

UMass Extension Board of Public Overseers Meeting
Monday, January 25, 2021, 3:00pm

MINUTES

This meeting was conducted via videoconference (Zoom) during the pandemic emergency, when the open meeting law was temporarily suspended.

Members Present: John Lee, Matt Barron, Ted Wales, Commissioner John Lebeaux, Deb Phillips, Chris Dunn

Members Absent: Patricia Bigelow, Karen Heymann, Michael Lueders

Guests: Ed Bourgeois

Staff and Faculty Attending: Jody Jellison, Joe Shoenfeld, Bill Miller, Kathleen Geary, Sandy Thomas, Christine Hatch, Clem Clay, Dwayne Breger, Sandy Thomas, Linda Horn, Lisa Sullivan-Werner, Rick Harper, Tawny Simisky, Jason Lanier

Agenda

- Welcome, introductions, approve minutes of previous meetings, Matt Barron, Chair
- News from UMass Extension, Jody Jellison
- Presentation on commercial horticulture programs:
 - Rick Harper, Extension Associate Professor, Urban Arboriculture
 - Tawny Simisky, Extension Entomologist/Educator, Team Leader for Landscape, Nursery, Urban Forestry
 - Jason Lanier, Extension Educator, Team Leader, Greenhouse Crops/ Floriculture and Turf
- Discussion of funding mechanism

A quorum requires seven voting members to be present, and only six members attended the meeting. Thus, the minutes of the previous meeting (12/1/2020) were not approved.

News from Jody Jellison

Dr. Jellison noted that we face some continuing challenges as the pandemic continues.

- Farms are operating at 80%-90% capacity, and most on-farm research is moving forward, while some in person classes are held on farms. Health and safety plans have allowed research to continue. Outreach events have shifted to virtual formats. It is possible that some in-person ag outreach may happen in the spring, although community and school based outreach may not be on the table.
- Plant and soils labs are providing services.
- There will potentially be 4,500-5,000 more students on campus this spring than there were in the fall.
- Funding: Federal funding appears to be stable, although we haven't received final figures. There is uncertainty in the University budget, and the 2021-2022 budget planning underway at the Provost level.
- We can currently only attempt to fill a small percentage of vacant positions.
- Dr. Jellison said that she will likely have financial documents to share with BOPO members prior to the next meeting. Already we have seen that revenue is down significantly. Additionally, with the recent incentivized retirement packages, the portion of state funding that supported the salary of anyone who took incentivized retirement goes back to the central university.

Sale of the Waltham Property

Ted Wales asked if a decision had been made on money where the sale of the Waltham property might go. Dr. Jellison noted that she understands that a preliminary decision has been made, and that she is expecting a final decision soon.

Joe Shoenfeld noted that Chris Dunn recently told him that the sale has not been finalized. Ted Bourgeois asked if there was anything that BOPO members can do to communicate to decision makers as to what this money could be allocated to. Jody Jellison noted that she is hoping to receive a portion of the funds from the sale for an initiative within Extension. It was clarified that any money from the sale of capital property by the University has to go into something that is not considered “operational,” that instead funds must go to capital upgrades or endowment.

Comments and Discussion on Current Challenges to UMass Extension

- John Lee asked if UMass Extension is worse off than other land grant colleges.
- Jody Jellison noted that when looking at smaller New England states, we don’t have the county structure that they may have, which is a real deficit.
- Ted Wales added that it was 30+ years ago that county funding went away, and it had a huge negative impact on extension’s ability to provide services to citizens.
- It was pointed out that Barnstable County provides support for its own extension unit. Additionally, both Barnstable and Plymouth Counties provide 4-H support.
- Dr. Jellison stated that one of the continuing challenges, which we share with other extension groups, is that federal funding has been level for the last 20 years, while costs have risen consistently.

BOPO Membership

Matt Barron noted that he had a meeting with the President and Executive Director of the Farm Bureau during which they discussed BOPO vacancies. Both Jody Jellison and Joe Shoenfeld added that they were very encouraged by that Zoom meeting. Ted Wales said that it is important to get them back on board. Mr. Shoenfeld thinks that they have a nominee in mind. Clem Clay stated that the Farm Bureau representative doesn’t have to be a person who serves in a statewide capacity. Barron asked the House and Senate leadership to put someone on the BOPO Advisory Board, however; there is a new speaker in the Senate since that time. He is trying to keep this moving forward.

Roll call of BOPO Members taken at 3:20pm:

Present:

Matt Barron
Chris Dunn
Jody Jellison (non-voting)
John Lebeaux
John Lee
Deb Phillips
Ted Wales

Not Present:

Pat Bigelow
Karen Heymann
Mike Lueders

Joe Shoenfeld asked Rick Harper to make his presentation.

Rick Harper, Extension Associate Professor, Department of Environmental Conservation

Rick specializes in urban forestry. He talked about oaks in the landscape, elms, and specifically about invasive disease that impacts urban trees. He also described the wood banks that are appearing across the state.

He discussed the research interviews he has conducted with stakeholder, and noted that he sees his job to deliver information and to *generate* knowledge. He has found that people want more access to continuing education. There was mention of Urbanforestrytoday.org: in addition to a website, this connects to a Facebook page and a list serve. "Connecting Students with Stakeholders" is an important aspect.

Matt Barron noted that they are trying to make connections with folks who have "waste wood" (utility companies, highway departments) to make conversions in schools, etc, to wood from fossil fuels. Ted Bourgeois discussed the connection between wood banks and the health of forests connection. Communities take down more trees than they plant, and there is a lot of wood waste generated, which is more biomass to manage. On community tree takedowns: Rick Harper thinks that the tree warden arrangement is a great system.

Matt Barron mentioned that each town has to have a measure of wood and bark (<https://commonwealthmagazine.org/opinion/the-best-way-to-use-our-available-wood/>)

Ted Wales stated that there is a way to protect trees from heavy equipment, and to avoid soil compaction, when developing a property.

Presentation by Tawny Simisky and Jason Lanier

Tawny Simisky: Extension Entomologist and Interim leader of the Extension Landscape, Nursery and Urban Forestry Program.

Jason Lanier: Leader of Greenhouse team and Interim leader of Turf Program

Both presenters reviewed the members of their team(s).

Jason Lanier noted that this work is about knowledge: we gather and we communicate this information (in their case, practitioners) to help make responsible decisions.

There was mention of Massachusetts' prior involvement in the cut flower industry, before the 70s oil crisis.

The presenters provided an outline of their audiences and provided some data. They reviewed the number of recent presentations and consultations, and they noted that website educational resources have been well used. Joe Shoenfeld pointed out the high level of traffic to these websites that Jason and Tawny refer to – "1.3 million is pretty impressive." There have been big increases in traffic to the websites compared to the previous year. They published 30 issues of "HortNotes" and "Garden Clippings," which are made freely available to stakeholders. Additionally, the teams offer blog-style educational posts

Presenters also noted that there are 19 on-demand videos on YouTube and on Facebook, that are shared on the CAFE website. Tawny Simisky created InsectXaminer, a short video series to educate stakeholders, professionals, and the general public. Tawny noted that she is planning to gather more footage to create additional videos. The annual Garden Calendar is another collaborative effort that was very popular this year. Information was shared on the "Pollinators in Our Landscapes" conference.

Tawny Simisky reviewed information about this year's Green School, which was 100% a virtual offering. The team used a variety of tools to deliver the educational content. There were 164 recorded lectures and modules for which they were responsible. Ongoing is the Winter School for Turf Management. Jason Lanier reviewed historic vs current practices. Tawny Simisky mentioned that they are joined by many collaborators on monitoring spotted lanternfly, a challenging invasive pest, in Massachusetts.

It was noted that state and regional industry groups are conducting turf research, with environmentally sound practices employed in both private and public settings.

Deb Phillip asked: Are there other ways in which more support could be provided?

Jody Jellison noted that the number of staff supported on “hard money” (on USDA Smith-Lever funding) has gone down over the years. There is continuing attrition as the cost of employing well-qualified professionals has gone up and support has stayed level. Dr. Jellison expressed appreciation of what extension professionals provide.

Jason Lanier noted that they recently lost over 100 years in experience due to retirements. Rick Harper said that he strives to tell the extension story in as a succinct manner as possible, as people don't know about it.

It was mentioned that greenhouse growers are interested in wood heat.

John Lebeaux, Commissioner of the Massachusetts Department of Agricultural Resources (MDAR), expressed his appreciation of the relationship that they have with UMass Extension.

It was noted that in terms of invasive plants and insects, COVID changed a lot about how businesses could operate.

Other items currently on the table: Neonicotinonoids, hemp regulations.

BOPO Membership

70% to vote is statutory. This is a tough burden, considering that other public bodies require a simple majority. The nursery industry is supposed to have a seat here, and we could suggest member to the Farm Bureau. It was acknowledged that it is reasonable to need representation from the nursery industry (they hold four seats, and John Lee is the only active member). They are looking to fill these seats.

Mentioned: A memo on mechanisms of how to receive external funding: grants, gifts, contracts.

There is no current mandate on engaging on active fundraising, and Matt Barron would like to take advantage of this to explore wood heat sources.

Jody Jellison noted that it is important to think about the best mechanism for money to come in. Some contracts might have a greater expectation of deliverables, while grants have some objectives that tend to be broader. Additionally, gifts can be targeted. They can be small or large, and can endow a program or a position. As people think about ways in which to engage with Extension group, they may reach out to ask how to engage.

John Lee suggested that diverse groups can team up to raise money. Jody Jellison noted that sometimes it works better if funds go to a state agency. Ed Bourgeois asked: Are there things we might do to be more productive? Jody Jellison noted that she would like to pursue items that would allow us to maintain and expand capacity in the area of healthy soils.

Matt Barron asked: Who are the best candidates to approach for asking for money? It was noted that we need to decide what areas we could work on. It was also noted that healthy soils impact everyone in the group.

Ed Bourgeois suggested that the group might spend the meeting discussing how to move forward on advancing the area of soil health.

Joe Shoenfeld noted that he will speak with Matt Barron about the next meeting's agenda, and can take action on any suggestions that the board makes. Ted Wales would like a meeting to discuss those things. When we get to the legislation that promotes the importance of maintaining healthy soils, the outreach and education that Extension provides will be essential to that.

The next meeting will be scheduled for early April.

Gratitude was expressed for the very useful presentation on some of the services that Extension provides.

All agreed to close the meeting, which adjourned shortly before 5pm.