

Weathersfield Conservation Commission

7 pm

Thursday, January 25, 2024

1879 Schoolhouse - Perkinsville

Present: Ryan Gumbart, Chair, Howard Beach, Cheryl Cox, Bruce Cox, Marina Garland Heather Shand, Anna Vogel, Ellen Clattenburg

Guests: Hannah Dallas, Southern Windsor County Forester, and Kathy Urffer, Connecticut River Conservancy River Steward

Ryan opened the meeting at 7:05 pm with a welcome to guest presenters. He briefly reviewed the agenda and turned the meeting over to Hannah Dallas to give an update on the Town Forest Management Plan.

Town Forest

Hannah has been reading deeds, conducting a natural communities inventory, and showed a map of the 310 acre forest with her overlay of the natural communities. Her ideas and observations briefly summarized:

- There is a huge amount of deer pressure (in some areas, the deer are even going after beech saplings)
- The Town Forest is part of a huge wildlife corridor, but from a forestry and ecological perspective, it's pretty vulnerable because there is not a lot of regeneration – a lot of old trees, not much young forest coming along
- The parcel was once farmed and pastured, evidence of this is still visible and the forest is still recovering. (The naturalist who reviewed the parcel after it became town property said “Do nothing”, Hannah feels that with no young trees, there's not a good future for this forest. She felt some management would be necessary.)
- Access to some parts of the forest is quite limited, but other areas have good access. A few areas have high species diversity compared to other areas which are primarily hemlock or pine. In particular areas 5, 6, and 8 have good (or at least possible) access. Stand 6 is the site that the ATA would like to build lots of trails.
- Area 7 is 92 percent white pine which is declining (dying) and invasives are coming in. This is an area to work on. Hannah noted that there is a deer exclusion fence (20x20') ready to install as soon as we have a site for it (this might be the area).

Hannah asked the commission for our opinion on what should go in the management plan and wondered why recreation has been identified as a primary purpose of the forest, especially with access so limited. She was encouraged to point out that the efficacy of recreation hinges on the ability of people to easily access the Town Forest. She pointed out that a special permit will be needed to access the park road for logging equipment, though this is not a big problem; however, using the access road for recreational groups is a bigger issue.

A couple final notes on the discussion:

- Hannah should treat the VELCO power line as its own stand - so many invasives, but VELCO treated invasives for the first time last year, so it will be interesting to see how that area changes or doesn't
- Vermont Land Trust which holds the conservation easement on the land will need to review the Management Plan once completed
- The Conservation Commission will present it to the Selectboard
- Commercial harvest funds (all or part) will go to the Edgar May Center (part of the deed restrictions)
- Other towns are using any profits from logging to deal with invasives and tree planting (they are planting trees in their town forests that will withstand a warmer climate – “assisted migration”)

Ryan urged Hannah to write the prescriptions she felt were appropriate, and we will see if we can find alternate ways to implement them, not necessarily relying on commercial logging. The management plan should focus on the long term health and resiliency of the forest.

Relicensing of the Hydroelectric Dams - Wilder, Bellows Falls and Vernon

Kathy Urffer of CRC presented a slideshow to educate us on the relicensing of the three dams just north and south of us. Towns and individuals will have a chance to comment on the relicensing and she hopes that the Conservation Commission will participate in the public comment period when it opens up.

She gave some background:

- The three dams are owned by Great River Hydro, an LLC which has been purchased by Hydro Quebec. Great River controls the river from Canada to the ocean.
- The Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERC) requires PM&Es – plans to protect, mitigate or enhance environmental resources – as part of the relicensing process
- The relicensing process, supposed to take 5 years, began in 2012
- 33 studies have been conducted and the CRC have been the watchdog throughout the relicensing period. The studies include white water flows, recreational assets, dragonflies, migratory and resident fish, fish ladders, riverbank erosion, bathymetry of the river, tiger beetles, mussels, etc.
- Vermont and NH (the Clean Water Act is administered by each state), US Fish and Wildlife and the Nature Conservancy are also involved in this process.
- The dams have been releasing water at peak electric use times which causes surges of water which scour the river bottom below the dam and which dramatically drop the water level 3-5' in the impoundment areas above the dams. The fluctuation is greatest at the northern ends of the impoundment areas - the case of Bellows Falls that's 29 miles - to Weathersfield, in the case of Wilder it's 46 miles to the Piermont area.

Progress so far:

- CRC has negotiated “run of river” or “inflow equals outflow” - dams will be generating electricity all the time which eliminates the scouring and dramatic drops in the impoundment areas
- The dams can still peak, but CRC negotiated total time for peaking, how much they can lower the river level (1 foot, not 3-5) and this peaking is dependent on the month and what is happening biologically with fish, mussels, etc. (Peaks and valleys are more limited)

Areas that Kathy suggests we consider when commenting on the relicensing PM&Es:

- Fish ladders are set to be upgraded in 16 years - consider urging that this happen sooner
- Recreation (for instance, upgrading the Conn River paddler trail)
- Erosion (FERC cannot require an erosion mitigation fund, but it could be asked for and if there is enough public pressure, Great River Hydro may do a settlement agreement)
- More attention to traditional cultural properties (Abenaki archaeology)
- Tributary mouths will shift once the river has a continual flow – the large deposits of sediment at tributary mouths will certainly move (somewhere).
What kind of consideration will that get? (Think for instance of Hoyt's landing)
- The CRC has already urged more comprehensive recreational mitigation – that Great River Hydro consider 175 miles of river not just a couple spots near the dams (ie adding boat launch areas, portage improvement in BF (now 1.5 mile on a road))

The States will have only 12 months to comment regarding the Clean Water Act ; they can include whatever they need in the water quality certificate - this is limited by how the state defines water quality (Vermont includes recreation, NH does not)

Rest of the Agenda

4. Minutes: The July minutes were tabled, the August minutes were moved and accepted as written.

5. Project review - Ryan had sent out current projects and urged everyone to look at the list and decide which projects to be involved in (report at the next meeting)

6. Member Packet - Ryan had created a member packet which was universally endorsed.

7. Summer walk series - we did a quick review and will deal with it more at a later meeting.

8. Town plan update - the energy section has been worked on and about to go to Selectboard.
The final town plan is due for readoption 2025. We need to review the scenic, natural sections for us and comment.

9. The Town Forest kiosk was completed. Much of the materials were donated by Bibens, but Ryan and Ellen had to make some purchases.

*** Cheryl moved that Ryan Gumbart be reimbursed \$157.82 for the stain and shingles for the kiosk. Howard seconded the motion, all voted in favor.*

*** Ryan moved that Ellen Clattenburg be reimbursed for the screws and other small hardware for the kiosk. Heather seconded, all voted in favor.*

10. Budget - Cheryl pointed out that the \$179 that was taken from our budget this year should have been taken out of last year's budget. She submitted her receipt last spring, but it was lost. She has met with the

new finance person at the Town Office to fix this; that person has gone. Ryan will bring this up when he is next in the office and get it fixed.

11. Ryan suggested that we table the Rural Design discussion.

12. Ellen moved and Howard seconded her motion to adjourn at 9:13 pm.

Respectfully submitted, Ellen Clattenburg

Next meeting will be Thursday, February 22 at 7 pm.

Location TBD