

City of Keene
New Hampshire

MUNICIPAL SERVICES, FACILITIES AND INFRASTRUCTURE COMMITTEE
MEETING MINUTES

Wednesday, March 10, 2021

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 Fox, HR Director/Assistant City
Manager
Rebecca Landry, IT Director/Assistant City
Manager
Andy Bohannon, Director of Parks,
Recreation & Facilities
John Rogers, Zoning Administrator
Kürt Blomquist, Director of Public
Works/Emergency Management Director
Don Lussier, City Engineer
Rhett Lamb, Community Development
Director/Assistant City Manager

Members Not Present:

Chair Manwaring 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 the meeting to order at 5:33 PM and Committee members stated their locations and whether they were alone.

1) Kevin Leary – Amended Request for Property Access off the Old Gilsum Road Through City of Keene Utility Road

Chair Manwaring welcomed Mr. Leary, who addressed the amendment to his February 6, 2021 request. With this amendment, Mr. Leary now sought permission to use a gated utility road maintained by the Public Works Department that abuts the Fontaine property, which he has permission from the owner to access for recreation. The utility road leads to a City water tower. This request is to allow his motor vehicle on that utility road so that he can access the Fontaine property without interfering with recreation on Old Gilsum Road, which was an expressed concern with his original request.

Vice Chair Giacomo said he received questions from constituents about the type of activities Mr. Leary would be engaging in on the property; would there be hunting, trapping, or potential impacts to the general area and not just Old Gilsum Road. While Mr. Leary was not obligated legally to

reply, the Vice Chair asked. Mr. Leary replied that his activities would be strictly recreational, creating trails for utility work by ATV, and his means of preserving the land.

Chair Manwaring requested comments from the Director of Parks, Recreation & Facilities, Andy Bohannon. Mr. Bohannon said that this request had pivoted since the last meeting's discussion about concerns for recreation on Old Gilsum Road. The Greater Goose Pond Forest conservation easement signed by the City Council in 2009 is held by the Society for Preservation of NH Forests. Mr. Leary seeks to access the lot, where the water tower is located. At present, Mr. Bohannon was unsure whether the conservation easement would limit the City's ability to grant access over that parcel; he thought such access would be likely limited but Staff were still researching and gathering information from Society for Preservation of NH Forests. Mr. Bohannon requested that the Committee place the matter on more time to allow Staff to learn more, gain input from the City Attorney, and return with a full understanding.

Chair Manwaring welcomed public comment.

Robert Shalit of 350 Water Street recalled that Mr. Leary's original request was to access the property two or three times annually and now the request was to access the parcel three or four times annually with a four-wheel vehicle, which Mr. Shalit said looked large. Mr. Leary said he would only be accessing with an ATV. Mr. Shalit requested more detail on the activities Mr. Leary intended to pursue on the property; would he be hunting, shooting, or trapping? Mr. Leary said that there might be hunting on that property. Mr. Shalit asked if Mr. Leary was aware of the pervasive hiking and biking trails surrounding that property. Mr. Leary said that was the case for most hunting roads and private properties that abut recreational areas. Mr. Leary said that hunting is a recreational sport. Mr. Shalit asked if Mr. Leary was aware of how heavily the surrounding area is used for recreation. Mr. Leary replied in the affirmative, adding that he hikes the Old Gilsum Road area daily. Mr. Shalit continued that the recreational trails surrounding this property are used by all people – snowshoeing, horseback riding, cycling, and more. Despite changing his request to access via the water tower road, Mr. Shalit asked whether Mr. Leary would still be accessing the same gate that opens to Old Gilsum Road. Mr. Leary replied no, with the amended request, his activities would never touch Old Gilsum Road; he would use a gate at the top of the neighborhood property that connects to the water tower utility road.

Chair Manwaring asked Mr. Bohannon to comment on gate access and he said that at the top of the Meetinghouse Road cul-de-sac there is an access road to the City's water tower, which is where Mr. Leary sought to access.

Chair Manwaring took final comments from Mr. Shalit, who asked whether Mr. Leary was comfortable hunting on the property despite it being surrounded by trails used actively, adding that he had never experienced anything like this and that the area had always been off-limits to motor vehicles. Mr. Leary replied that this was simply a matter of his personal recreation choices, which include hunting, on a private parcel where he has permission to engage in these activities. Mr. Leary concluded that many private lots surrounding this one in question were hunted long before he

moved into the Drummer Hill Homeowners Association and he suspected the same was true for public lands not in conservation easement where the activity is allowed. Mr. Shalit said he would comment further at the next hearing.

Vice Chair Giacomo made the following motion, which Councilor Filiault seconded. On a roll call vote of 5-0, the Municipal Services, Facilities & Infrastructure Committee recommended placing the request on more time for one cycle.

2) Grant Application for Transportation Heritage Trail – City Engineer

Chair Manwaring welcomed the City Engineer, Don Lussier, who was present to request Council authority to submit a grant application for the Transportation Heritage Trail. The City Engineer recalled that the fiscal year (FY) 2021 Capital Improvement Program includes this project as the City's next iteration of the trail development program. The City first began investing in trail properties in 1998, demonstrating a long series of investments and commitments to developing the trail network since. This FY21 phase is the first in a long term vision to extend the trail from existing Rail Trail parking at Eastern Avenue and eventually connecting to trails improved already in Swanzey. This grant application for phase one focuses on the section from Eastern Avenue to RT-101, ending there for now with signage about the coming trail features, including a historic bridge installation to connect this network over RT-101 to the Stone Arch Bridge. Phase one would also include addition of needed trail amenities and connecting the trail to neighborhoods off of Chapman Road and Marlboro Street using City owned property that was the old Chapman Road. City Staff requested that the City Council grant authority to submit the grant application and requested that the Mayor sign a letter on behalf of the City Council expressing the legislative body's support for this project.

Councilor Williams asked when the final connections were projected. Mr. Lussier said that completion is planned for FY27, though he said much of that is driven by the need to seek outside grant funding to continue pursuing the project's conclusion.

Vice Chair Giacomo asked about the plan for a crossing at Eastern Avenue, noting that the other Rail Trail crossings are bold, and recalling recent discussion of pedestrian challenges on that thoroughfare. Mr. Lussier admitted there was no plan at present and that concepts were under discussion in advance of concrete recommendations that would arise from the formal design phase. At this time, Mr. Lussier imagined a mid-block crossing with a rapidly flashing beacon similar to the one at Keene State College on Main Street. Pedestrians always have the right-of-way and such street features make drivers aware of unique conditions.

Vice Chair Giacomo referenced the stone buttress at the end of Eastern Avenue, where the trail used to end, and asked whether this phase of the trail would go around that. Mr. Lussier said that stone abutment was a part of the spur that diverged from the Cheshire branch at that location, carrying the privately owned railroad to a quarry in Roxbury. The Transportation Heritage Trail would not follow that same line but rather stay south, or right if facing the abutment. Mr. Lussier continued

that the Rail Trail bed is flat to that end of Marlboro Street. He added that there is also a stone abutment at RT-101, opposite the Stone Arch Bridge, where a steel mechanism that carried cars over RT-101 was taken down because it was too low for modern trucking. In later phases of this project, the historic Robert Cross Bridge would be relocated there to carry the Transportation Heritage Trail over that section of RT-101.

Councilor Williams said he would love to see the Eastern Avenue crossing be an opportunity for a raised speed table in addition to the beacons to help mitigate citizen expressed speed issues there as a safer practice for pedestrians. Councilor Williams complimented the project and hoped it would be funded and working as soon as possible. He said the Transportation Heritage Trail was not only important for recreation and bringing tourists to Keene but also as a potential commuter artery with economic benefits if it is easier to arrive from Swanzey, especially with increased use of electric bikes.

Vice Chair Giacomo made the following motion, which Councilor Filiault seconded. On a roll call vote of 5-0, the Municipal Services, Facilities & Infrastructure Committee recommended that the City Manager be authorized to do all things necessary to apply for a Transportation Alternatives Program grant for the Transportation Heritage Trail; and further, that the City Council forward a support letter, signed by the Mayor, to the New Hampshire Department of Transportation on the project.

3) Presentation on Hundred Nights

Chair Manwaring welcomed Jan Peterson and Nikki Sauber. Ms. Peterson had served on the Hundred Nights Board since 2017 and acted as its Chair for approximately one and one half years; she was retired from 24 years as a public defender for Sullivan and Cheshire Counties and as such, she was experienced in poverty law. Ms. Sauber was a member of the Hundred Nights Board of Directors and Chair of the Hundred Nights Advocacy Committee; she had been engaged with the organization since she was a student in Antioch University New England's Advocacy and Social Justice Program followed by her work for the Monadnock United Way, for which she still served on the Board.

Ms. Peterson said that when Hundred Nights began in 2010, it was founded on the mission that still drives their work with guests daily: respect, dignity, and compassion. When Hundred Nights opened, it was to serve needs of the most vulnerable populations during the 100 coldest nights of the year. Since then, the shelter has evolved into a year-round emergency shelter. Hundred Nights had evolved to meet the community needs over the last decade, beginning with year-round emergency shelter for families when there was a shortage of beds throughout the state. Hundred Nights collaborates with Southwestern Community Services (SWCS) Center for Violence Prevention and welcomes people that other shelters would not accept, because Hundred Nights has trauma-informed care. Ms. Peterson said that Hundred Nights would continue surviving through partnerships between the City, County, State, grant writers, and community members who donate their expertise pro bono.

Ms. Sauber continued by explaining that the Hundred Nights emergency shelter on Lamson Street accommodates 24 beds, with 24 additional offsite beds for winter overflow. Hundred Nights provides basic needs services to guests including personal care products, basic sanitation needs, and access to phones and computers. Hundred Nights also helps guests make vital connections to other service providers in the community that help guests transition from the shelter to more stable ground. These additional case management services – for which a full-time employee was hired last year – help guests with needs such as getting birth certificates or rides to appointments. Ms. Sauber said that Hundred Nights had evolved over time to fill gaps in existing services for the populations they aid, and such an evolution continues to be possible only due to taking advantage of partnership opportunities to stay relevant over time. Ms. Peterson added that there are basic needs so many of us take for granted and Hundred Nights tries to help people get started with those needs when they sometimes show up with nothing. Hundred Nights wants homelessness to be in the rear view mirror for each guest.

Ms. Peterson continued explaining how Hundred Nights had adapted to the challenges of Covid-19. St. James Church and the United Church of Christ typically provide 24 overflow beds but both locations were forced to close this past winter due to Covid-19, which put pressure on Hundred Nights. With creative and professional contributions from community members, services were provided that Hundred Nights could not afford otherwise – a pro bono lawyer who helped with the Zoning Board of Adjustment, donations from C&S Grocers, and more. A community member determined how to acquire a bus for overflow, which Ms. Peterson called creative but said it was not popular with some. The Lamson Street location is now adapted to CDC guidelines thanks to grant funds and there is now overflow at the Holiday Inn. Reverend Elsa helped provide access to the closed St. James Thrift Store for more socially distant space.

Ms. Sauber discussed the people Hundred Nights served in 2020. The populations that Hundred Nights and SWCS serve are some of the most vulnerable in the community, including those with disabilities, mental illnesses, and no income or incredibly low income only from social service funding. The number of people seeking to access Hundred Nights had increased 176% since 2016, which Ms. Sauber said could not be ignored. Homelessness is also increasing statewide – 27% in since 2016 – and 35% of people experiencing homelessness in NH are families with children under 18 years old. Housing rates had been increasing statewide (slightly lower in Cheshire County) and there was a lack of affordable housing for vulnerable populations whose numbers are not decreasing. Ms. Sauber said that Hundred Nights was in a challenging position trying to work with the community to figure out how to meet every increasing needs.

Ms. Peterson discussed underlying causes of homelessness. She said there is a local focus on workforce housing but many employees in Keene and the Monadnock region cannot afford to rent here. Unemployment during Covid-19 brought eviction to the surface and there were still great risks despite some of the government preventions. Hundred Nights serves a diverse populations coping with mental illness, substance use disorders, domestic violence, catastrophic illnesses when people are discharged from the hospital with nowhere to go, other crises, and natural disasters. She said

that everyone has a story and needs. The Police Department is also aware of the potential for challenges with guests. Staff and volunteers work hard with guests on skill developments that help their track toward long-term housing. Still, there would always be need for an emergency shelter. Being operationally nimble and providing this continuum of services allows Hundred Nights to help such diverse populations. She said that Staff and volunteers are invested emotionally and do their best day and night. She reminded everyone that some in our community have fallen on hard times but that a smile and conversation go far.

Ms. Sauber said the Hundred Nights looked forward to securing a new building to meet the community's needs safely and adequately so that case management services could be incorporated more to help people transition to housing and beyond. Securing funding is a consistent sustainability factor and Hundred Nights cannot accomplish this work alone. They were grateful for the opportunity to educate the community on what Hundred Nights does, why it is important, and how the community can partner together. Ms. Peterson ended with a quote from a guest: "Hundred Nights has provided me a safe, secure place to go when I needed protection from a former boyfriend. I had a court protection order and did not know what state of mind he would be in after being released from jail. Mindy, Jeff, and all the Staff gave me help and support. Hundred Nights is a great place of support for people like me. I've never, ever had this type of protection."

Chair Manwaring said she shared Ms. Peterson's and Ms. Sauber's passion.

Councilor Chadbourne noticed that vision services were listed on one slide but she did not see dental, which she thought would be important if guests were in pain. Ms. Peterson said that dental was not a service at present due to Covid-19 but efforts were underway to restore that and other services truncated due to Covid-19.

Councilor Williams thanked those involved for their great work for the people of Keene who need help. He was impressed with the operation and hoped they received the support needed. There were no public comments. Chair Manwaring is on the Board of Directors for Hundred Nights but because this was not a vote on finances, no Committee members expressed a need for her recusal.

Vice Chair Giacomo made the following motion, which Councilor Filiault seconded. On a roll call vote of 5-0, the Municipal Services, Facilities & Infrastructure Committee recommended that the City Council accept the presentation on Hundred Nights as informational.

4) Adjournment

There being no further business, Chair Manwaring adjourned the meeting at 6:29 PM.

Respectfully submitted by,
Katrnya Kibler, Minute Taker