

## **Agricultural Advisory Committee Retreat**

**January 6, 2026, 5:30-9pm**

### **Retreat Summary**

*Prepared by Debbie Schechter, Schechter Consulting*

#### **Retreat Attendees:**

Ryan Casey, AAC Member  
Crystal Chaix, AAC Member  
Marilyn Johnson, AAC Member  
Peter Marchi, AAC Vice Chair  
Cole Mazariegos-Anastassiou, AAC Member  
James Oku, AAC Member  
Natalie Sare, AAC Chair  
John Vars, AAC Member  
Koren Widdel, AAC Member  
Olivia Boo, San Mateo County staff liaison  
Robby Miller, San Mateo County staff liaison  
Sophie Mintier, Assistant Director, San Mateo County Planning & Building Dept.  
Brian Pettit, Deputy County Attorney  
Debbie Schechter, Facilitator

#### **Call to Order, Roll Call, Public Comment:**

Chair Natalie Sare called the meeting to order. There were no public comments.

#### **Welcome and Introductions:**

Facilitator Debbie Schechter thanked everyone for being at the retreat. She reviewed the retreat purpose and objectives as follows:

- Retreat Purpose: Identify approaches to enhance AAC effectiveness
- Retreat Objectives:
  - Clarify the role of the AAC
  - Develop shared expectations for AAC operation and AAC/County staff interaction
  - Begin development of a workplan for the AAC for the next two years

Retreat participants introduced themselves.

#### **Remarks from Supervisor Ray Mueller:**

Supervisor Ray Mueller thanked Committee members for their service on the AAC, noting the importance of preserving agriculture in the County. He encouraged members to listen and be empathetic to one another.

#### **Group Agreements:**

Debbie Schechter reviewed the group agreements as follows:

- Speak respectfully and one at a time
- Listen for understanding; ask curious questions
- Share the air; step up, step back
- Be solution-oriented

- Let the facilitator guide the process
- Technology on silent
- Public participates during public comment periods

### **Framing Activity: Committee Values**

*Purpose: Identify shared values of the AAC and County staff in order to inform procedures and goals*

Retreat participants identified their individual values that also guide their work with the AAC. They shared their core/priority values in small groups and then worked to identify shared values of the Committee. The Committee agreed on the following shared values:

- Fairness
- Equality
- Integrity
- Respect

Additional priority core values identified by the small groups were:

- Safety
- Relationships
- Health
- Equal access to opportunity
- Support for others
- History of land and people
- Stewardship of land
- Positivity and fun
- Appropriate regulations

### **Discuss and Understand AAC Role**

*Purpose: Committee members and County staff develop a shared understanding of the Committee's purpose and roles*

Sophie Mintier provided a brief presentation on the purpose of the AAC. Information from the presentation is provided below.

#### Origin:

- Established in 1979 with creation of Planned Agricultural District
- Purpose: "Actively assist in preservation of agriculture of the Coastside by advice and recommendation to the Planning Commission and the Board of Supervisors to achieve objectives of the Planned Agricultural District"
- Membership: farmers and representatives of general public interest

#### Evolution of AAC:

- 2003 Resolution broadened role to "assist in the preservation of agriculture on the coastside by **providing advice and recommendations** to the Planning Commission and Board of Supervisors"
- Specified 15 members

- 11 voting members, appointed by Board:
  - 7 farmers/growers, 1 ag business representative, 1 conservationist, 2 public members
- 4 non-voting members including Ag Commissioner and Farm Bureau Executive Director

How AAC currently operates:

- Advisory, not decision-making
- **Provide recommendation** (approve, deny) to Planning Commission on ag-related discretionary planning permits, e.g. PAD and Farm Labor Housing
- **Provide input** on ag-related efforts or policy updates
- **Provide perspectives and expertise** to help County understand agricultural issues and needs

Participants discussed the role of the AAC and the issues (policies, projects) in which the Committee’s input is most important. Participants generally agreed with the role of the AAC as stated in the 2003 resolution to “assist in the preservation of agriculture on the coastside by providing advice and recommendations to the Planning Commission and the Board of Supervisors”. In addition, AAC members provided the following ideas about the role:

- AAC input should be sought early enough in the process to allow the input to make a difference in the decision, project or policy (e.g., the Farm Labor Housing Loan Program and the Farm Labor Housing Water System Program).
- AAC input should be provided in a timely manner without delays.
- The AAC should be informed of how its input was used.
- The AAC needs correct and complete information in order to effectively provide advice and recommendations.
- The AAC can provide advice and recommendations both proactively and reactively. In terms of proactive advice, the County would like the AAC to be a thought partner on policies and programs to enhance agriculture. Recommendations on permit decisions are an example of reactive advice.
- The AAC would like to play a role in the audit of Williamson Act contracts.

County staff agreed with these ideas and will look into the role of the AAC regarding Williamson Act contracts.

**AAC Operations**

*Purpose: Develop shared understanding of actions to improve AAC operations and ways to enhance AAC/County staff collaboration*

Retreat participants individually brainstormed answers to the questions below. They then discussed their ideas in small groups and reported out on common themes.

- What do respect and collaboration look like? What does a healthy working relationship between staff and the committee look like?
- How can we achieve these things?

Common themes from the discussion were as follows:

- Both the County and AAC members should give each other grace, be open-minded and strive to understand each other and each other's perspectives.
- Meetings should provide more structured opportunities for meaningful input by the AAC
- County staff should follow through with commitments and close the loop on recommendations and decisions
- County staff should understand the uniqueness of the Coast
- The AAC should serve as a sounding board on broader issues
- Respect and listen to one another, avoid side conversations
- AAC members should bring issues and concerns to the County staff liaison
- Don't jump to conclusions—ask questions and discuss what happened
- Look at the big picture
- The AAC should be provided with adequate information and answers to questions in order to make sound recommendations
- Have clear expectations for AAC members and County staff
- The AAC should have the same resources as other Boards/Commissions
- Understand that regulations and decisions affect farmers' and property owners' livelihoods
- The AAC and County staff should communicate and educate each other.
- Make sure that meetings are a safe space. The County staff liaison can support with this.

Following the discussion, Sophie Mintier presented a list of recent and planned changes to AAC operations based on feedback from AAC members and County staff observations. Information from the presentation is provided below.

Changes Recently Implemented:

- Meeting "script" provided to Chair to follow proper meeting procedures
- Public comment limited to 3 minutes/speaker; timer will be used and visible
- Public may ONLY speak during public comment
- Confirmed meetings can run past 8pm
- Delivered Brown Act training

Upcoming Changes – Agendas:

- Staff liaison to hold monthly call with Chair to develop agenda
- Agendas to provide additional detail on required steps, e.g.:
  - Presentation
  - Clarifying questions from committee
  - Committee discussion
  - Motion/votes
- Agendas to appear onscreen during meeting except during presentations
- Questions for AAC input to be included on agenda, and appear on screen to keep discussion focused

#### Upcoming Changes – Staffing:

- Staff liaison to attend meetings in person
- Additional staff support provided remotely to run public comment timer, manage Zoom, etc.
- Staff delivering project presentations may still present remotely

#### Upcoming Changes: Meeting Procedures:

- Meeting minutes will be agendaized for approval at the next meeting
- Meeting recordings tightly edited and limited to when meeting is in session only
- Chair and vice chair to be elected annually
- Brown Act and ethics training to be provided annually
- Staff will develop onboarding for new AAC members
- Relocate meetings to District 3 Coastside Office (270 Capistrano Rd) if AAC agrees
- Create an annual workplan, as required by bylaws

AAC members discussed these changes and generally agreed with them. Robby Miller was introduced as the new County staff liaison to the AAC and he expressed interest in working with the AAC to clarify his role. AAC members did not agree to relocate meetings to the District 3 Coastside office; the meeting location will be discussed in the near future.

#### **Public Comment:**

Two members of the public provided comments at the meeting. They recognized the value and expertise of the AAC. One member recommended that the AAC consider having a joint meeting with the Planning Commission. Another recommended that AAC members become familiar with the County's Local Coastal Plan and the General Plan as they relate to agriculture in the County.

#### **Summary and Next Steps:**

*Purpose: Review accomplishments and identify next steps to accomplish action items*

Debbie Schechter summarized the following action items/next steps that were identified retreat:

- Agendaize a review of the bylaws (Natalie and Robby)
- Check to see whether the AAC can play a role in Williamson Act contract audits (Sophie)
- Agendaize group agreements for AAC meetings (Natalie and Robby)
- Clarify projects/issues for which the AAC will receive presentations (County staff)
- Agendaize workplan discussion (Natalie and Robby)
- Discuss/agendaize meeting location (County staff and AAC)
- Share bylaws and resolution with the AAC (County staff)
- Prepare onboarding binder (County staff)
- Agendaize more trainings (County staff)
- Discuss reordering the agenda (Natalie and Robby)

#### **Adjourn**

The retreat was adjourned at approximately 9pm.