

City of Keene
New Hampshire

MUNICIPAL SERVICES, FACILITIES AND INFRASTRUCTURE COMMITTEE
MEETING MINUTES

Wednesday, May 13, 2020

5:30 PM

Remote Meeting via Zoom

Members Present:

Janis O. Manwaring, Chair
Michael Giacomo, Vice-Chair
Randy L. Filiault
Bettina A. Chadbourne
Robert C. Williams

Staff Present:

Elizabeth A. Dragon, City Manager
Thomas P. Mullins, City Attorney
Don Lussier, City Engineer
Rebecca Landry, IT Director
William Dow, Deputy City Clerk
Terri Hood, Assistant City Clerk
Kürt Blomquist, Public Works Director
Andy Bohannon, Director of Parks,
Recreation & Facilities

Members Not Present:

Chair Manwaring called the meeting to order at 5:30 PM, welcomed the public, and explained the rules of procedure. She read the executive order authorizing a remote meeting: Emergency Order #12, issued by the Governor of the State of New Hampshire pursuant to Executive Order #2020-04. Pursuant to this order, Chair Manwaring called roll. All members reported that they were calling from their home addresses and alone in the rooms they were calling from, minus Councilor Williams, who was present with his son.

1) Background Presentation – Ammi Brown Trail – Public Works Department

The City Engineer, Don Lussier, provided background on this Cheshire Rail Trail (CRT) project, dating back to goals in the Keene 2010 Comprehensive Master Plan (CMP) to expand the CRT. The City Engineer said that actions began in earnest toward those goals in 2012 completing phase one of the project, with construction of the North Bridge extending the CRT to Whitcombs Mill Road. In 2014, the Keene Bicycle & Pedestrian Path Advisory Committee advised creating loops and connections to the CRT rather than more expansion. They felt the need to improve access from community neighborhoods to the trails that the City invested in already. In fall 2014, the City applied for a Transportation Alternatives Program (TAP) grant, which was approved in 2015. In 2015, phase two of the project was completed connecting the trail from Whitcombs Mill Road to Hurricane Road. With the TAP funding, phase three of the project began with design work in 2016 followed by three public engagement sessions in January/February 2017. In spring 2017, staff first presented recommendations for this project to the MSFI Committee. In fall 2019, City Council voted to approve reclassification of the Ammi Brown Road from a Class Six road to a Class A trail, between which there is a vague legal distinction allowing the City to continue maintenance and improvement of the trail once it is upgraded.

The City Engineer read project goals from 2014: “The objective of this project is to create safe access from neighborhoods in west Keene to the Rail Trail, establish a bicycle and pedestrian loop facility, and improve access to the downtown area. To accomplish this, concepts for connecting a connector gateway street – Park Avenue – commonly traveled by bicyclists and pedestrians to the Cheshire Rail Trail. The improvements proposed include in-street bicycle and pedestrian facilities along the streets mentioned, improved connections to the Rail Trail at two locations north of the Keene YMCA along the Class Six Ammi Brown Road and by Pitcher Street. Development of two trailhead facilities at Whitcombs Mill Road and Summit Ridge Drive/Summit Road are also included.”

The City Engineer continued using graphics to provide a broad overview of the CRT area in question. He demonstrated how the CRT extends from the North Bridge over Rts-9/10/12 to Whitcombs Mill Road and then to Hurricane Road, where it essentially ends today. Recreation can continue past the formal trail at Hurricane Road but the conditions are unmaintained. The City Engineer said that Phase Three of this project would extend the trail from its formal end at Hurricane Road north to Westmoreland, between which there are already some very rustic trailheads. Ammi Brown Road was constructed by the railroad in the 1800s. Legal access to the Ammi Brown Trail (ABT) is not where people use it today, which was part of the impetus for its reclassification and layout, to make the trail coincide with what the public think is already available for their use. An official trailhead would be established at Hurricane Road, from which the ABT would extend to the intersection of Summit Ridge Drive/Summit Road, where another trailhead would be established before connecting to the existing trail by Kohl’s. The City Engineer said that there was a lot of feedback from the public engagements as well as online and paper surveys, from which he received five phone calls and emails, a few letters, and 22 survey responses that all became part of the consultant’s design alternatives package.

The Director of Parks, Recreation & Facilities, Andy Bohannon, spoke about the funding sources for this project. Mr. Bohannon said that the ABT grant required a 20% community match, toward which Pathways for Keene donated \$30,000 on September 3, 2015 and the Monadnock Conservancy donated \$15,000 on November 5, 2015. While it has been several years, Mr. Bohannon thanked both organizations for their continued support of this project. Those donations left the City with a necessary \$37,323.10.

The City Engineer discussed trailhead parking. He said that through the public process, staff heard from neighbors about their existing parking concerns, specifically visitors parking at the Ammi Brown trailhead on Summit Ridge Drive. He explained that it is legal currently to park there on Summit Ridge Drive but only if the vehicle is off the road entirely and not blocking traffic. Still, the neighbors describe a nuisance and request a No Parking zone.

Chair Manwaring asked if a designated parking area is planned as part of the project. The City Engineer replied in the affirmative that a parking area and informational kiosks would be established at the intersection of Summit Ridge Drive/Summit Road. Signs would be placed at the beginning of the woods trail directing users to the acceptable parking area.

Councilor Williams referred to apparent gaps in the ABT on the map. The City Engineer said that the map shown was from the original 2014 grant application, which was not final. Those gaps represent areas of sufficient sidewalk or trail where no improvements are necessary.

Councilor Giacomo asked if the planned parking area would be established where there is already dirt parking at the Summit Ridge Drive/Summit Road intersection. He said the lot seems to be good size currently but questioned apparent wetlands behind the lot. The City Engineer confirmed that the lot would be established at the dirt area in question. However, only part of that lot is in the City right-of-way and the rest is privately owned. The City Engineer said there is sufficient space for the City to establish a formal parking area but the lot is not yet formally designated. The City Engineer could not confirm whether the adjacent area was true wetland, but said there is an identified drainage problem in the area, for which the City is working with the property owner to fix and protect City infrastructure. Councilor Giacomo said it indeed appeared that a spring runoff would envelop the road there, which the City Engineer said has happened in years past with periods of standing water destroying the road over time.

Councilor Giacomo noted that visitors are already parking inappropriately at the trailhead and have for a long time. He asked if there would be signs informing visitors that they cannot park at the trailhead on Summit Ridge Drive. The City Engineer said that he and Mr. Bohannon agreed that it is a great location for advertising and wayfinding signs directing users to the correct parking lot once constructed.

Chair Manwaring requested public comment and recognized Mike Kowalski (of Swanzy), who leads an informal Monadnock regional collaborative trying to improve Rail Trails throughout the region. Mr. Kowalski said that he lived on Summit Ridge Drive for 15 years near this trailhead and said that he saw no excessive parking. Still, he said he understands the current situation and thinks the proposed parking lot at the Summit Ridge Drive/Summit Road Intersection would handle traffic because it is not too far from the trailhead. He supported restoring the ABT to increase bike traffic on the CRT because the rocky and washed out conditions make it unsafe currently for cyclists to pass through. Mr. Kowalski thinks the City should do everything to promote citizen use of the CRT and therefore recreation, active living, and public health. He said that the seven-mile Ammi Brown-Park Avenue CRT loop is a great weekend activity for families.

Chair Manwaring heard the next three related agenda items before hearing a staff recommendation and voting on the matter.

2) Edgar Hastings/Summit Ridge Association – Ammi Brown Trail Entrance

Chair Manwaring recognized Edgar Hastings, President of the Summit Ridge Association. He represented the association's three-member board and 26 units. He said the association supports continued improvement of the Cheshire Rail Trail and Ammi Brown Trail. Still, they are concerned that as these improvements progress traffic would also increase. He said that without sufficient enforcement of No Parking at the trailhead there would be users who choose to still park there inappropriately. He said that long-time users see parking at the trailhead as their right. Mr. Hastings submitted a letter to the City from Mr. Mueller, who endures most of the traffic. Mr. Hastings said that cars park at the trailhead at all times

of the year, day, and night, which is both a safety issue and nuisance to private property owners who withstand noise of car fobs, turning around in their driveways, parking on lawns, and blocking driveways.

Mr. Hastings said that the City requested an easement from the Summit Ridge Association to continue this project. He said that the association is in favor and want to cooperate dependent on sufficient enforcement of parking in the designated area. He cited examples of private property owners being rebuked for kindly requesting that trail users move their cars to appropriate areas. Mr. Hastings said that without proper enforcement of No Parking areas as the trail is completed and advertised, that residents' quality of life would continue being negatively affected and there are concerns that property values could decline.

3) Debra & Mike Hart – Ammi Brown Trail Entrance

Chair Manwaring recognized Mike Hart, who thanked Mr. Hastings for representing the Summit Ridge Association well. Mr. Hart said he lives directly across from the trailhead, has used the trail for 45 years, and therefore has firsthand knowledge of the situation. He never wants people to stop using the trail because it is a fantastic area. Still, he said parking is a problem and it has been worse this year with people out of work. He said that the New England Mountain Bike Association has publicized the area and it is common to see 20-50 bikes go up the trail in a day, which he said he has no problem with, but many people feel entitled to park in the road, on lawns, and blocking driveways. On four occasions, he has called the cops because of vehicles parked with four tires on the road and in one situation, two cars parked back-to-back on a corner, which was dangerous for vehicles and pedestrians. Mr. Hart said that on all four occasions he was impressed with how quickly the police responded, but disappointed that they took no action. He requested sufficient signage at the trailhead directing users to the parking area as well as police enforcement of parking rules by the Summit Ridge Condominiums.

4) Nancy Sporborg – Ammi Brown Trail Entrance

Ms. Sporborg was not present.

Chair Manwaring welcomed public comment and recognized Gary Tochtermann (of 58 Skyline Drive, Keene), who said he wanted to provide a few facts. He said that the trailhead is only approximately 70' from the north side of the road to the building where Mr. Mueller and Mr. Hart live. He said that people park in yards on both sides of the street. Mr. Tochtermann thinks the plan for a parking lot is great, but questioned how to make people use the after years of no enforcement. He said that there are already some signs saying where the trail is, but there are no regulatory No Parking signs, whereas on Eastern Avenue, he said the road is wider with homes further from the road and yet there are No Parking signs there. Mr. Tochtermann said he heard that the proposed parking on Summit Road would be the largest of any Cheshire Rail Trail trailhead parking, which he thinks is a good idea. He said it makes the most sense for there to be regulatory No Parking signs and immediate enforcement even before project completion because changing long-time habits is challenging. Without enforcement, Mr. Tochtermann said that inappropriate parking would continue, with damage to private property, threats to public safety, and the dissatisfaction of many homeowners. He hopes that proper enforcement will make this project a success.

The Public Works Director, Kürt Blomquist, added to earlier staff comments saying that it was always the intention for the dirt area in question on Summit Road to become a No Parking area upon completion of this project. He recognizes that it would take time for people to change habits. He explained that to establish an enforceable No Parking area on both sides of Summit Ridge Drive—from Summit Road to Skyline Drive—it must be written into City Code, which is why staff recommended moving forward with drafting an Ordinance.

The Public Works Director said that if the MSFI Committee made that recommendation at this meeting then the recommendation would go to City Council for a vote to draft an Ordinance, then staff would draft the Ordinance for Council consideration before coming back to the MSFI Committee, and then back to Council for final consideration of adoption. Due to timing, staff suggested that the Committee authorize at this meeting drafting an Ordinance to go to Council at the same time that they hear this Committee's recommendation. This would be possible because the Council agenda package would have a review first of this Committee's report before they are presented a draft Ordinance. He thinks the Council would support this process and have sufficient time to review the proposed Ordinance. If MSFI Committee made that recommendation to City Council, then the proposed draft would return to this Committee for review on May 27 before a final Council vote on June 4. As such, there could be legal authority to install signs and enforce No Parking as soon as June 5.

Chair Manwaring asked if there was a way to enforce No Parking on only one side of street while this process continues. The Public Works Director said there are general parking rules that vehicles must be parked completely off the road but without an Ordinance designating No Parking areas, the City can do nothing to enforce. Through the recommended process however, there could be No Parking on both sides of the road June 5. Councilor Filiault agreed with expediting the process. He walks the road past the trailhead daily, that there are cars everywhere on and off the road, and agreed that there are more people out right now.

Vice Chair Giacomo made the following two motions, both of which Councilor Filiault seconded, and passed by a unanimous roll call vote.

With a vote of 5-0, the Municipal Services, Facilities & Infrastructure Committee moved to accept the communications as informational.

With a vote of 5-0, the Municipal Services, Facilities & Infrastructure Committee recommended that the City Manager be authorized to do all things necessary to develop and submit for consideration an Ordinance for the establishment of No Parking on Summit Ridge Drive from the intersection of Skyline Drive to Summit Road.

There being no further business, Chair Manwaring adjourned the meeting at 6:21 PM.

Respectfully submitted by,
Katrnya Kibler, Minute Taker
May 14, 2020