farm finder and show people what how that works?

**Sarah Gatti:** Yep, it's just a map, so you look at it and there's these points you can click the icon and it has the info: contact information, what's for sale, COVID details.

**Dan Castle:** The nice thing about this is that farmers or anyone in the business can enroll themselves. There's a link to a form that you fill out the basic information and we'll put it onto the map so that, anyone searching on this can get a free connection to your farm. These are the businesses that have enrolled so far. We would certainly encourage you folks and any other farms that have the opportunity to sell direct to enroll. Sarah can show you the link of how to do that.

**Sarah Gatti:** I will. Here we have a search by address. It's kind of like the Parks locator map. I put in the location of the Rath building and it shows me that Five Loaves Farm and a couple of different CSAs are within five miles of that location. So, that's kind of nifty. Then we do have a link on the page for the enrollment form. Any questions?

**Rachel Chrostowski:** I just want to say it's really awesome, Sarah. Great work.

**Sarah Gatti:** Oh, thank you. It was a collaboration, I can't take all the credit

**Sarah Gatti:** I'll just open up the fresh produce finder, formerly Erie Grown in its entirety. This should look familiar. I showed it off a few months ago. I'll click on the agritourism app as well, which also has the search tool I showed you on the other map. This one is symbolized by roadside markets, farmer's markets, u-pick, and wineries. CSAs have this glow around them. This is a comprehensive listing. We haven't certified these as COVID compliant.

**Dan Castle:** Another thing to point out here is that this this website will be a bit of a work in progress as we go. We are getting in a link that's not here yet. We talked to Diane this morning and we are adding in a link on meat - the MeatSuite. So, there will be that in here as well.

**Sarah Gatti:** Dan, I did have that already. We talked this morning and the website's already changed from this morning. It's living, it's Erie Growing.

**Sarah Gatti:** These are there sources for consumer. We have the MeatSuite, Grassroots Gardens. Here's a link to Erie County Maple that our Parks Department produces. Scrolling down, this is our link database for things that would be helpful for the business side of things. Scrolling down this is our regional and state section. We have links to New York State maple and then a link to our adjacent counties versions of Erie Grown. Then we're almost to the bottom. We have Twitter feeds. We have Cornell Cooperative Extension, USDA, and the American Farmland Trust. And then we have contact information for some key agencies.

**Dan Castle:** We're still trying to figure out how to put logos, so hopefully we get logos here in the near future.

**Sarah Gatti:** I was just going to finish up by saying there's a link right here, "sign up here to enroll", and there is another link at the at the very top of the page.

**Dan Castle:** It's a really helpful thing. The plan going forward on this is that Diane and I will be presenting this at the COVID Business Task Force meeting tomorrow afternoon and then Friday, the County Executives will roll it out at his briefing. He's going to do a live demo of this and talk about this for the official rollout. There will certainly be some publicity there. I'd encourage folks to get registered on here before it goes widespread on Friday. It'll be a work in progress. We hope to keep it out there in the public's eye. Certainly, if there's any ideas that to incorporate please to follow up and let us know.

**Brett Kreher:** Thank you, Dan. Thank you, Sarah. That's terrific. A lot of work.

**Sarah Gatti:** That's it for me on Erie Grown. I think that was the last agenda item as well.

**Dan Castle:** So, Brett, we'll turn it back to you to conduct other business.

**Brett Kreher:** Thank you, Dan. Thank you, Sarah. I am not aware of any other business. I don't know if anybody else says has anything that that they need to discuss this evening.

**Diane Held:** One thing that came up was actually Vince Phelps, who's on our Agricultural Program Committee, brought this up. It's kind of the next step concern. It's not one of the immediate concerns. Rachel's doing work directly and the County's going to hopefully at some point get more involved with farmland protection. Farm land is vulnerable as farms live on the edge like this. Conversion becomes a big threat. So, it's something, again, that may not be what we're most worried about right now. Obviously, we want the businesses to survive, but this is that next step that certainly the Agricultural and Farmland Protection Board should be paying attention to. Just wanted to flag that.

**Brett Kreher:** Yeah, that's a good point, Diane. Actually, I was talking with a neighbor today and one of my other neighbors is retiring and one of my neighbors is sort of picking up his operation and it's putting him in a more fragile state.

**Earl Gingerich:** Yeah, it's definitely going to be an issue, especially in the second-ring towns.

**Earl Gingerich:** The only other comment, which I'm starting to see a change made, is some in the agricultural community feel like they're slighted by the media. Constantly hearing praise for all these

essential workers yet farmers are never mentioned. They work seven days a week and if the food supply wasn't there, there would be nobody able to do anything. If the County Executive or the public media maybe could once in a while, you know, thank the farmers for being out there. The only time I ever hear it is from a John Deere commercial. My point is the farmers are down like everybody else on this, and they still work a certain way and they don't qualify for a lot of these programs out there. Just a word of encouragement that, hey, we thank our farmers being out seven days a week, taking care of the animals, the crops and keeping the food supply going. It wouldn't hurt the morale of the agricultural community.

**Diane Held:** New York Farm-net has been on several conference calls and is talking about how the stress in the farm community is incredible. It wasn't in a good place coming into this and this is just been a whole extra layer. So, all of the mental health issues and things that can be a concern like this are certainly impacting the agricultural community as much or more than anyplace else.

**Brett Kreher:** I want to thank everybody for being on here and sharing all these thoughts. I want to thank you Dan and you Diane for collecting all this information, and Sarah for everything that you do to organize this stuff. I just wanted to call your attention to the bottom of the agenda, the next meeting we've got scheduled for May 21st. Sarah will be sending something out to remind us all of that. So, I wanted to thank everybody for being on here tonight and hope everybody stays safe.

– END –