

**City of Keene**  
**New Hampshire**

**CONSERVATION COMMISSION**  
**MEETING MINUTES**

**Monday, August 21, 2023**

**4:30 PM**

**Room 22,  
Recreation Center**

**Members Present:**

Alexander Von Plinsky, IV, Chair  
Councilor Andrew Madison, Vice Chair (4:41 PM)  
Eloise Clark  
Councilor Robert Williams  
Art Walker  
Ken Bergman  
Steven Bill  
John Therriault, Alternate (Voting)  
Brian Reilly, Alternate (Voting)  
Thomas Haynes, Alternate

**Staff Present:**

Mari Brunner, Senior Planner  
Kürt Blomquist, Public Works  
Director/Assistant City  
Manager/Emergency Management  
Director

**Members Not Present:**

Lee Stanish, Alternate  
Deborah LeBlanc, Alternate

**1) Call to Order**

Chair Von Plinsky called the meeting to order at 4:30 PM and roll call ensued. The following guests were present: Paul Henkel, Peter Hansel, Nancy Ancharski, Sarah Ellsworth, and Jamie Doherty.

**2) Approval of Meeting Minutes – July 17, 2023**

Revisions: line 107, change “pointed out” to “questioned.” Line 266, change “any regulatory approval process” to “any role in the regulatory approval process.” Line 355, change “the Planning Board referral” to “the Planning Board wetlands CUP referral.”

A motion by Mr. Walker to approve the July 17, 2023 minutes as amended was duly seconded by Mr. Bergman, and the motion carried unanimously.

3) **Report-Outs**

A) **Greater Goose Pond Forest Stewardship Subcommittee**

Mr. Haynes reported that Lew Shelley of Snowhawk LLC, the Goose Pond trail maintenance contractor, would be finishing his work within the few weeks after this meeting. The new bridge was nearly complete and most of the major trail reroute was complete. The old bridge would be removed the day after this meeting. Then, all that would remain is tidying the trail after the machinery had come in and out. There were also some steps from the north trailhead to finish. Ms. Clark noted that there was a recent article in the Keene Sentinel about this work at Goose Pond.

B) **Outreach**

Mr. Haynes reported that the Outreach workgroup had not met since the last meeting. He recalled that he needed to step back from leading this workgroup to devote his time to the Goose Pond Subcommittee. Mr. Haynes noted that some of the long-term Commissioners' terms were ending at the end of 2023, and he felt like a new generation of Commissioners could lead this effort. Determining the new leader should be a focus on the September agenda.

C) **Invasive Species**

Councilor Williams reported that after the July Conservation Commission meeting, volunteers met at the Woodland Cemetery and removed a lot of Japanese knotweed. This was the second year removing knotweed at this location along Beaver Brook and he thought there was a lot of improvement since last year. He recalled the need to remove knotweed from the same location several years in a row to ensure it does not come back. Councilor Williams said there would be another invasive event immediately after this meeting to address more knotweed at the Ladies' Wildwood Park, where Mr. Bergman said there is a clear knotweed monoculture. Councilor Williams agreed with Mr. Bergman that it could require equipment or chemicals to treat/remove the knotweed at this location in the future. For now, Councilor Williams was interested in clearing and keeping the knotweed from encroaching on one area. Councilor Williams also wanted to discuss purple loosestrife. He said this invasive was all over the cemetery and he did not know what to do about it. He said there was more than he had seen in previous years. Pulling the plant is challenging and is not something Councilor Williams would want to task volunteers with.

Mr. Bergman noted that when he was a professor at Keene State College (KSC), a colleague co-ran a trial release of beetles (supplied by another institution) to target purple loosestrife. The program lasted several years, but Mr. Bergman was unsure of the conclusion.

Chair Von Plinsky noted that when driving down Maple Avenue recently, he saw that someone removed knotweed from Dinsmoor Woods. Mr. Bergman recalled riding his bike in that area a few years ago, when the knotweed was so pervasive it forced him to bike in the street. Mr.

Bergman also mentioned a recent walk along Arch Street, where he noticed that a vehicle had left the roadway, hit, and destroyed the bench by the Ladies' Wildwood Park sign.

**D) Land Conservation**

Chair Von Plinsky said the workgroup had not met.

**4) Street Tree Discussion – Kürt Blomquist, Public Works Director**

Chair Von Plinsky welcomed the Public Works Director/Assistant City Manager/Emergency Management Director, Kürt Blomquist, to talk about street trees. In his 29 years as Keene's Public Works Director, he had experimented with many things tree related. Keene has always been proud of its trees. However, he said it was interesting how many times residents have come to the City Council, requesting that trees be removed. He said the City has no formal forestry program, though he had tried to create one over the years. He said that a challenge of the City Council's fiscal policies is that budgets are based on the Boston Consumer Price Index (CPI), which does not leave a lot of opportunities for additional programs. The City also does not have a formal tree maintenance program. The Downtown Memorial Tree Fund dates back to the 1988 downtown renovation and created funding for specific trees. Today, Mr. Blomquist has \$5,000 in his budget annually to maintain those specific downtown trees (i.e., trimming and replanting). Mr. Blomquist only has \$3,000 annually in his budget for new trees, which is challenging with new trees (2–3-inch caliper that take a decade to fully mature) costing \$600–\$800. Further, he has \$40,600 for emergency tree operations (e.g., a public hazard). When possible, in-house City Staff address these maintenance needs.

Mr. Blomquist continued explaining that when installing new trees, he looks for sugar maples, pin oaks, lindens, birch clusters, Cleveland pears, crab apples, crimson maples, and blue spruces. These species are 14–20 feet high. Species are chosen based on the application and location. Mr. Blomquist avoids planting species that would interfere with electrical lines, for example. Over time, City Staff have also experimented with other tree species, like the American Liberty elm, which are present at the Rt-101 roundabout, along Main Street, and along Winchester Street. There is a different demand for trees in more urban parts of the City. Urban trees must be road salt tolerant, heat tolerant, and taller. Mr. Blomquist also works with the Cheshire County Forester, the state of NH, licensed arborists, and other tree professionals. It is challenging to find licensed arborists to consult on tree projects; former arborists at KSC had retired. Mr. Blomquist had been working with Eversource's arborist. It helps when the Council hears information from a third party versus City Staff. Mr. Blomquist talked about the City's street tree requirements. Street trees are required every 50 feet along both sides of a new street. There is an exception to allow trees within 20 feet of the right-of-way. Trees do not always fit in this right-of-way or might conflict, sometimes requiring going onto private property with an easement that allows the City to maintain the trees. If a property owner wants one of those trees removed, they need City Council permission.

Mr. Blomquist recalled when many Dutch elms were planted in the City in the 1970s. The City had also used ash trees. Now, the City has faced the emerald ash borer for 8 years; before 2015, there were purple traps throughout the City to capture the insect. Now, the emerald ash borer's impacts are visible, particularly in the ash tree canopies downtown. The City has been trying to chemically treat the downtown trees. In City projects, Mr. Blomquist avoids planting monocultures of trees in favor of more biodiversity, which can prevent an insect/disease from destroying all of the trees. He has considered a public campaign (perhaps this Commission could help) about addressing this infestation. There is not strong legislation in NH for dealing with trees on private properties. When managing/taking down infected trees, there is a risk of spreading insects/disease to other nearby trees. He said the best option is to treat the trees for as long as possible before eventually having to remove them.

Mr. Blomquist continued explaining that the Public Works Department is responsible for managing Keene's urban forest and all open land. There had been Staff concern about who is responsible for monitoring and maintaining conservation land donations. Mr. Blomquist had been having this conversation with the Director of Parks, Recreation, and Facilities, Andy Bohannon. Mr. Blomquist also mentioned that after the 1938 hurricane, George Wheelock planted white and red pines that worked very well for close to 80 years but had now reached the end of their useful lives. He recalled that 1–2 years ago, Staff removed many trees along Maple Avenue because they had become hazardous to the roadway and park users. While many community members were upset about this, Mr. Blomquist said it would have only taken one severe ice storm to significantly damage those trees. Looking ahead, Mr. Blomquist said that unfortunately, the future of Keene's street trees depends largely on funding.

Councilor Williams appreciated that summary. With the potential to lose many ash street trees, the Councilor's concern was how to replace them. He mentioned the need for shade trees and the desire for natural areas. He said that the City Council had seen new requests from residents to remove City-owned trees every few months, many of which he said had not been replaced. A lot of trees on private property are dying too. Councilor William would like to locate some funding for trees as a project in the Capital Improvement Plan (CIP). It would need to be a reasonably solid plan for the City Council to get behind it. He wondered what would be possible if that money was allocated. Councilor Williams also suggested pursuing grants for buying and replacing trees.

Mr. Blomquist said there would need to be 2 pieces of a forest management program: 1) inventory – there is already a fairly good one of the immediate downtown and KSC areas (an aerial inventory is possible), and 2) education – it is important for the public to know that older tree roots are attracted to the wet underground sewer infrastructure and compromise those pipes. Most trees cannot be replaced in the exact same location because of remnants of the old trees. Mr. Blomquist gave examples of the constraints of the right-of-way. In the 1960s/1970s, the City Council declared that anything in the right-of-way would be under the City's control, but there is case law that could challenge that. The City owns a lot of trees on newer streets from the 1940s–

1960s. Mr. Blomquist suggested that the Conservation Commission could recommend the first step—a tree inventory—to the City Council.

Mr. Therriault asked how the Liberty elms had worked over the last 30 years. Mr. Blomquist replied that it takes 15–20 years for the Liberty elms to mature and to determine whether they will survive. He said the City was reaching the time when it would be clear whether the Liberty elms would survive or be resistant to the Dutch elm disease. Several of the trees had been lost during that time, which could happen to any species. He said the rest seem to be thriving. Mr. Therriault asked if there was a plan for at least 1 Liberty elm on Central Square as a part of the downtown project. Mr. Blomquist said Central Square is unique. The goal is to have minimal impacts to Central Square as a result of this downtown infrastructure project and thus, no new trees are planned at this time. The water line under Central Square would be abandoned to minimize the impact there. For example, the oak across from the church is 125 years old.

Mr. Bergman talked about a tree inventory and specifically about elms. The largest elm he had ever seen on the west side of Keene was killed by roadwork approximately 20 years ago. He asked if the City had a list of the elms in Keene. Mr. Blomquist said he has a general list but not a specific inventory of those within the right-of-way. He was not aware of many. Mr. Blomquist said the elm killed by road work was already well on its way to removal; the roadway is a very harsh environment. When talking about this aspiration of a tree inventory—which would be limited by money, volunteers, etc.—Mr. Bergman asked if it would be exclusively a right-of-way inventory. Mr. Blomquist replied that at this point, focusing on the right-of-way would be the most manageable but he thought that enlisting property owners to do their own inventories was possible; there are web-based crowdsourcing tools available for such an effort. Still, Mr. Blomquist’s responsibility is within the right-of-way and parks that the City owns. There needs to be a focus on public input about the City’s parks over the next decade. Mr. Bergman asked how the right-of-way is defined. Mr. Blomquist said it is the space where the City has the rights for pass and repass. Prior to the 1940s, the right-of-way was 33.33 feet or 2 rods wide; the middle of the road is a general marker, but not all roads were built in the center of a space. Post-1940s, the general right-of-way width in most neighborhoods is 40–50 feet. In some areas, like downtown, the right-of-way is 134 feet or 8 rods. Residents are often surprised that their property does not go all the way to the pavement edge; they usually own anywhere from 4–15 feet back from the pavement edge.

Ms. Clark reviewed the downtown tree study by Bartlett Tree Experts, and she found it detailed and impressive. With the ever-shifting plans for the downtown project, she asked how Mr. Blomquist perceived the project impacting the carefully laid-out plans espoused in the tree study. Mr. Blomquist said that tree study was the second one in the last decade and helped to identify the trees’ general health and specifically, the high priority trees that the project should try to work around. Those trees would be considered in the next design decisions by the City Council over the next 6 months. Mr. Blomquist said that how the Council uses the tree study to determine tree maintenance and funding would be important. Ms. Clark asked about recommendations to create more collars around trees. Mr. Blomquist said little had been done about that

recommendation to date because there is insufficient space. Most trees downtown are rootbound. Such recommendations could act as guidance for the downtown project and tree survival for the next 30 years.

Ms. Ellsworth is a resident of the Edgewood neighborhood, where there are huge pines. She said there had been an issue with removing the pines that had reached the end of their useful lives and were causing problems. She has removed 20 large pines from her 1/3-acre property over the last 24 years and replaced them with things like oak seedlings that only needed a few years of tending. She noted how some people are impatient with the time it takes for a big tree canopy to develop. Mr. Blomquist noted the difference between trees in the right-of-way and those on private property, as those along the roadway must be heartier to withstand things like road salt and snowbanks. Ms. Ellsworth said she was thinking more about locations like Ladies' Wildwood Park and Wheelock Park. Mr. Blomquist said those discussions are needed as there are different priorities at different locations. Ms. Ellsworth wondered whether the budget could be stretched at some locations by planting smaller trees. Mr. Blomquist said his recommendation was for the Conservation Commission to continue this discussion about the parks into the future in consultation with Mr. Bohannon.

Mr. Hansel recalled that Keene has been designated as a Tree City USA for many years. Mr. Blomquist agreed, noting that Keene just received its designation for the 41<sup>st</sup> year. Mr. Hansel asked if there are any responsibilities associated with that. Mr. Blomquist says he has to complete the application each year and report on newly planted trees. Keene continues to meet the minimum for this designation and is the second longest Tree City USA designation in NH. Mr. Hansel urged keeping as many mature trees as possible during the downtown project and, where they cannot be retained, to plant new trees where possible. He hoped that Mr. Blomquist would continue speaking for the trees as the final design comes to fruition. Mr. Blomquist agreed that during his time in Keene, the trees remained a priority. In many cases, he has left trees beyond their useful life because he knows the public's reaction when trees are removed, especially downtown, where the tree canopy is valued. Mr. Hansel said he is a member of the City's Energy and Climate Committee and noted that trees play a role in reducing greenhouse gas emissions and heat. Mr. Blomquist agreed that heat especially is an emerging issue in NH, where there are ample shelters to escape winter weather but not to escape the summer heat. Mr. Hansel referred to 2 big elm trees planted 20 years ago on Washington Street near the Recreation Center, noting that the trees were 10 years old when planted. He said those were examples of the time it takes for trees to mature.

Ms. Ancharski echoed Mr. Hansel's comments about retaining/replacing trees downtown. Regarding the conceptual design accepted by the City Council, she said 60 trees were planned for removal, versus the Municipal Services, Facilities, and Infrastructure Committee's recommendation of 32 trees. She was concerned about that significant difference. Mr. Blomquist said he would have to refer to the project notes, but he did not recall that difference, which Ms. Ancharski said she was sure about. Mr. Blomquist said most of the tree impacts are due to the utility work, and those utility plans were the same across all the concept designs considered. Ms.

Ancharski said she walked Main Street and Central Square to count all the trees lining the sidewalks. She counted 61 and asked everyone to keep that in mind.

Mr. Bergman said he would like to see follow-up tree inventories in 2–3 years and 10 years later to best understand the results. Mr. Blomquist thought the Commission has an opportunity for greater influence, especially in terms of education. Also, the Conservation Commission is a sub-committee of the City Council and can help the Council remember conservation foci. Mr. Blomquist was grateful for the Commission’s continued support.

5) **Discussion Items**

**A) Society for the Protection of NH Forests**

Chair Von Plinsky recalled that the Society for the Protection of NH Forests requested comments on their re-accreditation process. He agreed with Ms. Clark that the Commission is not the best entity to make those comments. This would be removed from the agenda moving forward.

**B) Keene Meadow Solar Station Update**

This should remain on the agenda. No one had heard about a public walk yet.

**C) Potential Land Purchase Update (Rt 9/Washington St. Ext. Properties)**

Chair Von Plinsky recalled that the Commission recommended to the City Council to offer the assessed value of these properties to Hull Forest Products. Hull replied with what the Chair called an astronomical asking price. So, unfortunately, it did not look like the City would be able to purchase these 2 properties. He thought the Commission could take some solace in the fact that one of the parcels is beyond developable, but he added that he does not put anything past a developer. Hull Forest Products asked for \$150,000 for both parcels, which is essentially double what they paid for it. Chair Von Plinsky said the Commission could recommend paying that total to City Council, but that would nearly eliminate the funds left in the Land Use Change Tax Fund (\$200,000 by December 2023). The Chair did not think this would be wise.

Ms. Clark wondered about only purchasing the one property near Beaver Brook Falls that would have the greatest impact on flooding in downtown Keene. Chair Von Plinsky thought that might be an option, but he was unsure of the asking price for the individual parcels. Ms. Clark requested more information on this option from Ms. Brunner.

Mr. Therriault said that Hull Forest Products owns the properties at present and would be paying property taxes until they no longer own them. So, he thought the City could make them an offer for the one parcel, and if they are not interested, advise them that they can follow-up again when they are tired of paying the taxes. Chair Von Plinsky agreed.

Mr. Bergman said he looked up these tax map parcels, and the documents showed that these 2 parcels were purchased on March 15, 2023 for \$52,800 each. Ms. Brunner said the Commission's recommendation to the City Council was to purchase both parcels together for the then assessed value of about \$75,000. Hull Forest Products paid more than the assessed value because they were focused on the revenue from logging all the timber from these two parcels. The assessing website should list the 2023 assessed values. Mr. Bergman was unsure of those numbers and what factored into them. He said the numbers on the map were not clear to the average user. Ms. Brunner would follow up with the City Manager to see if there is an option to purchase only 1 of the properties. She noted her understanding that the assessed value is partly based on the previous sale price, which would be higher because Hull paid over the assessed value, despite them having cleared all the timber. Mr. Bergman said the assessing website listed the properties as purchased for \$52,800 each. Chair Von Plinsky tabled this discussion until the September meeting, when Ms. Brunner would bring more details, and the Commission could make an updated recommendation to the City Council.

Ms. Brunner recalled hearing about a buyer who is interested in the smaller parcel for maple sugar and another buyer was interested in the larger parcel for wind or solar power. The latter would be complicated because they would need a road frontage, and the logging road would not provide that access.

Councilor Williams said Hull Forest Products might have seen their neighbor working on solar energy and realized that temptation. He asked if the larger parcel could be subdivided into 2-acre lots with the latest Zoning change. Ms. Brunner could not recall the Zoning of these parcels but thought they were Rural. As such, there would need to be a way to access the parcel, which is along a limited access highway, and they would have to build a road across other private properties to accomplish that. To Ms. Brunner, these parcels did not seem developable, but someone might find a way.

**D) Airport Proposed Wildlife Control Fence Update**

Chair Von Plinsky recalled that this project was facing some hang-ups in the grant application process. The Commission will await further communication from the Airport Director, David Hickling.

**E) Conservation Commission Speaking Events**

Councilor Madison had no updates.

**F) Wantastiquet-Monadnock Coalition – Request for Commission Assistance with Construction of a Bathroom Along the Wantastiquet-Monadnock Trail**

Chair Von Plinsky recalled that the Commission was contacted about this effort to construct rustic campsites and privies along the Wantastiquet-Monadnock trail. The trail goes through

Keene near the Horatio Colony Nature Preserve. The Wantastiquet-Monadnock Coalition wants Antioch University New England, the Monadnock Conservancy, the Cheshire County Conservation District, and the Keene Conservation Commission to collaborate on building this privy. This would require a \$500 investment and undisclosed volunteer time. Chair Von Plinsky would find out more and report to the Commission in September.

**6) New or Other Business**

**A) Neighborhood Pollinator Garden**

This discussion occurred earlier in the meeting, before agenda item 5.A.

Ms. Doherty was present with other residents of the Edgewood neighborhood. Ms. Ellsworth explained that in the middle of the neighborhood, there is a triangle-shaped piece of land that the City mows and is otherwise only used by kids playing. Many of the trees surrounding this parcel have died. She recalled that Keene is also a Bee City USA. The Edgewood neighbors requested the City's support to develop that parcel as a native pollinator garden. They imagined starting small (21' x 21') and expanding in the future. Ms. Ellsworth cited some of the history of the parcel, such as when it was used for horses and buggies. None of the neighbors were opposed. Ms. Ellsworth's only question was how to get water to the parcel, which might just have to come from the neighbors' properties to start. Creating a garden would save the City from having to mow the parcel. The City's permission would be needed because they own the land. Commissioners supported this idea.

Mr. Blomquist suggested that the neighbors should meet with him and Mr. Bohannon to discuss and check any restrictions on that land. The biggest questions would be about the neighbors' long-term plans to ensure the garden is sustainable. Chair Von Plinsky thought there was a precedent for this proposal. Mr. Blomquist agreed that service clubs (e.g., Kiwanis) have had similar projects in the past. Ultimately, the City Council's permission would be needed too.

Mr. Therriault said he wholeheartedly supported this idea. He agreed to be the Commission's liaison on this project and asked to be included in the planning meetings. Given that this is a previously mowed grass area, Mr. Therriault said a 2-year running start would be needed to smother the grass before overseeding with pollinator friendly wildflowers. After that, the garden should only need maintenance twice per year—weeding in the spring and cutting down stalks to 6 inches off the ground (and hauling away) in the fall. The garden should flower every year or every other year depending on the species. Ms. Doherty also pointed out that there are invasive bittersweet and burning bush around the flagpole near this parcel.

**B) Antioch University New England – Collaborative Service Initiative Request for Proposals**

Chair Von Plinsky recalled that last year, the Commission submitted one of these proposals but did not match with a master's student. The window is open again this year with a September 22

deadline for proposals on a wide range of topics. Commissioners can send ideas to the Chair before the September meeting or bring ideas to the meeting for more discussion. Ms. Brunner would forward the guidelines to the Commission. There is usually a team of students for each project, and they are committed to 400 hours between the end of January and end of April. The students are not compensated, but the Commission would have to pay for things like travel or materials. A member of the Commission would need to act as the project supervisor.

Mr. Haynes asked if a tree inventory could be a viable project. Ms. Brunner thought so, but the Commission was unclear on what level of effort that would require. Perhaps there would be an opportunity to focus on one City ward, for example, versus too wide of a scope. Ms. Brunner thought the Commission could submit multiple proposals for different projects.

Mr. Bergman asked if there was feedback last year on why the Commission's proposal was not chosen. The Chair said no, it just did not align with student interests.

For a narrower scope, Ms. Clark suggested a tree inventory of Robin Hood Park or Beech Hill. Chair Von Plinsky thought the scope might depend on how many students are working on the project. Ms. Clark thought that a smaller area, like Dinsmoor Woods, could be more manageable as a student project.

### **C) Other New Business**

Chair Von Plinsky asked Commissioners to submit (to him via email) 1–2 representative photos from past site visits so he could upload them to the Commission's Flickr account. The Chair will share the public link to view the photos and will work with Ms. Brunner to get a link to Flickr on the Commission's website.

### **7) Adjournment – Next Meeting Date: Monday, September 18, 2023**

There being no further business, Chair Von Plinsky adjourned the meeting at 5:58 PM.

Respectfully submitted by,  
Katelyna Kibler, Minute Taker  
August 28, 2023

Reviewed and edited by,  
Mari Brunner, Senior Planner