

City of Keene
New Hampshire

ASHUELOT RIVER PARK ADVISORY BOARD
MEETING MINUTES

Tuesday, May 5, 2020

4:00 PM

Remote Meeting Via Zoom

Members Present:

Arthur Winsor, Chair
Councilor Steve Hooper, Vice Chair
George Foskett
Dave Whaley
Suzanne Krautmann
Paul Bocko

Staff Present:

Andy Bohannon, Director of Parks,
Recreation & Facilities

Members Not Present:

Judy Sadoski
Thomas Haynes, Alternate

Mr. Bohannon read the authority to hold a remote meeting: Emergency Order #12, issued by the Governor of the State of New Hampshire pursuant to Executive Order #2020-04.

1) Welcome & Call to Order

Chair Winsor called the meeting to order at 4:07 PM. Mr. Bohannon called roll and all members reported that they were phoning alone from their home addresses. Mr. Bohannon said this meeting was an opportunity to engage with the Conway School students assigned to this project in the park. The students—Samantha Pelkes, Amanda Smith, & Katherine Holder—were also attending via Zoom, alone from their home addresses.

2) Conway School Stakeholder Engagement Session #1

The Conway School of Sustainable Landscape Design students led a presentation before a question and answer engagement session. Ms. Pelkes began by thanking all for attending. She said that she, Ms. Smith, and Ms. Holder are tasked with assessing the ecological resilience of Ashuelot River Park (ARP).

Ms. Pelkes first discussed what makes a public space resilient and how that resilience can benefit the community. Ms. Pelkes defined resilience loosely as how well a place or system can overcome a disturbance and persist in the future. She said that resilient parks could benefit communities by providing cooling effects, clean water and air, and access to outdoor spaces, which improves mental and physical health.

Ms. Pelkes continued by using a map of the park to demonstrate the area of interest for this project, which is focused on the Arboretum at Ashuelot River Park and the former Rachel Marshall (RM) Learning Lab across the bridge.

Ms. Pelkes explained that the Conway School students are enrolled in a 10-month master's program in ecological design, through which they work on real projects with real clients to grapple with complex design and planning problems. For example, past Conway School students have worked in Keene on the Ashuelot Greenspace Master Plan to redesign the unused parking lot, as well as the Carpenter Street Field (now the Patricia T. Russell Park), which has led to a \$1.5 million project beginning fall 2020.

Next, Ms. Holder explained goals for the Conway School project at ARP. The students are assessing the park through the lens of climate resilience to address three main goals: 1) revitalize a community treasure, 2) reinvigorate community involvement in the park, and 3) enhance the ecological function and services of the park. To achieve those goals, Ms. Holder listed the project tasks:

- Ensure ongoing maintenance and inventory of garden bed plots to ensure a sustainable and climate resilient landscape
- Increase accessibility to all places and facilities within the park
- Provide ideas for increasing educational opportunities within the park
- Explore methods for erosion control along river banks
- Develop a management plan for invasive species
- Incorporate more opportunities for seating
- Assess how resilient the Arboretum and RM Outdoor Learning Lab are to climate change
- Assess what the park will look like in the future with climate change

Ms. Smith continued explaining why it is important to assess the park's ecological resilience. She noted that the City of Keene acknowledges that climate change is and will affect the City, which is clear in a quote she read from Keene's 2010 Comprehensive Master Plan: "Keene is already feeling the impact of a changing climate. From more frequent and worse flooding, to changes in annual snowfall, to the infestation of non-native plant and animal species, to the increase in high-heat-index days and poor air-quality days, the community has come to recognize that these changes are affecting the community's built, natural, and social environments."

Ms. Smith displayed a photo of rescue workers seeking stranded people via boat on Water Street during a 2005 flood. Such floods and other extreme weather events and natural disasters have tripled since the 1970s. In addition to weather changes, climate change poses risks to human health through vector-borne diseases, heat related illnesses, poor air quality, and impacts to mental health. The park faces potential climate change impacts such as flood damage or obstruction of uses, loss of native species, risk of vector-borne illnesses, and increased conflict or risks near the dam related to heat waves such as injuries. Ms. Smith said that public parks provide numerous ecological services that contribute to a resilient community, such as flood control, mitigation of the heat island effect, and contributing to clean air. Still, these municipal parks are vulnerable to the aforementioned climate impacts and so are the services that parks provide to communities.

Ms. Holder began a discussion with the Board and used various questions as prompts. First, she shared ground rules for the conversation: speak freely, there are no stupid questions, own your ideas with "I" not "we," follow the moderator's guidance, and have fun!

Question 1: What aspects of the park (generally) work well or do not work well? Have you faced any issues with accessing/using the park? Do the educational components work/how can they be improved?

Mr. Foskett was eager to hear the students' thoughts on how to incorporate memorials in the park. He said that many people have donated funds but there are no clear ideas yet for the best use of those funds for memorials in the arboretum. To date, Mr. Foskett said there have been some memorials in the form of benches with name plaques and the cobblestone dedications, which have been the biggest revenue source to date for the arboretum. These cobblestones, benches, and other donations are managed by the Friends of the Arboretum at Ashuelot River Park. He asked what form the students think that memorials should take, what locations are best, and how donations should be used for memorials. He said that was his main concern at this meeting. Ms. Smith said they had not yet investigated memorial details, as those recommendations would evolve as the project unfolds.

Mr. Foskett said there are many trails running through the park and he wanted to see the arboretum become a destination for trail users from the surrounding area. Additionally, he said that the park is 30 years-old and needs refurbishing. It began with 6" diameter trees that are now 2' in diameter. It began as a sun garden and is now a shade garden, which needs replanting. Ms. Smith said that those concerns would be included in their analysis. She said this meeting was an opportunity to seek input to generate a broad picture of the park's needs. More design solutions would be proposed at the next engagement session.

Chair Winsor said that many trees in the arboretum are overgrown or doing poorly and he hopes the students will consider what needs to change to remedy overcrowding. He added that the park is used poorly sometimes to a detriment, which this Board needs advice to manage in a tasteful way to not drive away good use of the park and protect the park as best possible.

Regarding memorials, Ms. Krautmann stated that she sent photos to Mr. Bohannon via email from the Sandhills Community College Horticultural Gardens in NC, where they have abundant stationary garden features, like statutes, that could provide examples of memorial possibilities.

Regarding Chair Winsor's comments about poor use of the park, Councilor Hooper noted that he and other City Councilors have wondered about reintroducing a public toilet to the park and he wondered if the students could assess that possibility. Mr. Bohannon said that the idea would be considered. He recalled that there was once a composting toilet now closed several years due to a drug overdose therein. As the park rebuilds with a goal to bring more people back, he thinks it is a good time for this group to revisit the possibility within this project.

Mr. Bocko said that the resilience focus is perfect because there are growing challenges managing certain features of the park, which has been wonderfully accessible for 30 years. He was happy to see the former RM site on the list of priorities, as he was the director of that program in the past, and he hopes to see that area stay for educational opportunities. Regarding education, Mr. Bocko referenced a behind-the-scenes minimal-impact Quest in the park, which is like a treasure hunt. He manages the Quest and thinks that following this project there is an opportunity to revise the Quest to focus on resilience, which could be a way to highlight the project's work and promote exploring the area without constructing more signage. A school group could develop the Quest, as most past Keene Quests were developed. He hopes there will be more chances to brainstorm educational opportunities specifically. He said there was once significant activity in the RM portion of the park,

that the project has a strong legacy, and that he hopes the area will come into focus again. He imagined opportunities for Keene State College (KSC) and Antioch University students to participate in developing and using the space.

Regarding education, Mr. Whaley wondered if the students could identify a mechanism to assess whether the bat houses are being noticed/appreciated so the Board can understand whether their signage, etc. need improvement. Mr. Bohannon said the houses have been installed for some time. He needs to communicate with Ingrid Evans to determine whether they were installed properly; he received an email to the contrary from a member of the public saying the houses should be facing south and are too near to trails/humans, both of which would deter bats from using the houses. Mr. Bohannon and Councilor Hooper will follow-up.

Councilor Hooper said that the four bat houses would increase educational opportunities in the park, which was an incentive for the Board supporting the project. He agreed that the RM area does not need to return to full fruition, but he does want emphasis on the area, which is now full of many native plant and bird species that enhance sightings for nature lovers.

Chair Winsor recognized Libby McCann, who was calling alone from Westmoreland. Ms. McCann is a professor of environmental studies and education at Antioch. She was on the 2010 Keene Comprehensive Master Plan Advisory Committee and said it was good to see the resource used. She is excited about the park and the great work this group is doing. She commented on the wonderful potentials in the RM area for wildlife and education. While the site is accessible, she wants to talk to organizations in the community to ensure accessibility for all. She said this was an exciting opportunity to connect and learn about the project. Ms. McCann said the same 2010 Master Plan also informed creation of the local Community Garden Connections program, which offers financial and other support. For example, the program supported the garden beds behind ARP at Harpers Acres as well as local rain garden installations.

Mr. Foskett questioned whether the students would investigate invasive species growing in the park like Japanese knotweed. Mr. Bohannon and Ms. Holder replied in the affirmative, stating that the students want to do more research before providing any suggestions.

Chair Winsor noted that soon QR code signs would be installed on trees in the park with species information and he wants to see related educational opportunities, with resilient signage and information on wildlife and native species. He thinks the original educational intent of the RM area should continue.

Question 2: How do you define resilience? How can the arboretum support a more resilient community? How can the arboretum be more resilient in the future?

Ms. Krautmann said that updated plantings would help the park be more resilient. Mr. Bohannon agreed and suggested featuring in the arboretum more native NH plants so visitors see examples of what plants they can acquire locally would look like in their yards. In that way, the arboretum can be an example to the community of how to adapt to the climate.

Ms. McCann defined resilience as the ability to bounce back from disturbance but in a state different from the original. She said that resilience could be at different scales: personal, community, ecological. She wondered how the arboretum could contribute to resilience at all three scales through community engagement, plantings, and volunteerism. She envisioned opportunities

for multiple stakeholders to participate. She was excited about the prospects and would be happy to be of service where applicable in the future.

Mr. Foskett said that replanting occurred along West Street in recent years, but the Board has waited to replant near Starbucks and the Mascoma Bank parking lot. He said that the Board was waiting until this project to hear the students' recommendations before further replanting throughout the arboretum. The students agreed that they would assess the existing conditions in garden beds, including soils, drainage, and more, before recommending the best native plants for those conditions. Mr. Foskett asked if the students would investigate any grant opportunities to fund some of their recommended improvements, like replanting. The students said that they could inquire and said they more likely imagined grant opportunities related to education or streambed work, for example, more so than for replanting.

Chair Winsor thought that low-impact plants – meaning those with minimal need for fertility, irrigation, and human inputs – would make the park more resilient. He said that the arboretum depends currently a lot on irrigation and a little on fertilizer. He knew that the Conway School is mindful of low-input plants and so he looked forward to hearing their recommendations.

Mr. Bocko thought about building climate resilience into the future of the park. He recalled that when the park was established 30 years-ago, it was designed for the future as well, which got the park to this point today. He said the park is now in a different place to reevaluate resilience for a new future not just a few years from now, but much further, especially as climate impacts are changing quickly. He is biased to how the arboretum can support community resilience. He thinks there are opportunities to use renewal of the space as a teaching tool with minimal signage after the project, especially if the redesign is advertised successfully to the community as crucial in a changing climate.

Councilor Hooper agreed with Mr. Bocko that there would be opportunities later to advertise the great results of this project through photography in local media. Although the results of this project and redesigning the park are premature at this point, he wants the community to know this Board is trying to improve the City.

Chair Winsor said the park needs a web presence, which would also make the park more resilient in the future. For example, in the current situation where people are confined at home, they could take a virtual tour and learn about the park.

Ms. Krautmann said that with the aesthetics of seasonal blooming, path widths and the amount of grass space in the arboretum would need to be likely reconsidered.

Mr. Bocko said that with advertising, this is a great opportunity for community resilience. Though he does not live in Keene, he said this could be a next piece of momentum in addressing climate change. He said that Keene is doing great work already in all departments and is recognized as a regional leader in many ways and he thinks this project can help that momentum versus being a daunting first task for the City as a climate leader. Mr. Bohannon agreed and said there have been similar discussions for Russell Park. Mr. Bohannon thinks funding will be an important focus for this Board after the project, whether through trust funds or applying for grants. As a member of City Council, Councilor Hooper said he was excited to have the Conway School working on this project. He is excited to see the results and wished the students luck.

Mr. Bocko thought this was a great start to the project. He asked the students the most important thing they need from this Board to support their next steps. The students felt prepared with the information and local knowledge acquired at this meeting and said they would reach out to the Board as further questions arise throughout their analysis. The students would continue meeting weekly on Tuesdays at 10:00 AM with Mr. Bohannon through the duration of the project as well. Mr. Bohannon would inquire with the Clerk's office how Board members could participate in some of those weekly meetings. This meeting was a visioning opportunity for the students to understand how the park is used and maintained, what assets exist, and what needs improving. This is the first step.

Question 3: How do you use the arboretum? Is it used for educational purposes? (The students displayed a map with letters and asked the Board members to identify what areas they utilize most.)

Mr. Bocko said one of his students studied the maple trees around I/J.

Mr. Foskett said he cares for the area to the right of the entrance where the sprinkler box is located for the new irrigation system, where he is usually weeding when he is at the park. Otherwise, he sees people sitting and enjoying the park for 30-60 minutes or sometimes longer if having a picnic, etc. He thinks the arboretum is used a lot more as a pass-through.

When in the park, Ms. Krautmann walks past D-C-E-F or cycles from G-B-A to West Street. Chair Winsor's favorite location is K, overlooking the dam, where he can hang out and enjoy coffee. Mr. Bocko said the Quest goes through the whole arboretum and minimally in the RM area; it is a vehicle to move people through the park. Councilor Hooper uses the arboretum and RM area equally for wildlife and occasional wedding photography. Mr. Foskett added that the arboretum is used a lot for photography during prom season. Chair Winsor added that he wants passive recreation in the arboretum like photography or picnicking to be respected without discouraging the active recreation associated with the bike path or kayak access, for example. The Chairman thinks the students should consider how to redesign the space so it is clear where active and passive recreations are most encouraged. The students would revisit the map with the Board, likely through an online survey to gather more information.

The students have created an account for the park at: <https://www.inaturalist.org/projects/ashuelot-river-park>. Here, wildlife sightings and other information can be reported. Board members can visit the website to see what is already included, much like the QR code process.

Board members can contact the students with questions/concerns via email: keene2020@csid.edu

Board members should anticipate an online survey via email by May 15, a formal presentation on May 29, a second community meeting the first week of June, and final product delivery to the client on July 15.

3) Adjourn – Next Meeting Tuesday, June 2 at 4:00 PM

There being no further business, Chair Winsor adjourned the meeting at 5:15 PM.

Respectfully submitted by,
Katie Kibler, Minute Taker

Reviewed by Andy Bohannon, Director of Parks, Recreation & Facilities