

City of Keene
New Hampshire

CONSERVATION COMMISSION
MEETING MINUTES

Monday, June 15, 2020

4:30 PM

Remote Meeting via Zoom

Members Present:

Alexander Von Plinsky, IV, Chair
Eloise Clark, Vice Chair
Councilor Bobby Williams
Brian Reilly
Andrew Madison
Ken Bergman
Art Walker
Steven Bill, Alternate
Thomas Haynes, Alternate (non-voting)

Staff Present:

Rhett Lamb, Community Development
Director/ACM
Andy Bohannon, Director of Parks,
Recreation & Facilities

Members Not Present:

1) Call to Order

Chair Von Plinsky called the meeting to order at 4:30 PM and 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, Mr. Lamb called roll. All members were calling alone from their home addresses.

2) Approval of Meeting Minutes – May 18, 2020

Revision: line 249: replace "...adding to much work..." with "adding too much work..."

Mr. Bergman moved to approve the minutes of May 18, 2020, which Mr. Walker seconded, and the motion passed by unanimous roll call vote.

3) Communications & Notifications

a. Ashuelot River Local Advisory Committee (ARLAC) Donation

Mr. Lamb referenced a letter in the meeting's agenda packet from Barbara Skuly, Chairman of the Ashuelot River Local Advisory Committee (ARLAC), who wrote to the Commission seeking a \$125 donation, which they request annually from each town that their testing and monitoring work benefits. The letter notes that in summer 2019 volunteers from Keene and other towns logged more than 150 hours to accomplish aspects of the program. Mr. Lamb recalled that in 2019, the Conservation Commission chose to donate more than the \$125 requested to help ARLAC purchase necessary equipment. The Commission also chose to make that more substantial gift in 2019 because funds remained in the Commission's budget that would have been returned to the General Fund at the end of the fiscal year on June 30. Annually, City Council allocates \$1,500 to the Commission's budget and the remainder of that budget at the end

of the fiscal year returns to the General Fund; it does not roll over to the Commission's next fiscal year budget. As of the date of this meeting, \$1,500 remained in the Commission's budget. With two weeks left, the Commission had made no expenditures this fiscal year.

Mr. Bergman moved for the Conservation Commission to donate \$125 to ARLAC, which Mr. Madison seconded.

Mr. Bergman said that \$125 is a tremendous bargain and that the City gains so much for it. Mr. Lamb said that like last year, funds remain in the budget and the Commission could choose to donate more to ARLAC. The Chairman agreed with Mr. Bergman that the donation is a bargain and he thought the Commission should donate more. Mr. Bill was also in favor and suggested \$200. Mr. Madison supported the increase also if those funds will not be available for Commission use after July 1. As a former ARLAC volunteer, Mr. Madison agreed that their services provide important data to the State and local municipalities and so donations are a wise Commission investment. Ms. Clark suggested \$500. In response to Mr. Bergman and Mr. Madison, the Chairman and Mr. Lamb agreed that there should be no outstanding encumbrances that the Commission should need these extra funds for by the end of the fiscal year, even with the potential \$900 Membership dues for the next agenda item. The Chairman added that while the Commission needs to steward well the taxpayers' money, he thought this was a good use. Mr. Reilly agreed that \$500 was a reasonable investment for the return. Mr. Walker stated that if only two weeks remained to spend the money he supported spending the funds and recommended a higher contribution as well. Because Vice Chair Clark was unaware of any expenses in the next two weeks for Japanese knotweed management in the potential ARM Fund fill removal project, Mr. Bill supported a higher donation also. The Chairman said that if the Commission made the full \$900 donation requested in the next agenda item, that \$600 would remain that could be donated to ARLAC. All Commission members agreed with a \$600 donation, knowing that ARLAC would spend it well and that it is still a bargain.

Mr. Bergman withdrew his motion and Mr. Madison withdrew his second.

Mr. Bergman moved for the Conservation Commission to donate \$600 to the Ashuelot River Local Advisory Committee, which Mr. Madison seconded, and the motion passed by unanimous roll call vote.

b. NH Association of Conservation Commissions Renewal

Mr. Lamb referenced a letter in the meeting's agenda packet from Barbara Richter, Executive Director of the NH Association of Conservation Commissions (ACC), with the annual \$900 request, which they refer to as membership dues. Mr. Lamb said these dues are not a flat rate and are based on population. Keene's rate has been \$900 for some time. Last year, the Commission elected to donate less; he thought \$300 or \$350. The Chairman said that he wanted the Commission to use the NH ACC resource better because they have many smart people doing things that this Commission is trying to accomplish, and this group should lean on NHACC's experience/expertise. He added that the letter references NHACC's representation in the State Legislature and he has seen them at those meetings having a positive impact, which he said the Commission should support whether the matters effect Keene directly.

Vice Chair Clark moved for the Conservation Commission to donate \$900 to the New Hampshire Association of Conservation Commissions, which Mr. Walker seconded, and the motion passed by unanimous roll call vote.

4) Informational

a. Roxbury Street Bridge over Beaver Brook – Commencement of Work

Mr. Lamb referenced a letter in the meeting packet from the City's Engineering Division notifying the Commission of the commencement of work on the Roxbury Street Bridge over Beaver Brook. This notification is required because the Commission reviewed and commented on the project plans through both Wetlands and Non-Specific Site Permits and recommended that the permits move forward.

b. Subcommittee Reports

i. Outreach Subcommittee

Work is halted due to Covid-19.

ii. ARM Fund Subcommittee

Vice Chair Clark referenced the last meeting's discussion of applying for ARM funds to remove fill in an area off North Lincoln Street and said that she completed the preproposal, which City staff submitted. However, the application had to be withdrawn at the last minute when Hydrogeologist, Steve Brackett, recommended not removing the contaminated fill. The Vice Chair said that her recollection from 2008 about the degree of contamination was inaccurate. The Chairman said it was unfortunate and upsetting to withdraw the application but he thanked Vice Chair Clark for her extensive work despite the project not coming to fruition. The Vice Chair thought there were still potential options to remove the Japanese knotweed at that location because Mr. Brackett said it is okay to disturb top layers of the fill to treat the knotweed with best management practices.

Mr. Bill asked what contaminants are in the fill and whether the fill has been monitored for leaching into the wetlands. Mr. Lamb said that he recently reviewed Mr. Brackett's 2008 report, which describes "urban fill" comprised of ash and residue from burning coal that is suspected to have come from the B&M Railroad. Mr. Lamb said that the best management practice is to leave the fill in place, which poses no leaching threats or human exposure to hazardous chemicals. To remove, treat, and dispose of the fill safely would require extensive/expensive efforts. While not necessarily cost prohibitive, the Chairman said that ARM funds in this watershed are limited and it would have been problematic to go far over budget after project commencement.

Mr. Bergman asked whether the nature of the contamination or the location within the fill warrants posted signage. Though not an expert in the field, Mr. Lamb thought that if such a degree of contamination existed when the City purchased the property then signs would have been posted. To his knowledge, the contamination is covered with clean fill and so there is no opportunity for human exposure.

Mr. Bill asked if the knotweed roots are deep enough to penetrate and bring contaminants to the surface and he questioned whether bioremediation would be warranted in the future.

Mr. Madison said it was unlikely that knotweed would penetrate that sort of fill and bring

contaminants to the surface. Mr. Madison explained the urban fill from a railroad would be likely comprised mainly of creosote that stays attached to its surface until dug up and disturbed, for which clean-up costs can run in the six figures. He said that the knotweed at this location might actually stabilize soil above the fill.

5) Discussion Items

a. Bee City USA – Continued Discussion – Mr. John Therriault

Chair Von Plinsky discussed how to move this initiative forward with Councilor Williams and John Therriault, who was calling alone from his home address. Councilor Williams said that there was much discussion at the last meeting of what a Bee City *could* do but not what it *would* do specifically. Before defending the idea to City Council, the Councilor wanted to understand better the types of projects, the workload for this Commission, and the support that would be needed from City staff.

Mr. Therriault said that being a Bee City has three minimal annual requirements: 1) one project enhancing pollinator habitat such as improving a City park with pollinator forage; 2) one educational event that could be as simple as a school field trip to the observation hive at Stonewall Farm; and 3) review City policies and procedures to ensure pollinator friendliness such as during Parks Department lawn management. He said it is not a constant activity but rather raising awareness and improving pollinator habitat incrementally.

Councilor Williams asked how the three elements – education, habitat building, and policy – would be determined. Would this Commission as an entity be responsible for organizing and implementing the education and habitat aspects, or would the Commission identify and sponsor such projects implemented by non-profit organizations, for example? Councilor Williams was concerned about the Commission's responsibility in identifying projects and ensuring they are executed to meet these Bee City requirements. Regarding the task to review policies and procedures, Councilor Williams said it is a great idea but he was unsure whether a plan/timeline would be needed for it to be clear to Council that the City, and specifically this Commission, would be reviewing those policies. Policy changes require public comment and Council support.

Mr. Walker asked for examples of specific projects from the Bee Cities of Burlington, VT and Durham, NH. Mr. Therriault could not provide examples from those cities because neither had submitted their 2019 annual reports on time. Other 2019 reports from cities in the south describe enhancing park areas and rehabilitating roundabouts with pollinator gardens. In Keene, he posited that small portions of lands overseen by the Conservation Commission could be improved with pollinator habitat and developed as educational areas. If Council approved becoming a Bee City, Mr. Therriault said it simply means that anytime the Commission considers an action, that they question whether it is pollinator friendly on a case-by-case basis. Mr. Therriault had not yet heard from the Mayor about joining the Conservation Commission as an alternate member to act as the Bee City point-of-contact.

Mr. Bill asked if the Commission would be obligated to run education events or to foster someone else doing so. Mr. Therriault said that he leads events routinely at local schools so it would be no additional work for him.

Mr. Bergman said that Peter Hansel and Laura Andrews in west Keene received a grant from the Cheshire County Conservation District for pollinator gardens. He recalled that Mr. Therriault

offered to pay the annual \$200 Bee City USA fee and he asked whether that is possible in City policies. Mr. Lamb said that could occur through the donation process to City Council, however, he was unaware of instances of donations directly to a specific use, but he was unsure why it could not occur.

Mr. Madison wondered whether some requirements like education must be implemented by the City or if non-profit support could be leveraged, such as Stonewall Farm or the Cheshire County Conservation District. Mr. Therriault said yes, that the role as Bee City is more as a facilitator.

If Keene were a Bee City and wanted to improve pollinator habitat in a roundabout, for example, Mr. Reilly asked who would pay for that work. Mr. Therriault said that some roundabouts are already sponsored by businesses or groups that might be amenable to making those improvements, which require minimal input. For example, effective pollinator patches only require a minimum 4'x4' area to attract most pollinators.

Mr. Bergman said that eventually it would be important to assess the effectiveness of a project like this to determine whether pollinator populations were improved by such efforts.

Mr. Therriault said that would be a good opportunity to collaborate with the University of New Hampshire, which already conducts pollinator studies; Mr. Bergman said they might have ideas about optimal planting as well.

Mr. Bill suggested that the Ashuelot River Park would be a good place for pollinator projects because there are already many sponsored garden beds there.

The Chairman said it sounded more like a matter of coordination without hitting the City's budget.

Councilor Williams asked who would be responsible for creating the annual report.

Mr. Therriault assumed that he would as the Commission's Bee City point-of-contact. The Chairman considered the long-term, when Mr. Therriault's time on the Commission ends, and said that it would be a general responsibility of the Commission and whoever takes his place. Mr. Therriault said it is not actually writing a report but answering nine-computer screens of questions that generate a report, which in his experience takes about one hour of work. Councilor Williams does not only want a report submitted to Bee City but also made available so that the citizens of Keene know about this work; he thought the whole Commission should have input on the responses before a report is final.

Councilor Williams was comfortable moving this matter back to the Municipal Services, Facilities, & Infrastructure Committee with comments from these meetings' minutes for Council review. The Chair, Mr. Lamb, and Mr. Therriault could help participate in those conversations.

Chair Von Plinsky moved to recommend that the City Council approve a resolution to become a "Bee City USA," which Mr. Bill seconded, and the motion passed by unanimous roll call vote.

b. Public Education & City Management of Invasive Species

Councilor Williams presented information about the terrestrial invasive plant species found in Keene. He said he was not an expert but took part in a two-day University of NH Extension course on NH invasive plants, which he encouraged others to attend as well. Councilor Williams summarized and/or showed photos of the following invasive plants:

- Garlic mustard can be pulled from the ground but it grows back a lot. Some City properties are invaded extensively by this plant.
- Japanese barberry is a common decorative yard plant that escapes into the woods.
- Burning bush grows into thickets on forest floors blocking native plants that grow there.
- Vinca minor is a common decorative yard plant with blue flowers that also spreads into forests, like those at Robin Hood Park.
- Japanese knotweed grows near homes and can disrupt foundations effecting property values. It might be prudent for the City to assess whether property taxes are being lost due to land eaten by knotweed. It also blocks native plants from growing.
- Callery pear is a decorative tree, also known as the Bradford pear and other names, that was planted as a street tree because it was believed to be sterile. Today, the tree is hybridizing with other pear species into a second generation of pear trees that are mostly unattractive scrub that develop into a thicket.
- Black swallow-wort
- Glossy buckthorn
- Common buckthorn
- Oriental bittersweet
- Tree of paradise
- Norway maple

Councilor Williams identified another invasive species, Japanese stilt grass, which is spreading from the southern US and once in an area it carpets the forest floor. The Councilor said it would be important to ensure it does not enter the Keene ecosystem.

Councilor Williams continued presenting his ideas for invasive species management in the City:

1. Educate and enlist residents in the fight to contain invasive plant species.
 - a. Authorization for volunteers to remove invasive plants on City property.
 - b. Outreach to property owners with invasive plant problems.
2. Review list of permitted street trees.
 - a. No more decorative pears. Find native alternatives.
 - b. Establish a pear tree replacement program. Work with local nurseries.
3. Combat Japanese knotweed.
 - a. Identify priority areas.
 - b. Removal methods:
 - i. Physical
 - ii. Pesticide
 - iii. Cover with landscape fabric and mulch, and then wait five years
 - iv. Identify competing plants

Mr. Bergman applauded Councilor Williams for the presentation, and the energy and motivation behind his ideas. He mentioned the aquatic purple loosestrife as well and Councilor Williams recalled that this conversation focused on terrestrial plants, as managing aquatic invasives is much more complex.

Mr. Madison questioned whether Councilor Williams initiated this conversation with City staff in the Departments of Public Works and Parks, Recreation, & Facilities to understand any current City actions to combat invasives. The Councilor said he spoke with some staff and that he knew of past attempts with pesticides, but he was unaware of anything else the City is doing programmatically to manage invasives. Mr. Lamb said that there is no overall City strategy for

invasive species removal. However, the Keene Planning Board approves site plans for large residential and commercial development projects; developers are responsible for proving that landscaping plans exclude NH banned invasive species. Mr. Lamb continued that the latest conversation about callery pears is interesting because the City relied on them downtown in the past. However, with the revelation of ash tree infestations by the emerald ash borer insect/larvae, there would be an opportunity to replace those ash trees that are pending removal downtown with native species that are also resilient enough to handle high road salt use.

Mr. Bergman referenced small/medium cities in the western US that are prone to invasives and have compiled complete city tree inventories and asked if there is something similar in Keene for City streets and rights-of-way. Mr. Lamb said no but the Keene State College geography program recently did some inventory of urban trees though he did not think it was comprehensive. Mr. Bergman recalled an inventory on the Keene State College campus but he did not think it had been updated in some time.

Andy Bohannon, the Director of Parks, Recreation, & Facilities thanked Councilor Williams and Mr. Bergman for emailing him on this topic. He recalled having some pear trees planted around the Recreation Center two years ago because of their flowering capacity and ability to enhance the park in early spring when there are many City events. He also planted the pears in response to unsuccessful liberty elms in various City parks. Regarding tree inventories, Mr. Bohannon noted that similar to the Keene State College campus, Bartlett Tree Service conducted an extensive inventory of trees in the Ashuelot River Park and he offered to share that data with the Commission. The park is comprised of more than 100 tree species valuing over \$300,000.

Regarding invasive species management at City parks and facilities, Mr. Bohannon said that there had been some small projects. He noted that students from the Conway School for Landscape Design are developing a master plan for the Ashuelot River Park and part of that plan would be to remove knotweed along the river; he would share the plan with the Commission when available. He added that Parks and Recreation have been understaffed for some time, hindering the ability to manage invasives at the various locations he is aware of throughout the City. Insufficient funds and labor have hindered management and so the City would rely on grants or other opportunities to take action. He said that staff is open to those opportunities because part of the City's mission statement is being good stewards of the environment. There was a program some years ago to make Fuller Park and Ashuelot River Park chemical free, which he would like to expand. Regarding pollinators, he said there is no longer someone to hay an area of Monadnock View Cemetery, which could be converted well into a pollinator wildflower area. He wanted the Commission to know he is always open to these ideas but the City needs more resources.

Mr. Lamb noted that an aspect of invasive species management is the use of herbicides and he asked if the City has a license to apply those chemicals. Mr. Bohannon said yes, there are three staff members – Chuck Sweeney, Gary Croteau, & Tim Garland – licensed to use chemicals according to best management practices.

Chair Von Plinsky liked the idea of educating citizens and making it easier for them to participate in invasive species control on City land, but he asked what such a program would look like. Mr. Lamb said that was a great question and he thought it could parallel similar volunteer activities improving park trail systems. Mr. Bohannon agreed and cited historic volunteer efforts on the Jonathan Daniels Trail, though he noted that depending on the level of

effort, background checks or other agreements could be needed. Mr. Lamb said there has also been a long-term relationship with organizations like Home Depot, whose employees make improvements at the Recreation Center Park. Mr. Lamb would look into the likelihood of a program that gives people free reign to take actions on City land. The Chairman said that Keene is a great walking community and he thought that there could be high success with trained volunteers to manage these species, with minimal staff commitment. Mr. Bill added that upon return to campus, Keene State College also has many volunteer days of service to contribute. He asked if volunteers could apply chemicals and Mr. Lamb replied no. Mr. Lamb added that Keene State College students have participated for many years in a Japanese knotweed-monitoring program at the Woodland Cemetery. Mr. Bergman thought of the knotweed near Ladies Wildwood Park that seemed to him would require an industrial scale treatment and removal process with external funding. Mr. Lamb agreed that a project of that magnitude would require a larger program. Still, Mr. Bergman said that the next few years would be the best time for the treatment before the area grows further.

This matter would be agendized in July, providing staff more time to research.

6) New or Other Business – Land Development Code Update

Mr. Lamb noted that the Commission would hear a presentation in July or August from the Community Development Department on the Land Use Code Update, a portion of which on surface water relates to this Commission.

Mr. Bergman encouraged a conversation with the new Airport Manager about the proposed fence and wildlife viewing. Mr. Lamb would invite the Airport Manager to an upcoming meeting.

7) Adjournment – Next Meeting Date: Monday, July 20, 2020

There being no further business, The Chairman adjourned the meeting at 6:02 PM.

Respectfully submitted by,
Katie Kibler, Minute Taker
June 21, 2020

Reviewed by Rhett Lamb, Assistant City Manager, Community Development Director