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TOWN OF BETHLEHEM
Albany County - New York
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HISTORIC HEATH FARM ADVISORY COMMITTEE

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MEETING SUMMARY

Wednesday October 16, 2024

8:00am-9:00am

Delmar-Bethlehem EMS Building, 2nd floor
114 Adams Street Delmar, NY 12054

In Attendance: Bobby Lukasiewicz, Stuart Lyman, Zan Mckenna, Gabby Sant' Angelo, David Vigoda, Dale Richter, Tom Seymour, Mark Warford, Kristen Yourno

Staff: Lauren Chiyoko Axford, Open Space Coordinator; Rob Leslie, Director of Planning;

Meeting Commenced: 8:00am

Presentation:

Ryan Woodruff, President and CEO
ClearPath for Veterans

- ClearPath is a nonprofit organization that serves veterans and families across NYS, and nationally with their canine training program. The organization takes a holistic approach to supporting veterans and helping them transition to civilian life. ClearPath assists veterans in all stages of this transition.
- They have a 75 acre campus in Chittenango and have a flagship canine training program for veterans with PTSD.
- They have a weekly community canteen luncheon on Wednesdays 11-1pm, open invitation to visit.
- ClearPath currently has 4 core programs using a holistic approach to supporting veterans, can influence a real positive trajectory in a veteran's life. These core programs are:

1) Peer Support: 33 counties across NYS- though there is a gap (opportunity) in the Capital Region. The organization wants to have a presence in the Capital Region, for example hiring staff to facilitate the peer support program here. In this program, veterans are partnered with other veterans who have experienced the transition from active military to veteran status, and are able to connect with a network of veteran service providers. Veterans have a broad spectrum of needs and CP services veterans in crisis situations, to veterans who are thriving, they offer a wide range of services. CP serves veterans of all different eras. CP performs a baseline triage to understand who they are working with. The approach is tailored: "One size fits one".

2) Career Services: This program is centered on workforce development and career readiness. A veteran's transition to the civilian world basically requires them to translate everything from the military context to something applicable to the civilian world. It is a real challenge, how do we help veterans translate these important skills? 2 types of skills that veterans come out of the military with are: resilience and leadership. So we created the Working Warriors program. This program helps with career training, resume writing, and facilitates higher education connections. This helps to better equip veterans for the transition and a future career.

3) Canine Program: The canine program started as a peer mentorship situation, where a mentor veteran was involved in the canine program as a recipient (i.e. paired with a service dog). This veteran found the true healing power of working a trained canine. Our program is now internationally ADI certified. There are only 154 ADI certified programs in the entire world, and we are the only accredited service dog provider in central NY. Service dog training instructors are working with 5 members in our community navigating the world learning how to be a service dog in a human environment. So that being out in the community won't be a barrier to the veteran who the dog is placed. 18 months old and meet benchmarks, they come back to main campus, animal welfare health. Placement and training. Veterans from all across military related PTSD, Traumatic Brain Injury, military sexual trauma.

4) Family Support Program: This program is closely tied to the peer support program. What is good for the family, is good for the veteran, and what is good for the veteran, is good for the family. We host different events and provide case by case management services to support the whole family. We try to help address food insecurity, by working with local food banks. We also have mobile units to assist our veterans- for example, we contract with Soldier ON, helping to prevent veteran homelessness, and our mobile peer support unit can come to the veteran if they can't come to us.

- We also host what we call summit programs. For these events, we bring providers from across the state to present to our staff. Our hope is, to be invited into a community, and start a conversation among all those people, to learn from each other and strengthen the overall statewide support of veterans.
- More recently, we have been exploring how to leverage or include nature, to help veterans heal. We participate in the Nature Rx program (Cornell University), to take things that go beyond a clinical arena, and see what other complimentary approaches we can take for a holistic approach.
- ClearPath is not an institutionalized environment. It is a beautiful, natural, 78 acre campus, with land and space to just be, and community connection.
- Going forward I look forward to discussing and having more conversations to develop a collaborative concept, and see where we can go from there.

Q: First, thank you for your service. Second, I want to learn more about agriculture activities, or therapeutic agricultural activities, as agriculture is at the forefront of our vision plan.

A: At the moment, ClearPath does not have any agricultural programming. We did go after a National Parks Service grant to connect public land with veterans. Unfortunately, we did not receive the award. I am aware of “Armed to Farm” programs and that is definitely interesting.

But yes, we would be interested in exploring the potential development of an “Armed to Farm” type initiative. Prior to being CEO of ClearPath, I was the Chief Program Officer. In that role, I would look at the programs at ClearPath, figure out how to make them better, how to strengthen the core components. Looking at our existing programs, are there ideas that could be migrated into this community? Or could we envision a new program and model to develop, how would that look? We are experienced in going into a community, setting up a peer support program, hiring local staff and then see what is working (or not), and figuring out how to improve.

Q: As you expand into further reaches, do you have a model for how ClearPath might move into the Albany Area?

A: Hiring staff in the area is important. For example, for our peer support program, we were able to connect with local VA services and through an RFP, had a package we can provide to counties to engage. By partnering with ClearPath, these counties received a paid staff member to do x, y, z. This is the mechanics and funding of how we look to expand.

For a project like this [Heath Farm], we would look at different local and national grant funding opportunities to collaborate. How do we take this idea and turn it into a program? Establish a MOU to see exactly what we will do to provide these services, and this is what we would need. We always re-evaluate after the first year so the program can be altered as needed for success.

Q: What about infrastructure?

A: We are always interested in infrastructure. Occupying the area, assessing the need, see how things grow over time. In the forefront, to say we want a brick and mortar facility, that’s good to talk about, but really getting a program launched, it will help us to really see if a facility is necessary or not. Through partnerships, sometimes we can find sites to host our services and programs.

Our second site in Devons, MA was a full expansion. In that case, we had 2 individuals who provided funding, and wanted to build a similar facility as in western NY.

It would be important for us to evaluate internally, to see what exactly it would take to establish a ClearPath presence and program in the Capital Region. We have 52 staff members right now, and staffing is really important. Having local staff for peer support or other programs is vital to serving the community we are working with. We like to discuss with the community, what have you identified as a need?

When I think about an agricultural program for veterans, either for occupational or therapeutic purposes, maybe that would look like a ClearPath satellite office that would focus primarily on that program and service.

Q: The ClearPath campus in Devons, MA since it is a secondary location, what goes on there now, how does that look?

A: At the main campus, we host a weekly canteen (150-250 attend this complimentary luncheon). We prepare a meal and usually have service dog training going on at the same time. Wed PM is our family support group – this is part of the peer to peer program for familial relationships. Throughout the week, we have different levels of programming services, some Saturdays as well and seasonal events too. We have a Harvest Festival, motorcycle ride fundraiser, every day is a little bit different. We like to encourage the veterans to use the campus, and hang out, it is an open access facility 9-4:30PM. 4-8pm Friday nights, lodge style, fire, food, kids activities, bring outside providers....sort of like a YMCA for veterans, but with a clear intention to holistically support the veterans and their families.

Q: If you were to expand into Albany, you would need to assess the need. Where is your funding coming from? Is it grants and VA state programs?

State grants, county donations, traditional philanthropy, most recently VA Suicide Prevention fund, which is targeted focus on 27 counties, through the VA, this is new. We are a prevention organization and have been doing this work for 14 years, so this is a really well aligned funding stream for us. We also engage in traditional nonprofit fundraising.

Q: Thank you for coming. You made a couple references to Armed to Farm programs, can you elaborate?:

A: Armed to Farm is a specific program for veterans to help them get started in the agricultural career field. I think these are mostly farm apprenticeships, and they connect veterans with partnering farms to learn about different aspects of farming, I can tap into some resources about this program and send to this group. Not sure which ones are in NYS. I believe Cornell has some, and we are well connected with Cornell University already through our established programs.

If you have any specific questions, if you want to start talking about the how, ready to do that, please feel free to reach out.

Committee Discussion:

Stuart: When we hear these presentations, activity on the property, managing and the activity, there is a balance that needs to be achieved. How do we match the level of activity to the vision? Protect the land, use it for ag uses, how do we strike that balance between uses and development activity? Also, we have these houses on the property, perhaps one or both, if remodeled, could be utilized for farmer housing

Q: Do we all agree that the more active, public access areas would be more appropriate for Glenmont area?

A: All committee members in agreement.

Issue of Parking- could the town partner with Soccerplex (Bethlehem Soccer Club) to utilize parking when not in use by the club? An agreement would be needed.

Dale: Maybe that barn area is more the activity area, we need to be clear in the vision, if we are looking to see activity at the corner.

Dale: anything you do there, is going require parking. But these guys are going to come in and figure out how to make it happen.

The other thing, they are very organized, they have a good track record. I think we should definitely work with Clear Path to develop a concept.

Bobbie: taking the idea of overdevelopment, veterans are people, so forget campus, but people/veterans can use the perimeter trail, the natural area and access is there, this would really help with re-entry with civilian life.

Mark: a portion of the barn, could be a place to gather, a community space, a point where small groups could meet. As far as parking, there would need to be a traditional parking lot but in the event there is a larger scale event, you could do on the grass parking, just making sure there is a flat area, for future overflow, but wouldn't need to be paved.

Stuart: When I hear veterans, there may be people with disabilities, mental and physical. I think that maintaining the physical nature of the historic nature of the barn, counters the potential for ADA accessibility. We need to balance that with the development or the renovation of the building on the property. Focusing on the historic restoration of the barn could conflict with the future we are looking towards.

Gabby: Going through that process with SHPO, state and fed, they want to see accessible historic buildings, they are willing to work with you on preserving historic elements while allowing access.

- The plan needs to provide that recommendation of thoughtfulness.
- Committee needs to point out these issues in the body of the plan: if you are going to make it historic, coming to a decision on how to reconcile them.

Kristen: there is a community need for a program like this.

Bobbie: As far as historic registration goes, maybe we could retain the historic structure for equipment structure, or combine with more modern design for community meeting space, either as part of the original structure, or another, additional structure down the road. Doesn't have to be either or.

David: as I listen to this conversation, I feel that we are all very receptive to the idea of doing something with veterans. I didn't hear anything about agriculture, until Rob asked about it. Could they make use of a significant part of our land?

Mark: There doesn't seem to be an active agricultural program now, there are things out there but they aren't fully engaged with it yet. I could see this organization really embracing an agricultural component. I agree, there isn't a concrete program in place, but he said it is

something they are willing to explore, and they have some funding streams in place and access to funding streams we haven't really discussed yet.

Bobbie: Heath Farm could be the first model of connecting veterans with farmland, in the Capital Region. Plus, there is the new affordable housing development in Selkirk, under construction that has a portion of units reserved for veterans.

Zan: So as I see it, the organization works as an umbrella group. For example, trade unions have apprenticeships, it's the same idea. I work for a national organization that facilitates that for dairy grazing apprenticeship. We identify mentor farms, pair them with an apprentice, and then manage all aspects of HR for 2 years until they complete their apprenticeship.

There are ways to overlap these things. To match veterans to existing farm operations, matchmaking, and there is a precedent for that.

David: We need the farms to provide the opportunities to future apprenticeships

Zan: In an incubator model, the nonprofit organization would manage that. Doesn't necessarily need to only serve young farmers, could be other populations, or channels such as veterans.

Q: What does the farmer get out of it?

Zan: A: Our organization's major focus is farm succession. Apprenticeship, is a paid activity. The apprentice gets credentials for leveraging a business plan for the future. For the farmer, is more transferring experience and knowledge to younger farmer, who will continue either on their farm or another farm. Continuing the career path, passing down of knowledge. Farmer mentors get some funding relief as well so they aren't taking on the full weight of hiring someone, but then they also have another (often younger) farmer to help get it all the work done.

David: I have personal knowledge of veteran who did an apprenticeship on a working farm (Soul Fire Farm) for 2-3 years. After he wanted to set himself up as a farmer, raising pigs. Our farmland investment group purchased land in Berne, and then provided a loan on reasonable terms. What I got from Ryan, is that ClearPath is well organized, they have established funding streams, and a track record of starting programs setting them up for success.

Dale: The farm is so close to the VA, I don't think we need to give them a huge footprint, but to offer as an option, from the community standpoint, I think this would be a really favorable thing.

Zan: one of the real benefits is that ClearPath is connected to huge network of funders, veteran service provides, and other resources that could be vital to success. I think what we have to potentially offer is a welcoming space, indoor and outdoor, community space and place to connect.

Meeting Summary Approvals:

- The members unanimously approved the 8/13 and 9/18 meeting summaries and to defer approval of the 8/21 summary until the next meeting.

Other Business/Comments:

Bobbie: there are a couple of holes in our recommendations. For the barn complex- we didn't really talk about the property as far as future use. As David mentioned, one option is to sell it, perhaps we need to separate the land from the barn, and we could take another temperature.

Dale: I think the barn is a huge topic.

Bobbie: think of it from a recommendation level, so when we are drafting the Vision Plan, these are the view points and considerations that came out. What is the next step? I am informed every time we talk, if you were able to wave your magic wand, what would you want to see?

Glenmont: a hub – community centered, public uses and access, what kind of items would you like to see? How about housing?

Not get into the weeds of those houses, whether they are viable, should be sold separately, etc. But thinking of the TOB with this housing market, we might need to focus on housing for farmers, higher levels,

Stuart: Let's re-frame it – as we go into talking about the barn portion. This is all evolving, this is all entrepreneurial work, 100%. It's what we need to send us forward. David recognizes that building the partnerships takes time. His expectation is that this whole plan isn't going to be implemented in just a year. Recognizing the reality that this doesn't all happen overnight, is important.

David: The Supervisor mentioned that the two things he is interested in seeing in the Vision Plan is (1) options and (2) partners. Both in respect to the barn and in respect to the land.

Bobbie: the town isn't getting into the business of running a farm.

Public Comment: None.

Next HHFAC meeting is:

**Wednesday November 13, 2024 8am-9am
Delmar-Bethlehem EMS Building
114 Adams Street Delmar, NY 12054**

Meeting Adjourned at 9:15am