

N-S-N Rivers Wild & Scenic Stewardship Council

MINUTES OF NOVEMBER 17, 2022 MEETING

By Zoom Video Conference

Voting Member Entities Present:

Towns: Ayer: Beth Suedmeyer; Bolton: Rebecca Longvall; Groton: Diane Carson; Harvard: Lucy Wallace and Michele Girard; Hollis: Bernadette McQuilkin; Lancaster: Justin Smith; Shirley: Heidi Ricci; Townsend: Joan Wotkowicz

NRWA: Elizabeth Ainsley Campbell and Al Futterman

NPS: Emma Lord

DEC: Neil Angus

Guests: Martha Morgan, NRWA Director of Water Programs; Sarah Widing, NRWA Board of Directors; Pat Huckery, Supervisor, and Leslie Gabrielska, NE District Office MA Fisheries & Wildlife; Sherry Anders, Shirley Greenway Committee; Alison Hamilton, Groton Conservation Commission; Lynne Man, Lunenburg resident

The meeting was called to order at 7:00 PM by the Chair, Lucy Wallace. Due to the Coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic the meeting was held virtually by Zoom.

Administrative

On motion made and seconded, the minutes of October 20, 2022 were approved as presented.

Pat Huckery asked to address actions taken regarding the proposed SRWMA Oak Woodlands project. Lucy requested she wait, as it was an item to be addressed later on the agenda.

NPS Update

Emma Lord reported that Anne Gagnon and she would be attending the Partnership Wild & Scenic Rivers gathering in Florida December 7 – 9, 2022. As the topic of Indigenous People and their relationship to Wild & Scenic Rivers has been of increasing interest, Emma wondered if the Council would like to form a subcommittee on Indigenous People in our watershed as a way to reach out to and develop a relationship with tribes. Al Futterman indicated he would be interested in serving on such a subcommittee. Lucy suggested that others interested in this contact Al and Emma.

Finances

Elizabeth Ainsley Campbell reported on the status of the Council's finances as follows:

- Total expenditures in October came to \$20,357.25, comprised of \$17,187 in contract payments (Janet Morrison \$15,374.50 for FLP services and \$1,812.50 grant payment) and \$3,170.25 to NRWA (for staff support and NRWA fiduciary and indirect charges).
- A summary of Council funds as of October 31, 2022, showing a balance of \$227,215.

Community Grants

2023 Community Grants: Lucy reported that the Notice, Request for Proposals, and Grant Application for the 2023 Community Grants had been updated by Joan Wotkowicz for review by the Council. The goal is to publish these documents in December so that Council decisions can be made and grants awarded by March 2023. She then raised the issue of requirement that a grantee match our funds with other funds or in-kind services, noting in the past grantees have found meeting and/or reporting match to be a challenge. Will a match be required or does a match make the application more competitive? After some discussion it was agreed to require a match. Joan will edit the RFP to reflect this decision. The issue of valuing volunteers was also discussed and the Council agreed to use the “Independent Sector” estimate of \$29.95/hr, perhaps rounding to \$30/hr.

2021 Townsend Historical Society: Lucy reported that work on this grant to the Townsend Historical Society for exterior preservation of the Spaulding Cooperage had been delayed due to rising supply and contractor costs during the COVID pandemic and that only recently had the grantee been able to find and contract for services within budget. Therefore, they now could formally request an extension to the grant period to July 31, 2023 which is based on the contractor’s agreed upon completion of work. On motion made and seconded, the Council unanimously approved extension of the grant to July 31, 2023, with the request that grantee notify the Council when work has begun.

2022 Lancaster Land Trust: At last month’s meeting Justin Smith had offered to reach out to members of the Lancaster Land Trust regarding the delay in formalizing the Grant Agreement to support Phase 1 of the improvement of the parking area for the Cook Conservation property. Lucy noted that an Agreement had been held up pending confirmation of donated services which was needed to complete the Grant budget. Justin reported he had not been successful in having his calls to various Trust members answered, perhaps in part due to other pressing matters in Lancaster.

Justin went on to give an update on the November 14, 2022 Special Town Meeting held regarding rezoning nearly 400 acres on Route 70 in Lancaster and adjacent to both the North Nashua River and Cook Conservation land. Lucy reminded the Council that while the North Nashua is not a designated Wild & Scenic River, it does flow into the main stem of the Nashua which is so designated. Activities that could negatively impact the North Nashua could similarly impact the main stem and, therefore, were of concern to the Council. The Special Town Meeting approved the rezoning of the front portion of the 200-acre tract as a 40R Overlay District, which would allow residential and commercial development. Justin noted that a portion of the 40R Zone overlays the Central Nashua River ACEC. The Town Meeting, however, did not approve rezoning the balance of the tract to allow 2.4 million sq.ft of warehousing being sought by the project proponent, the Capital Group. That said, the site is already zoned for light industry and would allow, by right, 1.2 million sq ft. of warehousing. The eventual use of the entire parcel is still uncertain. Justin will work with AI in tracking the future development of this site.

Squannacook River WMA (SRWMA)

Proposed Oak Woodland Project: Lucy began by giving a summary of her conversation with Brian Hawthorne, MassWildlife, regarding the status of this project. According to Brian, “there is nothing happening now.” Letters will be sent to the Shirley and Townsend Conservation Commissions seeking to withdraw the Notice of Intent (NOI) applications, there is no timetable for the submittal of a MEPA Environmental Notification, and staff are focused on other projects.

Lucy then asked Pat what her concerns were regarding this project or what additional information she might have on its status. Pat began by criticizing members of the Council and the Nashua River Watershed Association for, in her opinion, actively undermining this nationally important project, although she did acknowledge that some members appeared to still be open minded about its value. She explained that the intent of the project is to improve the habitat so as to support a greater diversity of species, and especially endangered and threatened species, noting that goal was one cited in the Council’s *Stewardship Plan*.

Pat raised her concern about walks being organized by other groups, such as the Townsend Conservation Commission, that did not invite representatives of MassWildlife to join. She questioned why members of the Council attended a recent meeting of the Groton Conservation Commission. Alison Hamilton, the recently appointed liaison between the Groton ConCom and Council, explained the purpose was so the Commission could learn more about the project.

Pat asked why the Council had set aside \$30,000 for a consultant. Lucy reviewed the Council’s engagement in this project beginning with walking the site with Tom Wansleben in August 2021. This led to a meeting last spring with Brian and Tom (which had been arranged by Bob Durand), followed by the expectation of refocus by MassWildlife on the MEPA process, the submission of comments and questions to Department of Fish and Wildlife and review of responses. The Council understands there is a need to better understand the site and recently had asked MassWildlife for its studies (understanding sensitive information would be redacted). Heidi Ricci noted that the Council has not taken a position on this project, adding that it respects MassWildlife’s expertise, but given the reluctance to release even redacted studies, it is difficult for us to fully understand the basis for the appropriateness of the project on this site. Although there was some information submitted with the NOIs, Heidi felt it was fragmented and did not give a complete description of the project. She also expressed concern about long-term management of the site following the proposed restoration, particularly with respect to controlling invasives and the potential influx of ATV users or dirt bikes. Finally, Heidi reminded Pat that the SRWMA was part of a larger, several thousand-acre area of protected lands under several ownerships, the result of MassWildlife’s, municipalities’ and local conservation groups’ efforts. She felt it was unfortunate that there is no process for coordinated stewardship of these interconnected lands and that partners had not been consulted in the earlier planning of this project. She advocated for a more open and inclusive public process going forward.

Sherry Anders noted that she had attended Tom’s walk in August 2021, seeking to understand the impact of the project on water resources. While she is open-minded about the value of this project, she is concerned that questions are not answered. Pat noted that MassWildlife has experts in a variety of fields

working on this project but expressed concern that any information shared with the Council and the Nashua River Watershed Association would be used against the project. Elizabeth referred Pat to the NRWA's website for its statement on the project which reflects the Board's neutral position.

The discussion continued for a considerable period, with more specific concerns raised regarding preservation of existing stands of hemlock and chestnut sprouts, the nature of the management plan being developed, and the opportunity for more public engagement. Alison asked where the public could go for information; Pat suggested MassWildlife's website which has a page on this project, as well as the NOIs filed with the towns' Conservation Commissions. Lucy suggested that better communication between all parties would be beneficial, adding that the Council could prepare a comprehensive list of questions (similar to those sent to Tom after the August 2021 walk) to send to Pat.

Site Walk: Emma announced that Tom had set up the requested site walk with Jamie Fosburgh and Emma for Tuesday, November 22nd. In response to Al's suggestion that a member of the Council attend, Pat responded that it was an invitation only site walk for the National Park Service.

Other Business

Story Map: Bernadette McQuilken reported that Emma and Jackie Dias have prepared an outline and will be loading it onto the ESRI/ArcGIS platform that will support the Story Map. Bernadette has provided some editing of the text. Emma added the goal is to bring a sample of the format -with text and photos – to the December meeting.

Conservation Networking Meetings: Al reported that no future meeting dates have been set. He is hoping that the next meeting may feature Emma Gildesgame from The Nature Conservancy's Climate Adaptation initiative to speak on their work updating the Merrimack Conservation Partnership Plan. A future topic might include a representative a speaker on the impact of climate change on nutrient pollutants in rivers.

Partnership Wild & Scenic Rivers: The next PWSR lunch/speaker series will be held on November 30th, noon – 1:30 PM. The topic will be Green Infrastructure and low impact development. Emma will send the link for those who would like to attend.

Stratton Hill Development, Ayer: Beth Suedmeyer gave an update on this project. The Planning Board reviewed the comments from the Conservation Commission and consultant at its meeting a week ago and has sent it final comments to the developer to address when preparing a final submission. Beth noted that the area adjacent to Long Pond will be protected and remain undeveloped. There is some concern, however, that development could occur north of the power line, which abuts other protected lands in Ayer and Groton. Beth remains optimistic that there will be a good resolution for this project.

There being no further business, the meeting was adjourned at 8:45 PM.

Next meeting: Thursday, December 15th at 7 PM by Zoom