

City of Keene
New Hampshire

MUNICIPAL SERVICES, FACILITIES AND INFRASTRUCTURE COMMITTEE
MEETING MINUTES

Wednesday, September 23, 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
Rebecca C. Landry, Assistant City Manager/IT
Director
Andrew Bohannon, Director of Parks, Recreation,
& Facilities

Members Not Present:

Chair Manwaring called the meeting to order at 5:30 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, Committee members stated their locations and whether alone. Chair Manwaring called from City Hall with City Staff present. Councilors Chadbourne and Williams called alone from their home addresses. Councilors Filiault and Giacomo called from their home addresses with their wives present.

1) Ashuelot River Park – Climate Resilient Master Plan – Parks, Recreation, & Facilities
Director

Chair Manwaring welcomed Andy Bohannon, the Director of Parks, Recreation, & Facilities. Mr. Bohannon updated the Committee on the recent work of the Ashuelot River Park Advisory Board (ARPAB) – an appointed City body – in conjunction with the Friends of the Arboretum at Ashuelot River Park, which is the non-profit organization that initially donated the park to the City and today oversees park donations as well as volunteer maintenance of the arboretum. Both of these entities, as well as City Staff, recognized that many aspects of the park need to be revitalized. To address this need, Mr. Bohannon and the ARPAB solicited the help of Masters-level graduate students from the Conway School of Landscape Design (Northampton, MA), from which previous students worked on City projects successfully, such as the Carpenter Field/Russell Park, and private projects like the Ashuelot River Greenspace. To move this work forward, the Board's trust funds were utilized to execute this agreement with the school and so there was no impact to the Parks Division operating budget. Unfortunately, the beginning of this contract coincided with Covid-19, which impacted public engagement and information sessions that occurred virtually in May and June. Still, the students worked weekly with Mr. Bohannon and continuously with the ARPAB and Friends throughout the process. Mr. Bohannon proceeded with a presentation on the project.

Mr. Bohannon began by recalling details about the Parks & Recreation Department and ARPAB:

- Parks & Recreation Mission – To provide the citizens of Keene with quality community services and amenities including a park and cemetery system, balanced environmental stewardship, and diverse programming to inspire and support active lifestyles for all ages throughout the life span.
 - Mr. Bohannon said that this project promoted significantly the balanced environmental stewardship mission.
- Parks & Recreation Vision – Our community works together to provide for life-long opportunities for active living and wise stewardship of natural resources. Keene has beautiful, well-maintained parks and cemeteries, a citizenry that incorporates physical activity into their daily lives, and a connected system of open space, parks, and trails.
 - Mr. Bohannon said that Ashuelot River Park is a unique space with a trailhead, both active and passive recreation, and a central location on West Street.
- ARPAB Purpose – This Committee was created to promote, enhance, and maintain the Ashuelot River Park for its present and future use, enjoyment, and educational benefit for all residents of the City of Keene.
 - Mr. Bohannon said this project focused on ways to enhance future enjoyment of and educational opportunities at the park.

Mr. Bohannon listed the primary goals of the project:

1. Conduct an ecological analysis to identify ecosystem services provided by the park and the resilience of the park to the impacts of climate change.
2. Identify educational opportunities within the park.
3. Assess the effectiveness of current park maintenance.
4. Take inventory of plant beds within the arboretum.
 - Important for the Friends because there were no original maps of the arboretum, which hinders garden bed maintenance. GIS systems incorporation will help.
5. Recommend plant palettes that increase native vegetation and biodiversity.
 - Collaboration with the Conservation Commission toward this goal is in progress.

Mr. Bohannon explained the secondary goals of the project:

1. Increase the diversity of seating within the park.
 - To include more American Disability Association accessibility and new points of view. This effort will begin likely with an adopt-a-bench program through the Friends.
2. Propose an invasive species management plan.
 - Collaboration with the Conservation Commission toward this goal is in progress.
3. Explore options for replacing the existing toilet.
 - The former composting toilet was closed to the public in recent years due to a drug overdose and other undesirable behavior, and so portable toilets are rented for events like Art in the Park. The toilet was minimally visible from street view, which posed challenges for police surveillance. Deciding where and when to replace the toilet pends some further park development based on this plan.

Mr. Bohannon stated that it was important to understand the definition of resilience in the context of this project. He said that resilience refers to the ability of a system to bounce back from or withstand a disturbance, such as a natural disaster or development that interferes with wildlife habitat/natural processes. Part of this plan focused on how plants will react to future heat and drought so the park can continue flourishing.

Mr. Bohannon shared results of the park assessment the final master plan:

- 75 community members responded to a survey.
- The top six words that respondents highlighted about the park: proximity, uncomfortable, river, homeless, trails, and problems. The ARPAB seeks to address all these issues in implementing the master plan.
- What respondents like most about the park: views of the dam, garden beds, lawn space, access to water, seating areas, trees, and trails.
- What facilities/resources the respondents see as most (in)adequate: garden beds and trail networks are considered adequate, the kayak launch and seating areas are considered somewhat adequate, and signs and bathrooms are considered inadequate.

Mr. Bohannon said that when the students began, they identified a large park with many issues. To address this challenge, they identified four logical quadrants of the park to address individually and identify opportunities within each that benefit the overall park goals:

1. Rachel Marshall Outdoor Learning Laboratory – This area on the north side of the bridge was used actively in collaboration between the Keene School District, the City, and Antioch University until 2004-2006. Opportunities exist to increase educational signs, enhance seating, and improve trail accessibility and safety.
2. North Arboretum – This area near the boat launch requires mitigation of compaction and erosion, improved sight lines, and bank stabilization.
3. Main Arboretum – This area requires increase shaded and sheltered seating areas that are accessible to all and do not block sight lines, for which there is serious consideration of removing the 1996 gazebo in favor of a different structure, like a pergola. The main arboretum also needs enhanced garden beds with native plant species that benefit native pollinator populations, better accessibility from the parking lots, and improved sight lines in general.
4. Southwest Arboretum – This area has untapped potential that is highly depended on the West Street Dam's future. Regardless of the dam, some goals for this area include creating an accessible formal entrance from Starbucks, continued riverbank maintenance, and enhanced vegetation.

Mr. Bohannon said that the assessments of these four park quadrants resulted in six priority goals to implement:

1. Improve the kayak launch.
2. Remove and replace the gazebo with pergolas near the front of the park.
3. Remove mature conifers with lower level plants to increase sight lines.
4. Improve trails in the former Rachel Marshall Outdoor Learning Lab.
5. Replace invasive species with native shrubs.
6. Create an accessible path to the dam viewing area.

Vice Chair Giacomo said that dam removal would not only effect the river viewing areas but also water levels and potentially the plant species most applicable to the park; he asked to what degree potential dam removal was considered in the master plan development. Mr. Bohannon recalled a recent years' analysis of public decision making about the West Street Dam's future. The results of that analysis – conducted by a research team based from the Rhode Island School of Design – were shared with the Conway School students to help inform this plan. In consideration of possible dam removal and the lower river levels that would result, the park's irrigation system was recently converted from being river-fed to now being connected to the City water supply, which can be better controlled by the Public Works Department

during drought times, for example. Mr. Bohannon assured the Vice Chair that various options surrounding dam removal were considered in developing this master plan. Vice Chair Giacomo asked who performs the pruning and other park upkeep. Mr. Bohannon replied that the Park Division performs routine lawn mowing and empties trash, the Friends maintain garden beds, and mulching, pruning, and spring/fall clean-ups are all contracted out.

Councilor Chadbourne recalled when three private citizens purchased an extended parking area behind the Mascoma Savings Bank on Ashuelot Street to create kayak launch access and there were plans at some point to extend the park into that area. She asked whether Mr. Bohannon was referring to that kayak launch in the master plan. Mr. Bohannon confirmed he was referring to that kayak launch. The parking lot Councilor Chadbourne referred to was a part of the Ashuelot Greenspace project that did not come to fruition. Discussions continue today about trying to connect the park with that property but it remains unclear in what capacity that would be possible. Councilor Chadbourne asked how that kayak launch can be accessed through the private property. Mr. Bohannon said that users park in the Mascoma Savings Bank lot and carry their kayaks to the launch.

Councilor Williams stated his appreciation for the focus on invasive species and reiterated that the Conservation Commission is working to arrange a public meeting in Ashuelot River Park to train private citizens to help manage invasive species on City property. He encouraged other City Councilors to attend those public meetings that are yet to be scheduled. Mr. Bohannon agreed it is a good opportunity for many groups to collaborate toward a common goal and he thanked Councilor Williams for his initiative on this effort. Chair Manwaring also appreciated this focus, noting that the SouthEast Keene Neighborhood group has for a long time advocated invasive species management along Beaver Brook.

On a vote of 5-0, the Municipal Services, Facilities and Infrastructure Committee recommends the acceptance of the Climate Resilient Master Plan as informational.

2) REPORT OUT: Katie Schwerin – Proposal for Permanent Public Art Installation – Parks, Recreation, & Facilities Director

The Director of Parks, Recreation, & Facilities, Andy Bohannon, said he met recently with Ms. Schwerin, who created the labyrinth art piece on Airport Road and her plans to add additional art to the area has been delayed due to Covid-19. Staff reported this information out to Council so it could be removed from more time until art proposals are brought back to the Committee, likely in the spring.

On a vote of 5-0, the Municipal Services, Facilities and Infrastructure Committee recommends that the public art installation be accepted as informational.

3) Adjournment

There being no further business, Chair Manwaring adjourned the meeting at 6:12 PM.

Respectfully submitted by,
Katryna Kibler, Minute Taker
September 25, 2020