Chaffee Common Ground – Citizens Advisory Committee (CCG-CAC)

Minutes from Meeting on Tuesday October 8, 2024

Meeting Called to order at 3:00 p.m.

CCG-CAC Members present: **(all attended virtually)** Cindy Williams - Chair, Michael Hannigan – Vice-chair, Sydney Schnurr, Ben Lenth, Jim LaRue, Michael Fischer and Paul Muelle and Greg Felt - BOCC liaison. Also present Ben Doon, Administrative Support and Kim Marquis, Outreach Coordinator.
CCG-CAC Members absent: None

Agenda review
Cindy reviewed the agenda. Ben D will provide a financial report and projection of available funds for the next grant round. There will be discussion about the Ag Enhancement grant program and eligibility requirements to apply for funds from that program. Ben D will provide an update on revisions to the applications and rubrics based on Committee feedback from the last grant cycle. Ben D will present a proposed schedule for the next grant cycle in the spring. There are two organizations eligible for new partnerships, Chaffee Fire for the Wildland/Mitigation Coordinator position, which supports Chaffee Chips and ag operators during ditch burning season, and GARNA for the porta-potties program, which currently provides around 27 porta-potties across public lands in the county. Common Ground will make a presentation to the Board of County Commissioners on December 10th which will recap the first six years of the program. Kim said this year's Annual Report will focus on the $9.2 million of investments the program has made since the first grant cycle in 2019. Rather than focusing on one year, this year's Annual Report will provide an overview of the program's accomplishments over the last six years. The Annual Report will be presented at the Commissioners meeting on December 10th.

Approval of consent agenda
The meeting agenda and minutes from the April 24 and April 30 meetings were approved as presented. Michael H motion. Syd second. Vote unanimous.

Financial Report
Ben D said there is about $1,360,000 currently obligated for 2025 with multi-year grants and approved partnerships. For the spring grant cycle, he proposed including the sales tax collections through June 2025. Checks will be sent to grantees by late June, which shouldn't impact the field season for grantees. One thing to note is that in 2025 the final $450,000 payment to the National Forest Foundation's Upper Ark Forest Fund project will be made and that 5-year obligation will be off the books after that. That project received the largest grant made to date by Common Ground. Including June's collection, about $550,000 will be available for grants and new partnerships. This is projecting flat growth, which is what has been seen over the past year. This would maintain the high level of sales tax collections the county has seen over the last couple of years. The .25% sales tax brought-in almost $1,800,00 in 2023 and

2024 is looking to be about the same. Proposed new partnerships could cost up to $100k, leaving around $450k available for the next grant cycle.

Cindy said in regards to federal land management agency budgets, the forest service currently has a hiring freeze, which is expected to continue for two years and they will not be able to hire seasonal staff next season. Jim asked how the inability to hire seasonals will impact the Rec Rangers program that has already been funded through a partnership. Cindy said even though the forest service received outside funding support for the seasonal staff, they still can't hire. The forest service is looking to partner with Colorado Parks and Wildlife to hire the positions and then the forest service will help manage the employees. The forest service is still trying to figure out how to get boots on the ground next season given the hiring freeze.

Kim said the partnership proposal from Chaffee Fire will include funding the Chaffee Chips program and not just the Wildland/Mitigation Coordinator position.

Cindy said new partnership agreements requests will come first, then the grant cycle will follow. Group consensus to hear updates on the existing partnerships, which would be Rec Rangers, Rec Adopters and Central Colorado Conservancy's Conservation Connection lease agreement program.

Ag Enhancement Grant Eligibility

Ben D said the Committee received a letter from the Upper Arkansas Conservation District (UACD) back in March about only "qualified properties" being eligible for an enhancement grant. The current policy only allows properties with a Conservation Easement or an agreement with the Conservation Connection program to be eligible for an Ag Enhancement grant.

The current policy states, "Agricultural Enhancement Grants are for projects that support agricultural operations on qualified properties with conservation agreements in place or on public lands."

The request in the letter from the UACD boiled down to the following, "The Board of the Upper Arkansas Conservation District respectfully requests all applications from agricultural producers (individuals as well organizations) for projects that enhance agriculture operations on working lands be considered for funding under the Sustainable Agriculture Enhancement program. Members of the UACD Board are local producers in the community and are happy to answer questions or provide additional information to the Common Ground Advisory Committee upon request."

The UACD letter is framed with the understanding that only properties with conservation easements are eligible when in fact agreements with the Central Colorado Conservancy's Conservation Connection program are eligible as well. During the last grant cycle, two Ag Enhancement grant pre-applications were denied because the properties did not have any form of conservation agreements in place. These two applicants were encouraged to apply for Ag Enhancement funds by the UACD. These denials drove the UACD to draft a letter to the Common Ground Committee asking for a policy change in regards to the Ag Enhancement grants. At that time, Common Ground was in the middle of a grant cycle and no changes would be made then, so the Committee decided to take-up this issue later in the year before the next grant cycle. The purpose of requiring some kind of conservation agreement on the property to be eligible for a grant comes from the desire to protect tax payer funded investments on private land to ensure that these properties will stay in agriculture after an improvement is made and not sold for a higher value post-improvement with the possibility that the property could be developed.

Ben L said he felt one of the places where this policy has been ambiguous is with ditch company applications where some of the properties served by the water are encumbered by an easement, some are on the conservation connection program and some have no protection at all, and that's fine for him. He'd like to revisit the entire notion that some level of protection be required to be eligible for a grant. The reason originally for a conservation agreement is that we know it will be a good investment, the property is already protected and it won't get dried-up or split-up later, but he thinks with this policy in place, we miss a lot of opportunities. He feels like the risk can be reasonably controlled in other ways through the rubric and evaluating the risk itself and still open up the program to make more properties eligible.

Cindy said she is still a little anxious about funding projects on ag lands that don't have any protections at all. If they get funded, then sell soon after, then that's all public money that has gone to benefit the buyer and seller. She'd like to acknowledge the property owners that have put easements on their land or enrolled in the conservation lease program. Becoming eligible for the Ag Enhancement program can be an incentive for a landowner to enroll in the conservation lease program.

Ben L said there are acreage minimums for the Conservation Connection program and that can leave other opportunities unserved.

Cindy said we are kind of effectively trimming out small ag less than 350 acres, but some of that is intentional, wanting to support the big ag properties and not necessarily the folks that are more hobby ag.

Ben D said unprotected ag properties are currently eligible for mini-grants.

Ben L said with conservation easements, we lean on the public benefits, but there are incidental benefits to the private landowner. The enhancements in value are incidental to the public benefit purposes.

Greg said he thinks the better thing would be to have some kind of reimbursement requirement if the use changes, but that we open it up to all bonafide ag producers. He said it is generally true that we want to support producers that have taken those conservation steps, but it is also true that the best conservation mechanism is successful agriculture. As long as the property stays in ag production for as long as the amortization of the value being provided, we are still supporting successful agriculture in our community. We have seen that when we provide support, it sometimes leads to additional conservation of agricultural lands. There should be as many doors open for success as possible. Not everyone has the opportunity to conserve due to multi-family ownership arrangements. The real goal is successful agriculture.

Ben L generally agrees and said there are a lot of reasons why certain operations can't enter into various types of conservation arrangements. He'd like to keep the claw-back clause as simple as possible. We should always have the ability to make exceptions.

Greg said the claw-back can be explored with the legal team at the county. He thinks there is a way to protect the taxpayers without it being too complicated.

Jim said he knows of several producers who could really use a little lift with some added money to get them to the next level. There are several younger producers that just can't get there, but they are right on the cusp. He'd like to see it opened up a little more, but with protections.

Proposal to change the Ag Enhancement eligibility to the following, "Agricultural Enhancement Grants are for projects that support agricultural operations, properties with any form of conservation agreements are preferred, but others are eligible. If property is sold out of Ag production within 5 years, then grant funds must be reimbursed." County legal will also be consulted to see if there are any red flags for this type of claw-back proposal. The claw-back can be enforced at the county's discretion depending on the costs and trade-off. Ben L made a motion to accept this proposed change. Jim second. Vote unanimous.

<u>Update to applications and rubrics</u>

Ben D said he updated the applications and rubrics based on feedback from the last grant cycle. Text and integer boxes were added for acres, treatment priorities and wildlife habitat tiers. A couple of application questions that asked for numerous things in one question were broken down to multiple shorter questions to better match the rubric. He added clarification on scenic views if a property is already under a conservation easement and these values are already protected. The question now asks how would the project enhance these existing values.

<u>Next grant cycle schedule</u>

Based on previous grant cycles, the proposed dates and deadlines for the spring 2025 grant cycle is:

- Wednesday January 15th – open grant applications in the portal
- Thursday January 23rd – Q&A with potential applicants
- Friday February 14th – pre-application deadline
- Friday March 28th – full proposals and mini-grants application deadline

Review of existing partnerships and new partnership proposals need to be added to the schedule. Schedule a January meeting for updates from the existing partnerships. 20 minutes per update.
In early February invite new potential partnerships to give a funding proposal and make decisions by the end of February.

Ben D will reach out to the partners and potential partner organizations to set-up the meetings. Cindy will coordinate potential dates with Ben D. A Doodle poll will be sent with potential dates and times for these meetings.

Michael H asked if any Committee member terms are expiring. On 1/31/25 terms are expiring for Cindy, Michael H and Syd. County Admin will publish an ad for volunteers to serve on the Committee sometime later in the fall. All expiring seats have to be advertised. If there are more candidates than open spots, the Committee will be asked to make recommendations. There will be a board term update and recommendation if needed on the agenda for the January meeting.

December 10th meeting with the Board of County Commissioners

Kim will present the Annual Report at the December 10th meeting and recap all the incredible work accomplished over the last six years. With Greg being termed out, a new commissioner will be the liaison to the Committee starting in mid-January. The two Commissioners elect will be present at the December 10 meeting. Tentative start time is 11:00 and lunch is being planned. All Committee members are encouraged to attend.

If any Committee members want to talk with Kim about the report before it is finalized, contact her via phone or email before Friday October 11th at 5:00 p.m.

Greg will present a conservation financing session at the CCI conference being held on Dec 2-4 in Jefferson County and he plans to have copies of the annual report for all commissioners in attendance.

Other Business

None.

Next Steps

December 10th meeting with the Board of County Commissioners
January TBD – partnership presentations
January 15th – open new grant cycle
January 23rd – portal presentation and Q&A with potential applicants
February TBD – new partnership proposals
February TBD – new partnership decisions
February 14th – pre-application deadline
March 28th – full proposal and mini-grant deadline
April/May – review application scores & make funding recommendations
June – funding recommendations for BOCC consideration

Public Comment

None.

Adjourn

Meeting adjourned at 4:30 p.m.