



Solano County

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Legislation Text

File #: 19-163, **Version:** 1

Receive a verbal update on the Solano County Farmbudsman Program; and Consider designating a Board member to meet quarterly with the Farmbudsman

Published Notice Required? Yes ☐ No ☒
Public Hearing Required? Yes ☐ No ☒

DEPARTMENTAL RECOMMENDATION:

The County Administrator's Office recommends that the Board of Supervisors receive a verbal update on the Solano County Farmbudsman Program, and consider designating a Board member to meet quarterly with the Farmbudsman.

SUMMARY:

The Farmbudsman program has been operational in Solano County since April 2013. The Farmbudsman assists farmers, ranchers and agriculture-related businesses with various permitting processes, including assistance with agricultural permitting and standards as required by regulatory agencies. On July 24, 2018, Solano County entered in to an agreement with Humboldt State University Sponsored Programs Foundation's Northern California Small Business Development Center (Norcal SBDC) to administer the Farmbudsman program until a new SBDC host agency could be found in Solano County. On January 24, 2019, the agreement transitioned to the new Solano SBDC host agency, the Workforce Development Board (WDB) of Solano County. Heather Henry, Executive Director of the WDB, will provide an update on the transition process. And, Sarah Hawkins, Farmbudsman, will provide a status update on the Farmbudsman program. The Farmbudsman program's objective is to facilitate and expedite the development of promising value-added agricultural projects.

FINANCIAL IMPACT:

The operating agreement with Norcal SBDC, which has now transitioned to the WDB, for the administration of the Farmbudsman program is through June 30, 2019. The agreement is for an amount not to exceed \$35,000 to reimburse Norcal SBDC and WDB for Farmbudsman services offered to facilitate and expedite the development of promising value-added agricultural projects, to provide regulatory aid in complying with the regulatory process, and training programs in which clients are asked to participate. Funding for this program is included in the Promotion Department's FY2018/19 Adopted Budget.

DISCUSSION:

Update on the Solano Small Business Development Center

SBDC's mission is to provide assistance to entrepreneurs and small businesses in order to enhance the entrepreneur's business skills and to expand, enhance and/or maintain business operations. Since the Farmbudsman program's inception, this model has provided an economic benefit to Solano County.

The County has contracted with the Small Business Development Center since 2013 to administer the Farmbudsman program. Solano Community College first hosted the SBDC in Solano County, but ceased in

June 2017. The County then entered into an agreement in July 2017 with Norcal SBDC, as a lead SBDC center hosted by Humboldt State University, assumed the administration of the SBDC in Solano County until a new agency could be located as a host.

In June 2017, Norcal SBDC issued a request for proposals (RFP) seeking eligible organizations able to provide quality small business assistance services in Solano County following Solano Community College's decision to no longer host a SBDC. Two proposals were submitted in response to the RFP; however, neither submittal met the RFP stated requirements.

In August 2018, Norcal SBDC released a new solicitation seeking an eligible organization to host the SBDC in Solano County, and in December 2018, the Workforce Development Board (WDB) was awarded the contract. Four cities provided cash matches to support the project. Transition activity is currently underway. The Solano SBDC office officially relocated from the Fairfield-Suisun Chamber of Commerce to the WDB location in the Cordelia area on January 1, 2019, and the Farmbudsman position transitioned to the WDB as the new host agency for the Solano SBDC on January 24, 2019. The WDB is currently recruiting for a SBDC Director to lead the initiative.

As part of the new SBDC in Solano County, the WDB will implement changes to the existing SBDC model in the county. A wider geographic distribution of activities will include SBDC Satellite offices at the Vacaville Chamber of Commerce and in Vallejo at a location to be determined. In addition, Outreach Centers will be located at the Fairfield-Suisun Chamber office and at the Benicia Economic Development office. Training locations have been established in Vallejo and Vacaville as well to increase accessibility for local businesses. A SBDC Advisory Council will be established with membership from each chamber and economic development entity, as well as other stakeholders, that will guide the service delivery of the Center to ensure activities meet the needs of each Solano community. Business advising capability will be added in the area of talent management and will include a stronger promotion of key in-demand industry advising. A Business Rx program will also be created to support struggling businesses with layoff aversion strategies, financial restructuring, and loan options.

Additionally, in July 2018, the County and Norcal SBDC changed the operations of the Farmbudsman program to provide increased resources for the Farmbudsman while also allowing SBDC to leverage additional funding. In 2017, federal reporting requirements for the SBDC changed and less of the Farmbudsman activities were allowable expenses, and therefore, not payable to the Farmbudsman. The current agreement provides a greater opportunity for increased economic impacts as more of the activities and time spent by the Farmbudsman on providing assistance is now an allowable expense.

The agreement, consistent with prior agreements, allows for 16 hours of work per week with the Farmbudsman position employed by SBDC versus a contract employee, and provides the Farmbudsman with a dedicated office, which allows for storage of Farmbudsman materials, a facility to host meetings/workshops, a strong internet signal/connection for consistent communication and occasional remote counseling services, and a computer. It also includes the ability for reimbursement for a portion of the Farmbudsman's cell phone expense, mileage, and the cost to send the Farmbudsman's to two agriculture conferences for professional development such as to learn new regulations about cottage food laws, marketing small farms, as well as making connections with various farming finance institutions.

Update on Farmbudsman

The Farmbudsman program has been operational in Solano County and administered by the Solano Small Business Development Center (SBDC) since April 2013. The Farmbudsman position was vacant between July 2016 and March 2017 during the period when Solano Community College hosted the SBDC. A lengthy recruitment was conducted after the position became vacant in 2016, and Sarah Hawkins became the current Farmbudsman in March 2017. However, shortly after she started Solano Community College announced that

they would no longer host the SBDC creating an uncoordinated administration period for the program.

The primary objective of the Farmbudsman program is to facilitate and expedite the development of promising value-added agricultural projects. The Farmbudsman meets quarterly with the Farmbudsman Oversight Committee to discuss target measures and standards to measure the success of the program. The Farmbudsman Oversight Committee includes the Agricultural Commissioner / Sealer of Weights and Measures, the Director of Resource Management and a representative from Norcal SBDC. Measures of success include the volume of agricultural businesses with which the Farmbudsman interacts, increases in food processing, and increases in investment in agricultural businesses. Additionally, the Farmbudsman's Work Plan includes scheduling quarterly meetings with the Chair of the Board of Supervisors or the Board's designee.

Since the last presentation to the Board, a little over a year ago, the Farmbudsman has continued to work with and develop relationships with the farming and farming adjacent community in Solano County. She has reached out to and visited around a dozen farms since September of 2018 when this was added to the work plan. These visits have helped to highlight the individual concerns of farmers who have spoken about issues ranging from how tariffs are hurting even non-export farms in our county, to the need for better farmer's markets, to the challenges community supported agricultures (CSAs) are facing. These visits have also helped the Farmbudsman to make connections between farmers, which is an ongoing project, and has spurred outreach to state and federal level electeds from the Farmbudsman to see how their policy priorities can help Solano farmers. At the most recent quarterly Farmbudsman committee meeting, it was suggested that a class about carbon sequestration in farm soils, along with accessing funds the state has designated for this purpose, be developed and the Farmbudsman has been actively researching information to do so.

The Farmbudsman has continued to work with several of the businesses highlighted in the last report, as well as some new ones, but these don't always lead to the outcomes we hope for- one business which was helped with market research decided not to go forward with developing the product they were considering, which did save the company from losing money, but that is a difficult metric to measure. In working with new farmers, the largest challenge continues to be finding affordable agricultural land with a place to live or close enough to where they currently live to realistically and affordably commute. One client decided not to move forward with their operation because of this and another is still trying to find an outlet close enough to customers but which will also allow their farm-adjacent activities-a search which has continued for almost two years now. Projects which are moving forward include an event venue, working to find a new business for a large site in north Solano, which should create either many jobs or a large investment, a possible business headquarters with about a dozen employees, and a handful of small farm operations. In addition to these clients, the Farmbudsman has advised several aspiring farmers on the requirements of various farm projects, from installing a new vineyard, to requirements for bee keeping, to dairy husbandry, to free range chicken keeping, to advice about various livestock guardians to keep their sheep and goats safe from predators. So far, we've seen the creation of three full time and one part time job in 2018, three business starts, and a sales increase of \$9,231. We anticipate the official start of another business in the first quarter of the year, with one or two showing some promising signs of moving forward as well.

The Farmbudsman has been participating in the Spring Farm Tour planning, and was a participant in a panel discussion about agricultural businesses at the Small Business Development Center State Conference. She has met with staff of the Center For Land Based Learning, the Solano Resource Conservation District, UC Agriculture and Natural Resources, the Dixon Resource Conservation District, the Natural Resources Conservation District, the Agriculture Department, and continues to attend meetings of the Agricultural Advisory Committee, the Solano Farm Bureau, Sustainable Solano, the Solano Economic Development Task Force, and UC's Seed Central mixers. Also attended have been trainings about the nexus of Agriculture and Emerging Technology, and the viability of high value, but lesser grown crops in the Sacramento Valley put on by UC Cooperative Extension.

ALTERNATIVES:

The Board could choose to not receive the program update; however, this is not recommended as the update gives the Board an opportunity to learn about the impact this program is having on the agriculture community in Solano County.

OTHER AGENCY INVOLVEMENT:

On a quarterly basis, the Farmbudsman Oversight Committee, consisting of the Solano County Agricultural Commissioner/Sealer of Weights and Measures, the Director of Resource Management, a representative from the County Administrator's Office, and a representative from the Norcal SBDC meets to review program activity and to assist the Farmbudsman in addressing client project objectives.

CAO RECOMMENDATION:

APPROVE DEPARTMENTAL RECOMMENDATION