

City of Keene
New Hampshire

CONSERVATION COMMISSION
MEETING MINUTES

Monday, August 19, 2019

4:30 PM

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

Members Present:

Eloise Clark, Vice Chair
Art Walker
Brian Reilly
Councilor George Hansel
Steven Bill, Alternate
Thomas Haynes, Alternate

Staff Present:

Rhett Lamb, Community Development
Director/Assistant City Manager
Andy Bohannon/ Director of Parks, Recreation
& Facilities

Members Not Present:

Alexander Von Plinsky, IV, Chair
Kenneth Bergman
Denise Burchsted

1) Call to Order

Vice Chair Clark called the meeting to order at 4:30 PM and asked both alternate members present, Mr. Bill and Mr. Haynes, to act as voting members at this meeting.

2) Approval of Meeting Minutes – June 17, 2019

Mr. Bill provided a correction: on page 4 of 6, “Mr. Bill’s wife found a rattlesnake plantain plant, which was destroyed by log piles from the dam work...” should be corrected to, “Mr. Bill’s wife found several clusters of rattlesnake plantain plants, which were destroyed by log piles from the dam work...”

Mr. Bill moved to approve the minutes of June 17, 2019 as amended, which Councilor Hansel seconded and the Conservation Commission carried unanimously.

3) Informational

a. Subcommittee Reports

Mr. Haynes provided three updates. First, he asked if Commission members wanted to participate with him – representing the Commission – at the Source to Sea event on September 28. He proposed signing-up for the event as the Commission and choosing a designated area to work that members are passionate about. Vice Chair Clark noted that Eric Swope manages cleaning an area of Beaver Brook down the channel and that there is an active crew that works along the Ashuelot River through Swanzey. The Ashuelot River Local Advisory Committee (ARLAC) has participated in the past; the Keene Unitarian Universalist Church is also doing clean up by boat into Swanzey.

Vice Chair Clark, Mr. Walker, and Mr. Bill reported that they would not be available to participate. Mr. Haynes will sign-up and represent the Commission at the event.

Second, Mr. Haynes reported that Jeff Littleton is willing to lead a natural history walk through the Greater Goose Pond Forest. Mr. Littleton led a similar walk when developing the Goose Pond Forest Stewardship Plan. Mr. Littleton's preferred dates are October 19 and 26. Mr. Bohannon offered to get an update on the current construction project, which is scheduled to finish around that time, and so the new parking lot might be available. Mr. Haynes and Mr. Bohannon agreed to follow-up together as this would be a great way to kick-off the end of the project.

Third, Mr. Haynes reported that he and Vice Chair Clark agreed to lead some kind of educational walk on Beech Hill to acknowledge the Beauregard property acquisition. Mr. Lamb said he thinks it is wonderful that the Commission is pushing outreach and connecting citizens to the land around them. He recalled that the Heritage Commission searched for a mission for years after an intensive long-term project; they found a new mission of educating the community, such as leading a recent great session on urban/carriage barns. He thinks focusing on outreach is a way to enhance the Commission's role in the community. Mr. Lamb thanked Mr. Haynes and all members for their work. Mr. Bill said he would be honored to lead a glacial walk at Goose Pond.

b. ARLAC Thank You Letter

Vice Chair Clark hoped members read this and the subsequent two thank you letters for donations or renewed memberships this year.

c. NH Association of Conservation Commissions Thank You Letter

The Commission renewed membership and provided a donation to remain as members in good standing but without the assumption of remaining active members.

d. Society for the Protection of NH Forests Thank You Letter

e. 75 Swanzey Factory Road – Expedited Review

Mr. Lamb reported that the town of Swanzey submitted this project in Keene. The source water for Wilson Pond is created by a diversion dam downstream of the stone arch bridge on the Branch River, from which the small spillway is visible that pushes water into and through Wilson Pond. Chair Von Plinsky and staff signed an expedited permit and a letter came back with comments from DES saying the permit application needed to be updated with some information; that letter from DES was included in the meeting packet. Mr. Lamb said it is an interesting manmade waterway that was created to push water into Wilson Pond for power generation at the end of Swanzey Factory Road.

4) Discussion Items

a. Greater Goose Pond Forest Stewardship Plan Implementation – Andy Bohannon, Director of Parks, Recreation & Facilities

Mr. Bohannon reported that he is talking with Peter Poanessa (who was a part of the plan development) to create signage for the various trail markers. Mr. Bohannon said the first funds will be available in the Capital Improvement Program (CIP) to begin plan implementation will be available in fiscal year 2021, which begins July 1, 2020. This is later than Mr. Bohannon thought,

but the extra time allowed him look at the Recreation Trails Grant program for matching funds and to begin the Goose Pond fund. He will begin submitting grant proposals in May 2020 to prepare for the fiscal year beginning. When funds are available, he plans to blaze the various trails with signage regarding the City of Keene and the New England Mountain Bike Association Keene-Brattleboro chapter, who are very active in the park (e.g., volunteering to resolve two bridge issues in the forest this fall). Mr. Bohannon said his focus to implement the plan currently is to improve the loop trail around the pond. Subsequently, he will focus farther from the pond. He said the dam project is coming along nicely.

Mr. Walker asked for more details on the trail improvements. Mr. Bohannon said some surface drainage work is needed primarily on the backside of the pond, where new board bridge improvements will be accessible to walk one-by-one and provide better bike access. He said additional work is needed to widen some canopy areas and allow people to walk side-by-side; the Stewardship Plan calls for 6' – 8' wide canopies. Mr. Walker asked if there is any thought of relocating parts of the trail. Mr. Bohannon recalled a few years ago when parts of the trail were relocated with the summer youth's program but the feedback was negative and people continued walking where it is muddy. Those muddy areas will be mitigated with step stone bridges and other improvements. Mr. Walker mentioned a part of the trail also on the backside of the pond and on a steep hill that seems like an invitation to erode faster. Mr. Bohannon would need to look back at the recommendations for that section of trail. Mr. Lamb confirmed that the Community Development Department webpage links to the full Stewardship Plan and two large appendices.

Mr. Haynes recalled questions about how this Commission should be involved with implementing this overall stewardship of the property. Mr. Bohannon said he thought briefly about creating a City body moving forward to guide stewardship implementation; he has mentioned this to the City Manager. He admitted that the recently completed library project has overshadowed this stewardship implementation to this point. Moving forward, he said there are a lot of planned priorities but what lacks are passive recreation and open space components. He recalled a new project adopted by City Council and identified in the CIP this year that allocates \$25,000 of seed money annually for open space and trails, which could include such programs at Goose Pond.

Mr. Bohannon said that what this Commission did with the Goose Pond Stewardship Plan was significant in moving forward Keene's goals to connect trails across the City. The Beauregard property acquisition, for example, will contribute to connecting City lands. He will work with Mr. Lamb, Community Development staff, and Commission members to develop a public body to guide implementation. He considered the similar example of the Ashuelot River Park Advisory Board (ARPAB), which is more project based, with some maintenance funding, and a great plan coming forward in the spring. Being abundant in open space, he also suggested that perhaps organizationally these various groups could merge into some sort of open space management program.

Mr. Lamb agreed that there are great opportunities for partnerships between all the stewards of City lands, whether as a committee or as the reassignment of City stewardship groups like the ARPAB into a larger effort across the City. Whether participating on a stewardship committee or starting that process with Council, the Commission wants to work with Mr. Bohannon to help implement this plan smoothly. In particular, the Commission wants to help develop baseline studies before the recommended work occurs; if the Commission does not know current habitat conditions, for example, they would be unable to determine if the plan advised well. Mr. Lamb said a lot right now

is a matter of timing things to work together. Mr. Bill asked if there is a timeframe for any timber clear cuts at Goose Pond. Mr. Bohannon said no, not in the next fiscal year.

Mr. Haynes clarified that he was not trying to push Mr. Bohannon but to indicate that the Commission wants to be a part of plan implementation at Goose Pond. Mr. Bohannon said he did not sense the Commission pushing him; he has talked about many of these ideas with Mr. Lamb for a long time and it is great to see things moving in a positive direction. Mr. Bill noted many unusual plants destroyed during the dam projects, which could have been avoided if the Commission had been consulted in advance.

Mr. Lamb and Mr. Bohannon will return with more ideas at the September meeting, which will be a good time to revisit open space and trails in the CIP.

b. Request for Letter of Support – The Nature Conservancy Surry Mountain Project

Vice Chair Clark welcomed Patrick Hackley from The Nature Conservancy (TNC), who congratulated the Commission for their creativity and energy. He recalled a hike that some Commission members participated in. This is a major effort on behalf of the NH TNC to acquire the Casagrande property, which abuts the Greater Goose Pond Forest; the owners and TNC have considered a conservation outcome for many years for the 1,360-acre property. The Conservancy has an option to purchase the property and will ideally do so by end of year. Formalizing the purchase of sale agreement for \$3.5 million is a huge fundraising effort for TNC. The first public hike was to garner support for this effort to conserve the unusual property with diverse terrains, topography, lightly harvested timber types, and the headwaters of seven streams flowing into the Ashuelot watershed.

Mr. Hackley shared another map of the Monadnock region to demonstrate how The Nature Conservancy looks for areas to preserve and connect resilient corridors that help wildlife adapt to changing conditions. This project would connect almost 50,000 acres of unfragmented forest, significantly contributing to conservation in the region. Mr. Hackley said TNC is collaborating with other agencies, such as the NH Department of Environmental Services (DES) ground water grant program and the NH Fish and Game, which has federal funds to conserve lands and promote wildlife habitat. Mr. Hackley said the Surry Mountain Dam is a part of Keene's watershed. He explained that he was at the meeting to introduce the Commission to this project and seek a letter from the City to support TNC is seeking \$330,000 from the NH Drinking and Groundwater Trust Fund.

Mr. Hackley provided a map of the wellhead protection area that TNC wants to conserve, which contributes to the overall health and quality of the watershed that feeds Keene's aquifer. He provided another map demonstrating how the property feeds many streams and abuts conserved area to the west. Mr. Hackley said a wellhead is a topographical area that contributes to drinking water; it is groundwater flow to a producing well. A wellhead protection area is a circle whose radius depends on the maximum daily amount of water drawn from a well. It is a calculation NH DES uses to determine the amount of land that contributes to well water aquifers. Mr. Lamb commented that he had never seen such a large wellhead protection area. All calculations for Keene have been much smaller and he wants to know if the City should be paying attention. Mr. Bill noted that City wells are gravel and sand, and thus more readily replenished, whereas the wells in question are bedrock. Mr. Lamb recommended writing the letter and mentioned the City's agreement with the Bretwood Golf Course for chemical use because Keene's wellhead crosses their property.

Mr. Hackley said there would be another tour of the Casagrande property on October 5; he will share details with Mr. Lamb. Mr. Reilly said the first tour began from access at Gilsum Road and asked if that would be the same. Mr. Hackley believed the next hike would begin from the north; he agreed that the previous tour saw 70 participants who began from the south and split in two groups going east and west. He said there are nice trails on the property. TNC is also seeking support from the Surry and Gilsum Conservation Commissions. Councilor Hansel noted that state maps show high soil quality on that property. Mr. Hackley had not seen a soil map yet, but said it is the best oak site for growing timber and there are some areas with deeper soils that accommodate sugar maple, yellow birch, and white ash hardwood that are uncommon in NH. Councilor Hansel said this project stuck out to him because of the wildlife corridor connectivity, which Vice Chair Clark said is called for in the wildlife action plan for this region.

Mr. Reilly moved for the Conservation Commission to write a letter of support for this project, which Councilor Hansel seconded.

Mr. Lamb, the Chairman, and Vice Chair Clark will work on the letter and send it to David Patrick at TNC, ideally before September 13. Mr. Hackley thanked the Commission for their support; NH is lucky to have large tracts of land like these connecting habitats such as the 300-acre tract east of Goose Pond that Vice Chair Clark mentioned. Mr. Lamb said the Commission had authority to write the letter without Council approval.

The motion to send a letter of support passed unanimously.

c. Easement Monitoring – Schedule

Mr. Lamb said this agenda item is a placeholder to remind everyone this is still something for which the Commission is responsible. He suggested beginning the effort later in the season with fewer leaves on the trees. He hopes all members will participate in monitoring the roughly four easements the City holds on private lands. There will be more discussion in September.

d. Airport Road Habitat

Mr. Lamb recalled this topic from the June meeting, when members questioned the CIP project at the airport, which calls for a wildlife fences to minimize the potential of frequent collisions with wildlife on runways. One design in the CIP suggests a fence in close proximity to the paved surface of Airport Road, for which Commission members expressed concern because it would prevent bird watching and general experience of the roadway as a recreational resource. Mr. Lamb said the Airport Master Plan (AMP) indicates this fence project is a very important one for the airport; wildlife strikes are very common and require constant staff management the City cannot accommodate. However, there is no immediate design or funding anticipated until fall 2022 at the earliest, but summer 2023 is more likely. Mr. Lamb said the AMP does propose another option with the fence closer to the runways, which would cross through wetlands. Therefore, there is a trade off with either option, which the Commission will need to consider when the time comes. Vice Chair Clark agreed saying that the NH Wildlife Action Plan points out those wetlands as highly valuable habitat for birding, in particular. Mr. Bill agreed that property has some of the best birding spots in the state.

Vice Chair Clark recognized Councilor Steve Hooper, who said it is good news the fence project is pushed to 2023 because it gives this Commission and Council time to think through the wetland and recreation impacts. He noted that the airport is in the ward he represents (Ward 1). He agreed that the fence along Airport Road would block the majority of bird nesting areas and therefore the ability of fledglings to cross the road. He suggested concentrating on the wetland alternative and a few designs that do not obstruct Airport Road access. Councilor Hooper will be hearing this matter in the new year (2020) as a Council member during the CIP updates, in advance of which Mr. Lamb will share these concerns with the airport staff liaison (Rebecca Landry).

Mr. Reilly asked if there could be NH DES resistance to a permanent fence through these wetlands and asked how much the FAA would have to approve a final plan. Mr. Lamb said those were good questions because a more impactful wetland impact will require a harder to get wetland permit and would be more expensive. Ultimately, it will be a Council decision and they will weigh the tradeoffs.

Mr. Haynes asked if there were wildlife studies that informed the AMP. Mr. Lamb was unaware of any, but wildlife impact airport operations daily. Councilor Hooper said he was unsure of the distance the fence must be from the runway per the FAA. He thinks it would be good to lobby for a balance between safety and conservation. The airport has sufficient support for a fence and the Commission should provide the counterbalance to support wildlife. Councilor Hansel said he was surprised the project was pushed back because the airport representatives expressed the urgency of a fence. He requested a site visit to the two proposed locations before winter. Councilor Hooper agreed and said an 8' high fence with three barbed wires along Airport Road would be unsightly. Mr. Lamb said the project was delayed due to unforeseen circumstances with the Taxiway A project. Mr. Lamb will report with more details as the project develops through the CIP (review January-March). The Commission will want to look at the CIP book as soon as it is published (December-January). The CIP is on a two-year cycle now, making this even more important. This matter will be on the September agenda.

5) New or Other Business

Vice Chair Clark reported that the pocket park on Church Street (near Carpenter Street) would be dedicated on Wednesday, August 21, 2019 at 9:00 AM and she invited members to attend.

Mr. Lamb said the Beauregard property acquisition is closing. He added that Ed Burke sent a letter to the City about acquiring a 50' wide strip of land off Chapman Road to prevent public access. Mr. Lamb said the parcel extends up too steep a slope to access. The parcel is contiguous with Beech Hill and therefore could be accessed from any existing parcels today. This matter would be back before City Council soon with recommendations from Mr. Bohannon and the City Attorney.

6) Adjournment – Next Meeting Date: September 16, 2019

Hearing no further business, Vice Chair Clark adjourned the meeting at 5:48 PM.

Respectfully submitted by,
Katryna Kibler, Minute Taker
August 22, 2019