

City of Keene
New Hampshire

CONSERVATION COMMISSION
MEETING MINUTES

Monday, September 16, 2024

4:30 PM

**Room 22,
Recreation Center**

Members Present:

Alexander Von Plinsky, IV, Chair
Councilor Andrew Madison, Vice Chair (5:24 PM)
Councilor Robert Williams
Art Walker
Ken Bergman
Steven Bill
Barbara Richter
Eloise Clark, Alternate
Thomas Haynes, Alternate
John Therriault, Alternate
Lee Stanish, Alternate (Voting)
Deborah LeBlanc, Alternate

Staff Present:

Mari Brunner, Senior Planner

Members Not Present:

All Present

1) Call to Order

Chair Von Plinsky called the meeting to order at 4:31 PM.

2) Approval of Meeting Minutes – August 19, 2024

Revisions: Line 41, change “Lower Drummer” to “Drummer.” Change any instances of “Tom” to “Mr. Haynes.”

A motion by Mr. Bergman to adopt the August 19, 2024 minutes as amended was duly seconded by Mr. Walker and the motion carried unanimously.

3) Report-Outs:

A) Greater Goose Pond Forest Stewardship Subcommittee

Mr. Haynes reported that Subcommittee members met for a working session at the Park on September 13. The Subcommittee had shifted focus from the Lower Mattson Trail to the Rope

Tow Trail, off the Drummer Road Trailhead. Eight volunteers participated in this work creating much needed water bars on this trail that Mr. Haynes said was pretty eroded. He was very pleased with this turnout as they were able to accomplish a lot of work with two crews instead of one, and it was a lot of fun. The Subcommittee had another volunteer work session planned for Saturday, September 21, beginning at 8:30 AM at the Drummer Road Trailhead to continue water bars on the Rope Tow Trail.

B) Invasive Species

There would be an in-depth conversation about invasive species later in the meeting.

Councilor Williams reported that there was not an invasive event scheduled in September. The next event would be on Indigenous Peoples Day, October 14 at 5:00 PM at Robin Hood Park, where efforts over past years had made a big impact. The final event of the year would be on Veterans Day, November 11, pulling bittersweet vines along Eastern Avenue and the Cheshire Rail Trail as in past years.

C) Land Conservation

Chair Von Plinsky thanked Ms. Richter for sharing a spreadsheet on Keene's lands that are in various levels of conservation, which Ms. Brunner would forward to the whole Commission. Ms. Richter explained the various data she worked with, including [NH Granit](#), which captures a lot and helps to determine level of protection. Eventually, this list could be compared to the City's tax maps. Chair Von Plinsky asked Commissioners to review the spreadsheet and data in advance of the next meeting.

Ms. Brunner recalled the Commission discussing past efforts to monitor the City's lands in conservation. For a long time, there had been a bin with clip boards, vests, folders, binders, checklists, and more kept in the Community Development Department. However, no one currently working in the Community Development Department had knowledge of this. So, the Commission would work together to either try to find them or create a new ones.

D) Pollinator Updates

Mr. Therriault was not present to share updates.

4) Discussion About a Citywide Approach/Strategy for Invasive Species Management

Chair Von Plinsky led the Commission in a discussion about a broader citywide strategy for invasive species management. He was prompted to have this discussion after a Master Plan Steering Committee meeting, during which there was a brief conversation about invasives. This led him to realize that there might be a broader impression that the City has more resources dedicated to invasive species monitoring than it actually does. So, he wanted the Commission to

discuss his idea to write a letter to the City Council—as in the past—recommending that the City take more concerted action against invasive species. He said the City needs more staff training and clear guidelines, as well as clear guidance for volunteers who could pull invasives when on City property. Chair Von Plinsky hoped the Commission could arrive at consensus by the October meeting for him to write a letter to the City Council on behalf of the Commission.

Mr. Bergman asked if the focus was City-owned public lands. Chair Von Plinsky replied that yes, he thought the Commission and volunteers could have the greatest impact on City-owned lands or land in the right-of-way. Still, the Commission had a lot of conversations about educating private property owners as well, so there could be an element of that too because invasives spread from private properties into the right-of-way. Chair Von Plinsky said that Councilor Williams was doing a great job, but could not solve this problem alone, so the Chair thought the Council needed greater information on this issue to help them make a greater decision.

Ms. Brunner reported that to understand what everyone does with respect to invasive plant species, she recently met with the new Director of Parks & Recreation, Carrah Fisk-Hennessey; the new Director of Public Works, Don Lussier; the Deputy City Manager, Andy Bohannon; and Parks & Recreation Superintendent, Frank “Pepper” Anderson. Ms. Brunner said that all reported that they and their teams were stretched very thin at this time, with staff barely able to keep up with their regular work. So, adding any focus on invasives would be tough at this time, despite them indicating that they liked the idea. She said they discussed two options: a volunteer-run program and a staff-run program, the latter of which was unlikely at this time. City staff were more interested in seeing the volunteer-run option move forward. This option would be focused on high-priority, mapped areas, similar to what Councilor Williams had been doing. It could be led by a community group or a neighborhood, or a group could adopt a particular park, for example. There could be some level of oversight and training. Ms. Brunner added that the Commission could use the Conservation Land Acquisition Fund for planning or consultant services to set-up a program like this.

Ms. Stanish asked how the Commission would set priorities for the work and how to track the occurrence of invasive species. How can the Commission keep track of where it is investing its limited resources? Chair Von Plinsky spoke about Bob Milliken who would be invited to speak to the Commission—possibly in October—about his experiences creating a structured volunteer program. Mr. Milliken is a master gardener and reported the wild parsnip on Court Street; he is very talented with plants and specifically with invasive control measures.

Mr. Bill asked if anyone on City staff was trained in invasive species control. Councilor Williams said that he completed a two-day course from the University of NH Extension, which is conducted regularly all over the State. Councilor Williams thought it would be possible to invite the UNH Extension to Keene to lead the training for both City staff and volunteers. Ms. Brunner said she did inquire, and the City hires someone to apply pesticides on a short section of Beaver Brook—between Water Street and Marlboro Street—as required by the Army Corps of Engineers. Councilor Williams was interested in exploring whether funding could be arranged to

have a City staff member trained to apply herbicide. While he said he is not a huge fan of herbicide, he said there are cases when it is needed, but it cannot be applied by volunteers.

Ms. LeBlanc asked if an intern (like the Commission would discuss later in the meeting) could map all of the invasive species in the City. Mr. Haynes said that would trigger the Commission's educational outreach focus that was somewhat on the backburner at this time. He said there could be an opportunity for an intern to identify City-owned land with invasives ward-by-ward. Doing so by ward (e.g., including educational workshops) could also help to educate the general public about what they can do on their own properties in each ward. Mr. Haynes said this could be an opportunity for Commission outreach if the City cannot take more action on invasives.

Ms. Richter said she understood that this is a huge issue the City cannot tackle alone. She said certain City staff—especially Public Works and Parks & Recreation—would continue encountering invasives in their day-to-day work, so the more educated they are the better (e.g., best time to remove them). She did not think it would be a huge lift for a City staff member to attend a two-day training on herbicide application, which would be a significant asset to the City; training on basic control measures would be useful as well. The Commission also agreed that more educational programs for the public and volunteers would be helpful, so more people are aware of these species on their properties and City properties.

Ms. Stanish recalled questioning whether the Commission had any resources available to educate homeowners about Japanese knotweed on their properties. To contribute, she drafted a pamphlet using several NH resources as examples, but she tried to tailor them more to Keene. She thought the Commission could try to create a template for future pamphlets to make it easier to share resources at the Library and City Hall, for example. Chair Von Plinsky agreed that there is a need to get the word out as much as possible. He noted that the community was becoming more attuned to invasives, citing comments about it at a Master Plan Steering Committee meeting, in addition to comments that once you know what knotweed looks like, you cannot unsee it. Chair Von Plinsky hoped the City would develop clearer and simpler guidelines for citizens to address these invasives; he compared it to efforts like Green Up Keene, so volunteers can be trained to identify and remove invasives, adopt areas of the City, and address the invasives there long-term. He wants it to be a simple, low resource model. Mr. Bergman recalled that in recent years—thanks to Mr. Theriault's insistence—any time the Commission had reviewed requests for waivers in places being reseeded, it had insisted upon use of native pollinator friendly plants. Due to the soil disturbance, Mr. Bergman said the Commission could also recommend that contractors in these instances follow-up with three seasons of pulling invasives as Ms. Brunner mentioned earlier along Beaver Brook; however, Ms. Brunner then confirmed that was only three rounds of pulling over approximately six months.

Mr. Bergman thought a letter to the City Council would be valuable whether it achieves the goal or not. Ideally, he hoped it would at least raise awareness among the City Council and City departments that there is concern about this and that this impacts quality of life in the City. Chair Von Plinsky thought there was potential for at least a few rows of people at a City Council meeting willing to advocate for this issue. The Chair said he understood the City staff's perspectives. Yet, as spenders of the taxpayers' money, Chair Von Plinsky thought the

Commission could advocate that it is the Council's job to help solve this problem. He thought the letter would have greater impact if it included specific recommendations to start the discussion. Ms. Clark suggested that the letter should include practical incentives for the City Council, like infrastructure that Ms. Richter mentioned; the City Council had been very concerned about infrastructure.

The Commission agreed that Chair Von Plinsky should write the letter to the City Council encouraging citizen awareness and education, in addition to clear guidelines for what citizens can and cannot do with invasives in the City right-of-way. He would also advocate for a budget increase or staff position, but the Commission would review it and decide whether to strike it at the October meeting.

5) Discussion Items:

A) NHACC Intern Opportunity

Ms. Brunner emailed details to the Commission about this opportunity in spring 2025. Ms. Richter explained that the NH Association of Conservation Commissions (NHACC) received a grant to encourage Conservation Commissions to work more closely with graduate students on local projects they had not been able to complete with volunteer time. She said this would involve the NHACC matching towns with students in their areas who are focused on natural resource conservation or GIS mapping; there is a lot of flexibility. The NHACC would pay the intern's stipend based on 15–20 hours/week for three months (\$3,600). If selected, Keene would be in a sort of cohort with 3-4 other towns that are working with an intern, and each town would be asked to provide feedback on the program. Ms. Richter said there was a lot of interest, so she suggested that the Commission should be as defined and clear as possible in describing the project to increase its likelihood of being selected; a clear task list would better help the intern as well.

Chair Von Plinsky noted that the deadline was October 11, before the next Commission meeting.

Mr. Haynes asked if the Commission could consider education and community outreach as categories. Ms. Richter said yes. Mr. Haynes asked if the Commission would need to partner with a local faculty member. Ms. Richter said she could help with some of that, as she had been working with Antioch University New England, Plymouth State University, and University of NH. Some of this collaboration could be done remotely. Ms. Stanish asked if the intern could be an undergraduate. Ms. Richter said yes, and they could also be a recent graduate.

Mr. Bergman asked if the intern could specifically work on an inventory of the City's conservation easements. Ms. Richter said that could be a project.

Ms. Clark said that given the Commission's focus on invasive species, it would be eye opening to have someone survey the City and create GIS locations for the various invasive species visible from roadways in the City as a baseline inventory. Chair Von Plinsky thought that would be clearcut enough and Ms. Richter agreed given this path toward planning for a volunteer program. This could be the next step.

Mr. Bergman wondered if it would be better to strategize for this intern to focus on one particular invasive—like knotweed—throughout the City or in a certain part of the City as a targeted mapping project.

Ms. Stanish asked when this internship would occur. Ms. Richter said in the spring of 2025, but it could extend into the summer too. Ms. Stanish noted that the time of year would make a difference if focusing on a specific invasive. Ms. Richter noted that a subcommittee or volunteer group—not necessarily the whole Conservation Commission—would lead the intern and could help the intern make these decisions. However, she agreed that asking an intern to investigate every invasive species in Keene would be a big chore, so picking one species or a specific part of the City might be a good idea for the application. Chair Von Plinsky and Ms. Richter agreed that the grant application does not have to be perfect because the faculty advisor and intern would also have input, so the project would evolve.

Ms. LeBlanc asked if the intern could map the most aggressive invasive. To that point, Ms. Richter thought the application should emphasize that the Commission wants this to be an investigation that leads to a plan with a priority list of species or areas, and a framework for addressing them. The Commission agreed that the goal is to identify priority species and priority areas, on City land first. Councilor Williams said he had ideas to share.

Mr. Bergman asked about the application. Ms. Richter said the internship application was a short online form. Mr. Bill asked if it would be an ongoing program, as there would be more opportunities in the fall. Ms. Richter was unsure; this was a pilot program.

Mr. Haynes noted that the City was leading projects focused on the City wards. He said that those could be good target areas/boundaries for this effort too. Ms. Richter agreed that there could be various ways to coordinate this effort, and boundaries did not have to be defined for the grant application.

Mr. Haynes asked if the Commission could submit for more than one project. Ms. Richter said yes, but she advised picking the strongest project.

Chair Von Plinsky and Councilor Williams agreed to work together to help draft the internship application. The Commission agreed to focus on some sort of an invasive species inventory, as emphasis on education and workshops in the community could be a part of this.

B) Airport Proposed Wildlife Control Fence

No updates.

C) Keene Meadow Solar Station Project Update

No updates.

D) NHDOT Route 101 Project

Chair Von Plinsky reported some updates on the Swanzey Factory Road & Rt. 101 project, as the website indicated movement into the design phase. It seemed to be moving forward with design alternative #2, which is closer to Marlborough and further from the bridge. The timeline for the project was still unclear. Mr. Bergman asked if that was the alternative further from the Stone Arch Bridge and Chair Von Plinsky said yes. The Chair said it was pretty clear that no parties were in favor of options closer to the bridge. Mr. Bergman thought that this was synchronized with the final placement of a bridge the City paid \$1 for but Chair Von Plinsky said he could not speak to that.

E) Master Plan Update

Chair Von Plinsky invited Commissioners to a Future Summit on October 5 from 9:00 AM–12:00 PM at Heberton Hall. This would conclude the first stage of the Master Plan process. All Master Plan Steering Committee meetings are open to the public, and the next would be October 1 at 6:00 in the Council Chamber at City Hall. Ms. Brunner said the Steering Committee was working on defining the strategic pillars of the Master Plan to be used at the Future Summit. Ms. Brunner explained that a task force would be formed for each strategic pillar. One strategic pillar would be focused on environmental stewardship and climate action (not exact wording), which might be of interest to Commissioners. Chair Von Plinsky would be tabling about this at the Clean Energy Fair at the Dillant Hopkins Airport on September 28, which is another opportunity to provide input about the Master Plan process.

Vice Chair Madison arrived.

Chair Von Plinsky urged Commissioners to mention conservation and environmentally sensible planning any time they bump into a City Councilor; every little bit helps.

F) Outreach

Mr. Haynes noted that the Greater Goose Pond Forest Stewardship Subcommittee had been focused on trails for some time but would be shifting some focus to outreach opportunities in addition to its Goose Pond Through the Seasons events. He had many ideas he was considering.

Ms. Brunner noted that the Antioch University New England Community Service Initiative (CSI) would be reopening again soon. While the Commission's applications had not been chosen in past years, she wondered if a shift toward outreach might be more appealing to a graduate student intern. Ms. Brunner would look into the deadlines and communicate with Mr. Haynes.

6) New or Other Business

Chair Von Plinsky recalled the Commission discussing its responsibility to monitor conservation easements in the City of Keene annually. He thought there were five. He was hoping to distribute them over several months between Commissioners who were not already overly committed to Commission activities. Ms. Richter and Mr. Bergman offered to help. Mr. Haynes thought that

most easements were fairly small. Chair Von Plinsky said that if the monitoring checklists were actually lost (as discussed earlier in the meeting), the Commission and staff would work to recreate them, and Mr. Bergman offered to help.

The Commission wished Ms. Stanish well and thanked her for her participation, as this would be her last meeting.

December 2024 would be the end of Chair Von Plinsky's and Mr. Bergman's memberships. Chair Von Plinsky would send recommendations for new membership to Mayor Kahn who makes official appointments; others could make recommendations too. The Commission has seven members and five alternates. Regular members can request to transition to alternates when their terms end. Chair Von Plinsky said he would recommend advancing Mr. Therriault and Ms. LeBlanc from alternates to regular members. Anyone interested in being Chair or Vice Chair are welcome attend the monthly meetings with Ms. Brunner before Commission meetings to get a sense of that commitment (can attend remotely as well).

Mr. Bill asked if the law passed allowing municipalities to require elections of conservation commissioners. Ms. Richter said it did pass and that choice is up to municipalities, it is not required.

Mr. Bergman asked for an update on the City's offer on the Hull Forest Products property on the Washington Street Extension. Ms. Brunner had no comment or update.

Mr. Bergman recalled the Commission discussing Ladies' Wildwood Park last year because of red pines dying due to both age and disease, as well as lots of knotweed in the park. He said the knotweed is extensive and would be potentially easily removed with equipment. He wondered if removing the two species could be synchronized. He thought the forestry plan might be longer term, but stated that the park has the most conspicuous, huge patch of knotweed in west Keene. Mr. Bergman reiterated that Ladies' Wildwood Park needs a forestry plan. He said this is a project the Commission should be working on, citing the dangers of disease hitting this monoculture of red pines, or a storm. Councilor Williams thought he recalled that last year, the Conservation Commission wrote a letter to the City Council about a forestry management plan, which resulted in something proposed in the City's Capital Improvement Plan (CIP), and he thought it included something for Ladies' Wildwood Park, including the red pines; the CIP is a long-term plan, so those projects do not happen immediately. Mr. Bergman asked who would manage that project. Ms. Brunner said Parks & Recreation. Ms. Brunner recalled that in 2023, the Commission submitted a proposal to Antioch University for Ladies' Wildwood Park that was not accepted, which they could resubmit or try for the NHACC internship; she would forward it to the Commission again. Mr. Bergman did not want to compete for the NHACC internship if they would be more competitive for invasives.

Ms. Clark recalled that many years ago, Mr. Bohannon was working with Matt Kelly, the Cheshire County Forester, on the red pines at Ladies' Wildwood Park. At one point, Ms. Clark shared a firm she had worked with that was good with herbicides, and Mr. Bohannon indicated that there was a lot of pushback from the City against pesticide use. Discussion briefly ensued about the methods Mr. Milliken would hopefully share when he would visit the Commission,

including stump treatment of buckthorn. Even if the use of an herbicide was approved, the City would need someone licensed to apply it.

Discussion also ensued about how far out the Ladies' Wildwood Park project might be in the CIP, but Ms. Brunner was unsure. The CIP is updated every two years by the Planning Board and the City Council, and those interested should attend those hearings. It was just updated and approved this year. It is organized by department, and this project would fall under Parks & Recreation. Mr. Bergman asked who would advocate to ensure a project like this would come to fruition—the public, Parks & Recreation, or City Council? Ms. Brunner replied that there are multiple levels of review by the City Manager; Planning Board; Finance, Organization, & Personnel Committee; and ultimately the City Council.

Mr. Bill asked about the letter the Commission received about the Bretwood Golf Course, noting that it seemed the project should have been completed and it was hard to tell what was going on. He asked if anyone had more context because he felt like the Commission had been left out of the loop. Chair Von Plinsky replied that he did not remember exactly. Ms. Brunner thought the Commission received a letter from the NH Department of Environmental Services after someone reported a violation to them, and after that, she thought everything was via email; she did not recall someone presenting before the Commission. Ms. Clark said the Ashuelot River Local Advisory Committee (ARLAC) was informed about it. She said the property owner tried to put in a dam on the Ashuelot River to retain water so they could pump it out, but they were chastised for it.

Mr. Bill said he had the opportunity to visit the present-day George Street Bridge and he had a whole different perspective being able to see the vertical walls basically right at the edge of the bridge. He said it was kind of a mess. In the future, he hopes the Commission will have the opportunity to look at these things in advance.

7) **Adjourn – Next Meeting Date: Monday, October 21, 2024**

There being no further business, Chair Von Plinsky adjourned the meeting at 5:48 PM.

Respectfully submitted by,
Katrinya Kibler, Minute Taker
September 23, 2024

Reviewed and edited by,
Mari Brunner, Senior Planner