

City of Keene
New Hampshire

ASHUELOT RIVER PARK ADVISORY BOARD
MEETING MINUTES

Tuesday, September 12, 2023

8:15 AM

**Room 22,
Recreation Center**

Members Present:

Paul Bocko
Councilor Bettina Chadbourne
Suzy Krautmann
Thomas Haynes, Alternate

Staff Present:

Andy Bohannon, Director of Parks,
Recreation, & Facilities

Members Not Present:

Arthur Winsor, Chair
Ruzzel Zullo, Vice Chair
Steve Hooper
Dian Mathews

1) Welcome & Call to Order

Mr. Bocko acted as Chair. He called the meeting to order at 8:24 AM.

2) Approval of August 8, 2023 Minutes

A motion by Councilor Chadbourne to approve the August 8, 2023 meeting minutes was duly seconded by Mr. Haynes. The motion carried unanimously.

3) Finance Report

Mr. Bohannon reported that he received a receipt from Ms. Mathews, which would show on the budget next month. The Bartlett Tree work would also be accounted for in the budget for next month. The Friends had also purchased landscape fabric.

4) Report from the Friends of the Ashuelot River Park Arboretum

Three members of the Friends were present in Ms. Mathews' absence: Leslie Casey, Karen Flavin, and Raynee Joy.

Ms. Casey reported that Art in the Park occurred, and the Friends had a table. During the two weeks before the event, the Friends worked for 30 hours on the garden beds. They wanted to ensure that the vegetation was not hiding the stones, which paid off because there were many inquiries about the stones as a fundraiser, and the Friends gave out 15 pamphlets. The Friends sold history of the Park books at the

event and collected \$94 in donations. Ms. Casey said someone noticed that they had not planted the stones they had. The Friends also still did not have stone dust but there was a big pile of hard pack. Mr. Bohannon thought his crew had dumped a pile of stone dust. The Friends said more than half was gone and Mr. Bohannon said that it gets hard if it is not used right away. Planting the stones is a lot of manual labor.

Ms. Casey continued reporting that the native rain garden plants were purchased from Bagley Farm Nursery. The plants are on hold in the bridge beds. The plant expert, Julie Barrett, advised that it is best if they are not moved until spring, but Ms. Casey was unsure whether she concurred with that. Thus, the Friends asked for this to be put on the park maintenance schedule to dig the sod in the spring. After this meeting, Mr. Bohannon said he would check the status and get back to the Friends. Ms. Joy asked if it was possible to at least have the ground opened up. Mr. Bohannon said yes. Based on her research, Ms. Casey thought there might be challenges with planting on freshly dug sod. Ms. Casey said the Friends would do their best.

Ms. Joy said the Friends had discussed placing new landscape fabric over the exposed ground this fall to keep the weeds out. If they get it right, the Friends could get a head start because this has already been a year-long effort. The Friends agreed that Ms. Mathews is doing a great job communicating with the Cheshire County Conservation District.

Next, Ms. Casey reported that the Friends were still working hard to remove invasive Japanese knotweed, particularly in the section along the front edge of the wood chips back to the granite benches. Once the knotweed is addressed there, more wood chips would be needed, though not a lot. Mr. Bohannon could get the wood chips for the Friends. Last year, Ms. Joy and Ms. Barrett worked to fill a dozen bags with knotweed. Ms. Joy also reported that Ms. Mathews spoke with a gentleman from the Monadnock Conservancy at Art in the Park, who indicated that several of the trees along the fence would need to be removed, but that does not preclude dealing with the knotweed this fall. The Friends discussed covering the knotweed more to avoid having to continuously cut it year after year (up to 10 years), which is physically and time intensive. The Board agreed that the Friends were doing great work to address the knotweed.

The Friends continued discussing the Mascoma Bank area. They were unsure if they could approach the Bank about the area behind the building that leads into the Park. Ms. Krautmann recalled that during Art in the Park, she noticed a path that led to the parking area, with wood chips on it, and she asked if the City did that. The Friends did not think the City did that. Mr. Bohannon asked where the porta-potties (provided by Art in the Park) were, and Ms. Krautmann said behind the Bank. The path led right to the porta-potties. Discussion ensued about this path. Mr. Bohannon asked for some notice any time the Friends need wood chips. The Friends said they would need wood chips by Friday, September 22, and they would let Mr. Bohannon know how much they need in advance.

Next, the Friends reported on the challenges they were facing with fighting invasive species throughout the park, particularly in really obscure pockets of the park. The Friends thought that the presence of invasive species would not help the visibility of the Friends as an effective organization. They thought that until the Friends could demonstrate that they were doing fun and effective things, they would struggle to recruit more volunteers, especially as many Friends are aging out of the group. The Friends reviewed the Park's Master Plan, in which one of the secondary goals was to develop an invasive

species removal plan for the Park. Ms. Casey's research found that the City of Keene does not have an overall invasive species removal plan, due seemingly to a lack of resources. The Friends recently discovered that a small part of the southwest Park—in the area behind Starbucks—is actually a part of the arboretum and not managed by the City. This area near the dam is a monoculture of glossy buckthorn trees that are spreading into the park and are obscuring the view of the dam/river from certain angles. In theory, that area is the Friends' responsibility, but it is beyond the Friends' capabilities to address it effectively. Mr. Bohannon said he reached out to Ms. Mathews about having a joint meeting of this Board and the Friends in the park related to invasive species. Mr. Bohannon said the invasive issue is significant and the Friends have some knowledge of how to remove those. It would be important to discern how to provide the necessary resources (e.g., funding) to potentially have those invasives removed through a professional service. Mr. Bohannon noted similar challenges with the Pat Russell Park, where the City has now contracted someone to remove invasives five days per year; even after the first three pulls, it looked like they had done no work because those invasives, particularly the knotweed, are so dense. Mr. Bohannon would look into similar options for the Ashuelot River Park.

The Friends also reported that they need help with being able to dedicate more time and effort to horticulture. So, there are some preliminary designs for the expanded pollinator garden. The Friends would be useful for sourcing plants and planning them if not too large. Ms. Casey said the Friends would never get beyond tarping and pulling weeds to deal with these bare beds that are growing weeds, simply because the soil is not shaded by appropriately dense plantings or larger specimens, like shrubs. Mr. Bohannon and the Friends thought it could be helpful to have a large group of volunteers one day as they have in the past. The Friends were in a situation where there are plants they want to keep that, depending on the season, could be very small or look like weeds. There is a challenge with bringing in volunteers who might not know what to do, which could serve to delay progress; the Friends said many of them did not know proper procedures for many years. This idea could work with groups of 4–6 volunteers led by the Friends, so nothing important is damaged. Ms. Casey said they had tried that, but the past volunteers were not enthusiastic or familiar with this work. Cutting knotweed or setting stones would be good projects for volunteers. Mr. Bocko asked if there is a proposal for the plantings. Ms. Casey said the proposal was to plant these beds properly so there is not exposed soil everywhere, which was the only way to be sustainable. Discussion ensued about how tedious it is to get the perennial grasses out of the perennial flower beds without destroying the flowers. If the Board or Mr. Bohannon could help with recruiting volunteers who are experienced gardeners, the Friends would welcome that help.

The Friends remarked on sometimes going in circles trying to develop a shared understanding or make decisions. Thus, this winter, the Friends would use the Park Master Plan as their guide to identify discrete project plans and provide clear project timelines to this Advisory Board. This would help to identify needed sources of funding in advance. The Friends wanted these projects to be more tangible and structured. The Friends also discussed needing a Facebook page to help recruit volunteers, and Ms. Mathews would work on that.

Discussion continued about having a joint meeting in the park. The Board discussed needing public notice if a quorum of this Board meets, even if meeting at the Park at a different time than these Board meetings. Mr. Bohannon would take care of the public notice. The minutes for such a site visit could be simple, just reporting attendance and any votes taken, which Mr. Bohannon could write.

There was a final question about the garden beds. Ms. Krautmann wondered if an annual plant filler could add color. She thought the City provided those downtown. Mr. Bohannon said that the Public Works Department handles the downtown plantings, but he felt like there was an opportunity that the Board was not taking advantage of in its budget. In the past, the Board had paid for a professional landscaper when there were fewer able volunteers. He wondered about bringing that back in a different capacity. The Board could consider how to take full advantage of all the resources available. The Board would have a longer conversation about this in November. Mr. Bohannon and Chair Winsor would think strategically with Ms. Mathews and bring ideas back to the Board. Mr. Bohannon noted that Chuck Sweeney, Superintendent of Maintenance, is retiring at the end of October and his replacement might have new ideas.

Mr. Bohannon thought it would be good for the entire Board to spend a day volunteering in the Park, so they are all familiar with the challenges facing the Friends. The Board tentatively agreed to have a workday in the Park with the Friends on October 17. Mr. Bohannon would send details to the rest of the Board members.

5) Park Discussion – Master Plan Implementation

A) Rachel Marshall Area

Mr. Bocko had communicated with Mr. Bohannon about this. Mr. Bocko posted a job announcement at Antioch University New England (AUNE), seeking a graduate student intern for bird ecology interpretation. Mr. Bocko also explained that AUNE has something called Community Service Initiatives (CSIs), which partner students with community partners. Community groups can submit proposals and if a group of students are interested, they accept the proposal. The deadline to submit proposals was the end of September. Mr. Haynes noted that the Conservation Commission was also considering submitting at least one proposal.

B) Kiosk Information

Mr. Bohannon said that Chair Winsor was working on this.

C) Bartlett Tree

Mr. Bohannon said Bartlett Tree completed its work for this year.

Ms. Casey mentioned a completely dead tree along the river (right before the gap in the view of the river), between the shed and the bridge. It might be a white ash. She anticipated that it would start dropping branches soon. Ms. Casey suggested cutting the tree down to where the two main trunks split and turning it into a wildlife tree. There is a large chunk partially peeled out of the bark on the front of the trunk. Mr. Bohannon would look into having the tree cut. Ms. Joy mentioned that further down by the river in a section of knotweed, there was a group of trees with their trunks very damaged, but she was unsure of the cause.

6) Upcoming Events

On Saturday, November 4, Rich Holschuh, a representative of the Elnu Abenaki Tribe based in southern VT, would lead the walk in the Park 8:30 AM. He would likely focus less on the arboretum and more on the wild areas going upriver. Mr. Holschuh would then be leading a companion walk at the Horatio Colony Nature Preserve beginning at approximately 10:00 AM. Mr. Bocko would create the event sign-up and press release.

Mr. Bocko also reported that on October 21, he wanted to use the Park for a teacher conference, which is an inside/outside event each fall. This year, they would use the annex classrooms near the butcher shop for the inside space, but the goal is to be mostly outside. Mr. Holschuh and his colleagues would be helping to lead this. In the morning, the teachers would learn about Indigenous knowledge and ways of being. The afternoon would be about rest, play, and support. He also proposed some activities on the Rachel Marshall side. He anticipated approximately 50 participants. He was looking for space in the park to set up chairs, yoga mats, and/or hammocks (ideally amongst the trees on the Rachel Marshall side). Ms. Joy thought the knotweed area along the river would be perfect for the yoga mats because it is flatter. Mr. Bohannon would work with Mr. Bocko to make this happen. The main concern is keeping people out of the arboretum garden beds. Councilor Chadbourne asked if hammocks injure trees and Mr. Bocko said no; he explained how he hangs them carefully to protect the trees for the short duration that they would be used. Hammocks are a key part of a lot of nature-based education.

7) New, Other Business

Ms. Krautmann said that she and Ms. Mathews met Forrest Bencivenga at the Park on September 8. They discussed the idea of stringing solar lights. Mr. Bohannon recalled that he was going to reimburse Ms. Bencivenga, but Ms. Krautmann said the bill was not ready yet.

Mr. Haynes shared about the Source to Sea River Clean Up on September 29 and 30, in which volunteers clean-up trash in and along the Ashuelot River. The event is organized by the Cheshire County Conservation District. Mr. Haynes often begins on the Rachel Marshall side and walks up the river.

8) Adjournment – Next Meeting Date: Tuesday, October 10, 2023 at 8:15 AM

There being no further business, Mr. Bocko adjourned the meeting at approximately 9:25 AM.

Respectfully submitted by,
Katrinya Kibler, Minute Taker
September 19, 2023

Reviewed and edited by,
Andy Bohannon, PRF Director 10.6.23