

City of Keene
New Hampshire

CONSERVATION COMMISSION
MEETING MINUTES

Monday, June 17, 2019

4:30 PM

**2nd Floor Conference Room,
City Hall**

Members Present:

Eloise Clark, Vice Chair
Councilor George Hansel
Kenneth Bergman
Brian Reilly
Denise Burchsted
Art Walker
Thomas Haynes, Alternate
Steven Bill, Alternate (arrived late)

Staff Present:

Rhett Lamb, Community Development
Director/Assistant City Manager

Members Not Present:

Alexander Von Plinsky, IV, Chair

1) Call to Order

Vice Chair Clark called the meeting to order at 4:30 PM.

Mr. Haynes was designated as a voting member in Chair Von Plinsky's absence.

2) Approval of Meeting Minutes – May 20, 2019

Mr. Walker moved to approve the minutes of May 20, 2019, which Mr. Reilly seconded and the Conservation Commission carried unanimously.

3) Informational

a. Subcommittee Reports

Mr. Haynes reported that he, Vice Chair Clark, and Mr. Reilly met as members of the Education & Outreach Subcommittee to discuss further ideas for upcoming activities:

1. Beech Hill – considered a natural history walk in the fall, with a celebration at the trailhead of the Beaugard acquisition. Ledge views will be best in the fall when leaves are down.
2. Goose Pond – considered a natural history walk/hike with someone like Jeff Littleton, to whom the Subcommittee has reached out. Considered events in every season, such as tracking in the winter. Mr. Haynes awaits the contact for the New England Mountain Bike Association from Mr. Bohannon to discuss opportunities with them. Opportunities incorporating Vice Chair Clark's experience doing natural work with kids are possible in the future. The Subcommittee discussed laying the groundwork to study how timber harvesting will affect birds. Mr. Reilly also reached out to additional contacts at Antioch University.

Mr. Bergman recalled an email from Steve Bill, who offered to lead a geological talk, which he has done a lot with students. Mr. Bergman contacted both Mr. Littleton and Michael Akresh, the new faculty member at Antioch, who is an ornithologist and bird ecologist. Mr. Akresh is still closely affiliated with research groups at UMASS Amherst. He specifically studies how human landscape modifications affect bird habitat and populations. His research team is working on a model using parameters – like habitat patch size and disturbance – to predict what will happen to the populations of different bird species. They are testing this model with previously collected data and the notion is to make this available through some platform so foresters, the City, and others can better understand bird populations.

Mr. Bergman said Mr. Littleton gave him data for two previous bird surveys at Goose Pond (2014 and 2018). In both years, they surveyed in May and June, the prime nesting and breeding period. He thought they were getting the order of 25-30 species in each study. He was unsure of all details and methodology; he and Mr. Littleton plan to talk in the near future. Laura Deming of the NH Audubon Society conducted the 2018 study; Mr. Bergman was unsure if that work was through a contract with the City. Mr. Akresh told Mr. Bergman that because this study will likely offer little novel data (more so pragmatic monitoring as events unfold) it could be less relevant for a thesis project. Mr. Akresh did say, however, there are Antioch students who could be retained if paid sufficiently for this work. Mr. Bergman said someone like Ms. Deming, who is a real professional, could be a good contractor for this study. Mr. Akresh also suggested the Antioch Bird Club, which consists of people who might be able to go there on a less formal basis and look for particular species at different times of year; Mr. Bergman said this would be better than nothing would. At this point in early stages, Mr. Bergman was unsure if the Commission wants a fund to create an internship for a student project. Antioch students pay for their academic credits, so it is difficult to request free work from students. He will finish going through data and get back to Mr. Littleton about certain procedural matters. Mr. Bergman thinks there could be a need to hire someone to do it in a systematic, responsible, disciplined way with a standardized methodology, which requires expertise. Another option is to seek Antioch Bird Club students or seek citizen scientists. There is baseline data to begin with.

Mr. Haynes asked if the baseline data is strong and recent enough to provide ground level data to push off an official study to generate comparison data for a few more years. Mr. Bergman did not think a bird study is an effort to sustain annually unless there is a different group that adopts this with great enthusiasm. He noted that the cutting would unfold over a period of about 10 years with one or two years off in the middle. The Commission will also need to determine if annual differences are significant enough to indicate a trend. He will explore further and continue discussions with Mr. Littleton and Mr. Akresh.

Vice Chair Clark added that the amount of territory covered in these past studies is unclear. Mr. Bergman has maps to share that demonstrate the 25-point count sites throughout almost every plot in the forest. There are models and methods available to evaluate this data. Mr. Reilly said Steve Lamonde leads the Antioch Bird Club and might be who conducted the study in 2014; Mr. Bergman will ask Mr. Littleton.

Mr. Haynes will bring this topic of a bird study to the Commission again at the next meeting. Next steps will be complicated and he needs to know more about the survey process itself. Mr. Bergman will also bring further research to the Commission at the July meeting; he noted this year's breeding season is almost over so considerations will be for the next few years.

Mr. Lamb reported that that Commission has approximately \$2,000 to spend annually and the Community Development Department has an internship fund for special projects that arise, like this one. There is no one place the Commission can turn to and budget this, unless using Land Use Change Tax Fund, which could be used reasonably for this purpose. He also pointed out that once the Commission moves into an active timberwork phase, there is a recommendation in the plan to develop an endowment fund. Perhaps the first study before cutting begins might have to be funded from another source, and after an endowment would fund a reasonable regular project like this. Mr. Bergman added that Commission membership turns over and this kind of project should have the purpose and methodology written clearly, so that future Commissions can replicate. Mr. Lamb said that might be the most valuable thing the Commission might do for the future of the forest is to create a protocol that applies whenever and wherever the money allows.

Mr. Haynes reported other possibilities such as the Source to Sea clean-up that the Commission could sponsor. He will follow-up with Mr. Bohannon on his ideas for Dinsmoor and Ladies' Wildwood parks; he suggested the Commission could visit those parks and consider opportunities to mitigate concern that they are developing into monocultures.

Mr. Haynes also stated that the Pocket Park on Church Street looks nice. Vice Chair Clark noted that the ribbon cutting ceremony for the Pocket Park will be soon and she will report the date to the Commission; she is happy to represent the Commission at the event and she hopes other members can attend as well.

Vice Chair Clark reported that the Aquatic Resource Mitigation (ARM) Subcommittee is transitioning into more of a land priority group and Mr. Lamb did not think the Subcommittee had met since the last Commission meeting.

4) Discussion Items

a. Wetland Permit – 55 Old Summit Road (Permit by Notification)

Mr. Lamb reported that this Permit by Notification is to clean out a series of surface water retention basins and ditches at the top of the hill at the Transfer Station. The basins (40'-50' diameter) are full of cattails and sediment that have accumulated over time. This permit is for regular maintenance to remove what has collected there; there are no invasive species present and as he knows, they will be cleaned out entirely and returned to their original profile. Vice Chair Clark recalled that the Commission could not provide input on Permits by Notification.

b. West Street Dam

Mr. Lamb reported that 30-40 people attended the public forum led by the Rhode Island School of Design research team; they were studying decision making around dams. There were students from the school present, which skewed the attendance. He invited feedback from the Commission members who attended: Chair Von Plinsky, Mr. Haynes, Mr. Bergman, and Mr. Walker. He said Ms. Kessler would distribute final documents for those who could not be there, when she receives them.

Mr. Bergman said he found the process valuable to hear others' perspectives. He asked if the event would be repeated on a larger scale for the whole community; Mr. Lamb said no. Mr. Walker said lessons from this event would be most compelling to focus on in a follow-up study. Mr. Bergman felt the activity went rapidly, he was unsure about language the leaders

used, and he could not rank the options without knowing more. He felt like a student in a class and suggested more advanced participation might have been helpful. He said the PowerPoint presentations were illegible because the text was so small. He noted that Emily Vogler – the researcher who brought this idea to the City – did not introduce herself. Overall, he found the process interesting and useful as an opportunity to hear from diverse people.

Mr. Bergman recalled that the event was open to the public and asked how it was advertised. Mr. Lamb said it was advertised through all of the City's normal networks, including a public service announcement. Mr. Lamb agreed that things about the event could have been done differently, but it was set up entirely by the research team. He said perhaps the City could have been more aggressive in spreading the word. He recalled that this event was not about what to do with the dam, but about how communities may learn about and make decisions about dams of importance to the community. The researchers also held several focus groups where community stakeholders were invited directly and offered \$40 to attend. They had other ways of measuring how people make decisions in addition to information collected at the public event. Though this was not a City process, there is no reason the Commission cannot use the data generated when the time comes.

Mr. Reilly asked why decisions about the dam are still a few years out. Mr. Lamb said it is mostly because of the potential high financial impact to the City, so it is later in the Capital Improvement Program (CIP), most likely for 2024. From NH Department of Environmental Services (DES) perspective, the dam is a ranked lower priority because it poses minimal danger to the public; it is not holding back a lot of water like the water supply dams, for example. Staff does not anticipate DES questioning the City about the West Street Dam soon because the City has been working actively to repair other dams like Babbidge, Goose Pond, and Robin Hood. Mr. Bergman said the visual and social effects would be significant so it is important that the City knows public opinions.

Vice Chair Clark was surprised there was not more advertisement by the researchers; with their resources, she anticipated posters around town, for example. Mr. Lamb and Mr. Bergman agreed they expected more from the event. He added that the visuals presented were not impressive. He added that possibly in part because he and Mr. Haynes were so rushed to sign the consent and sit down, that they did not get to experience the poster visuals of options around the room.

c. Greater Goose Pond Forest Stewardship Plan Implementation

By reading through past minutes, Mr. Lamb and Chair Von Plinsky discovered areas that needed following-up with Mr. Bohannon, who was not available to attend this meeting. Mr. Bohannon is the center of much of this information and process. Mr. Lamb will invite Mr. Bohannon and other stakeholders to the July meeting to continue this conversation.

Mr. Bill said that many in the community consider Goose Pond as close to a natural area as possible in the Keene system. His wife has walked there for 30 years and is disappointed to see the level of disruption with the dam work. Mr. Bill's wife found several clusters of rattlesnake plantain plants, which were destroyed by log piles from the dam work; this is not a rare species, but it was in a rare location. He said it is unfortunate to see uninformed people affecting natural areas. He hopes there will be greater consideration of wildlife impacted by dam work moving forward. Mr. Lamb agreed that the valuable expertise of the Commission could help curb these mistakes by writing concerns into permits and contracts in advance. Once the space is turned

over to the contractor, they use the information they have been given. At the end of the dam permitting process, especially for the road necessary to get to the dam, there were changes to the contract because the Commission found concerns about vernal pools. Mr. Bill suggested that as a part of the Master Plan, the Commission could visit proposed sites to check for unique features that could be impacted. Mr. Lamb said there is an upcoming contract for timber management and it will be important to flag these issues before work starts. Mr. Bergman said things like the National Heritage Bureau are a common way that communities and contractors identify species threatened in the state and nationally. He agreed that while this plan does not identify endangered or threatened species in the forest, there are many species valuable to the community.

Ms. Burchsted said the Commission usually sees these projects at the last minute, with poor drawings. She questioned how this Commission with expertise can be seamlessly integrated into this permitting/contract process, without creating more work for staff or slowing the process. Mr. Lamb agreed that if this Commission knows about a project with enough lead-time, they could develop base information for engineers and wetland planners. In his experience, once contractors know about important natural areas, they are willing to avoid them. He liked this idea, especially with the timber harvest work.

Ms. Burchsted said the Commission's agenda is built by things going out to permit; the Commission is driven procedurally by approvals. She suggested there might be ways to use the CIP to build big upcoming projects into the Commission's yearly/quarterly agendas. Mr. Lamb said that was a good suggestion with the Commission's focus on conservation of City lands. He said the Goose Pond Dam project might have come to the Commission earlier, whereas many road or bridge projects might be better handled by a permit. When a list of projects comes through the CIP, this Commission can determine if they rise to any level of concern.

Mr. Bergman recalled that the stewardship plan describes timber harvesting in stages with maps and dates. He suggested that a SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, & threats) team look at the earliest harvested patches to check for anything of concern. He questioned if there is sufficient lead-time to modify a contractor's approach. Mr. Lamb said it would work if the input were before the bidding process. Mr. Lamb said the plan lists at least 1.5 years before any bids for timberwork, but this is a good time to start looking at that first quadrant. He said there are a lot more details to discuss with Mr. Bohannon and other stakeholders in July.

Mr. Bill agreed that input from stakeholders who use the forest a lot would be important. He suggested that if there would already be disruption for the dam, that perhaps the first parcel for timberwork should align with that work, to minimize disruption for roads and access; there was discussion of roads for dam work access.

Mr. Haynes stated that this conversation highlights the need for this group to be looking at the Goose Pond forest to identify options to coordinate all of these aspects and identify preliminary work needed. He thinks the discussion with Mr. Bohannon will be important to understand how he envisions the process.

Ms. Burchsted suggested a site visit and Mr. Lamb agreed. If the group first identifies what areas of the forest they want to look at, Mr. Littleton is always an important resource.

Mr. Reilly suggested there should be a Goose Pond advisory group separate from this Commission, because Commission membership turns over every six years. He said it might be good to have longer-term members in a separate group to ensure ideas transition well.

d. Easement Monitoring – Schedule

Mr. Lamb recommended that this item stay on the agenda. He reported that Chair Von Plinsky is considering splitting responsibility between interested Commission members to monitor four or five easements annually, following a training with the help of the Monadnock Conservancy.

5) New or Other Business

Councilor Hansel requested more information and a presentation from the interim Airport Manager on the proposed fence at the airport. Mr. Lamb agreed it is a good time to start looking at that project.

Mr. Bergman said he understood the pressing FAA mandate for fencing to keep wildlife off airport runways, which is a consistent problem in Keene. Mr. Bergman recalled there were two fence alternatives listed in the Airport Master Plan and asked who will decide between the two options. Councilor Hansel and Mr. Lamb were unaware of who the Council will instruct to make that decision. Mr. Lamb recalled that the City only pays 5% of the total cost of these airport projects, the FAA and NHDOT pay for the rest. Mr. Lamb will report with more information in July because there are significant wetland impacts. Mr. Bergman noted rare bird species only observable from the shoulder of Airport Road. Councilor Hansel agreed that maintaining access to that shoulder for bird watching could help make Keene a destination, which is an important consideration.

Mr. Lamb recalled that Mr. Littleton's contract included a Geographic Information System story map, which is now available and he will share the link.

Mr. Lamb reported that the Beaugard property closing was scheduled for July 20.

6) Adjournment

Hearing no further business, Vice Chair Clark adjourned the meeting at 5:32 PM.

Respectfully submitted by,
Katriona Kibler, Minute Taker
June 21, 2019

Reviewed by Rhett Lamb, ACM/Community Development Director
Edits, Lee Langella