

N-S-N Rivers Wild & Scenic Stewardship Council

MINUTES OF NOVEMBER 19, 2020 MEETING

By Zoom Video Conference

Voting Member Entities Present:

Towns: Ayer: Beth Suedmeyer; Bolton: Rona Balco and Rebecca Longvall; Brookline: Drew Kellner; Harvard: Michele Girard and Lucy Wallace; Hollis: LeeAnn Wolff; Pepperell: Ken Hartlage and Paula Terrasi; Shirley: Heidi Ricci; Townsend: Joan Wotkowicz
NRWA: Elizabeth Ainsley Campbell, Al Futterman, Martha Morgan
NPS: Emma Lord
Guests: Linh Phu and Ella Weber (USFWS Eastern Complex Refuges); Anne Gagnon, MA Fisheries & Wildlife); Neil Angus (DEC); Warren Kimball (NRWA Director and former MA DEP)

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

The minutes of the October 15, 2020 meeting were approved as presented.

NPS Updates

Emma Lord reminded the Council members of the Partnership Wild & Scenic Rivers monthly newsletter, noting that there will be an article on recent additions to the Partnership system, and particularly the Nashua, Squannacook, & Nissitissit Rivers. She will resend the link to the newsletter so members can subscribe to it. Emma also reported on an NPS publication, *Wild and Scenic River Currents*, which will include an article she is working on with Al Futterman on the shoreline survey project. She expects the article to be included in the January issue of *River Currents*.

USFWS Update

Linh Phu, Manager of the USFWS Eastern Complex Refuge, introduced Ella Weber, the Complex's Transportation Specialist. Linh explained that the role of the Transportation Specialist is to improve access to the refuges, including expanding the diversity of communities visiting refuges. In addition, recreational opportunities on refuges are to be more broadly disseminated, again to open the refuge experience to a broader, more diverse population. Ella will be focusing her efforts on two refuges, Parker River and Oxbow. Linh then offered Ella an opportunity to describe her work.

Ella noted that the two refuges she is focused on are in two separate complexes: the Eastern Complex and the Parker River Complex. Between these two systems there are 12 refuges which could fall within her scope of work. Ella expanded upon Linh's description of the position, noting her job in expanding access to the refuges would involve reaching out to community groups and other partners, and seeking opportunities for collaboration. Al Futterman asked if, and when, she might want input from us on improving access. Ella noted that since she has only been on board for a few months, she still needs time to familiarize herself with current usage and access to Parker River and Oxbow. Linh felt that in the future one opportunity for collaboration might be on the canoe access project. For instance, which ones could and/or should be improved for handicap accessibility? What other barriers are limiting use of these access points? She noted that the USFWS' Urban Partnership and Youth Ambassador programs might be a vehicle to improve diversity of use of the rivers.

Heidi Ricci advised Ella that MassAudubon has a similar program underway at its Joppa Flats Sanctuary, specifically looking into ways to provide public transportation there, which seems to be a similar problem for Oxbow. Lucy reported that there is a shuttle service on Devens between businesses, residences, and the Ayer train station run by MassDevelopment and the DEC. She suggested Ella contact Peter Lowitt at the DEC to see about expanding the service to take riders to and from the Bill Ashe Visitor Center on Devens.

Beth Suedmeyer reported that Ayer has an environmental justice population and likewise would like to see access improved to the Nashua River. Given there is no access to the River in Ayer, the Bill Ashe Visitor Center would be the nearest access to the Refuge and Nashua River. There is also access to the River in Shirley on Walker Road across from the Ice House property in Ayer. Beth noted that Ayer has just received a Mass Works grant to improve West Main Street by adding bike lanes and a sidewalk which should almost reach the Ice House property. Beth added that she is the Environmental Planner in Sudbury and has been involved in development of the Assabet NWR Rail Trails.

Linh concluded the discussion commenting on the multitude of opportunities for collaboration going forward. Al encouraged her not to overlook the gun range on Devens South Post, which can make visiting the Oxbow Refuge feel rather unwelcoming.

Linh and Ella left the meeting at this time.

Policies Committee Update

One policy and related documents were presented to the Council for consideration and approval.

1. *Community Grants Program*: Lucy explained that the policy for the Community Grants Program had been revised by the Policies Committee to reflect the changes suggested at the October meeting. Elizabeth Ainsley Campbell pointed out that the review criteria concerning under-represented communities had been amended and asked if it now captured the intent of the Council. Linh felt it was too narrow, being limited to ethnic or racial groups, and suggested adding language regarding access for those of varying abilities (such as physical limitations). Drew Kellner raised his concern that the policy would not allow funds to be used for land acquisition, but only due diligence activities related to acquisition. Lucy pointed out that the language in the policy was, in fact, very broad and that Drew was probably referring to the discussion reported in the October meeting minutes. She added, though, that with limited funds and targeting \$4,000 - \$5,000 grants, it would be difficult to use funds for land purchase. However, it would not be prohibited if funds were being combined with other funds, as suggested by Drew. By motion made and seconded, the policy was unanimously approved.
2. *Community Grants RFP*: Lucy explained that the proposed RFP contains many of the same criteria as the policy, especially with respect to who may apply and application review criteria. She noted that as guidance for applicants on the types of projects to be considered, Emma had provided a reference to the *Stewardship Plan* and the key goals for each of the three major ORRV areas (Biological Diversity, Recreation and Scenic, and Historical and Cultural). Lucy turned to the deadlines in the RFP: when should the RFP be announced? When will applications be accepted? When will awards be made? She added the Policies Committee was recommending announcement by the first of the year, with applications being accepted between February 1st and April 1st. The intent would be for the Executive Committee will evaluate all proposals and present acceptable proposals to the full Council for its final approval at its May meeting. Beth suggested that the RFP be announced when the Representatives report to their respective Selectmen. The question arose regarding expenditure of Community Grant funds within the current fiscal year, which will end on June 30th. Lucy commented that it was her

understanding that we could roll over unspent funds to the next fiscal year. As fiscal agent, Elizabeth reported that the NRWA will need to submit a year-end report to the NPS showing expenditure of funds and any funds that might be rolled into the next fiscal year. She asked Emma to verify if there was a limit on the funds to be rolled over. Emma did not think there would be, given only \$20,000 is tied to Community Grants. However, she will get confirmation on that. On motion made and seconded, the RFP was approved.

3. *Application Form:* Emma had prepared and distributed a draft application for review. There was considerable concern expressed about the level of detail being sought in the budget, with several members who have applied for grants from multiple agencies finding it excessive. There was a question about including match in the budget. Lucy responded that as we are seeking grantees to leverage other resources with our grant, it will be important to have match noted, which may be cash or in-kind services. Drew asked if personnel needed to be accounted for. Lucy noted personnel might be volunteers contributing in-kind services as match. Emma added that the NPS did not set a personnel rate, rather that could be determined, and justified, by the grantee. There was a question about including travel in the budget, as most felt that generally it is not covered in grants. Warren Kimball suggested we should cover travel (in the “Other” category) in the event an applicant was seeking funds to attend an out of state conference or training. It was agreed to a simpler form of the budget and the application was approved.

Land Stewardship Committee Update

Ken Hartlage provided a brief update on the Committee’s work by reviewing the following nine proposed projects, most of which are underway under the leadership of different Committee members:

Brochure for Riparian Landowners: Rebecca Longvall reported a rough draft will be sent to Al Futterman for review. Lucy asked if it would be produced in a print or digital version. Rebecca felt it would be offered in a digital version (PDF) which could be downloaded and printed should that be desired.

Off Highway Vehicles (OHV): Ken reported he has nearly completed a draft information piece which he will send to Paula Terrasi for her review.

Headwaters Conference: This is a project being led by Al intended primarily for conservation agents and conservation commissions, but which would be open to other interested parties. He added that this could serve double-duty with one of Martha Morgan’s projects which is organizing a symposia of those doing scientific investigations pertaining to resources within our watershed. It is anticipated the symposia will occur in next spring. Al hopes to incorporate the work of Sarah Widing of InterFluve and other experts in the importance of headwaters.

Invasives: LeeAnn Wolff is the lead on this project which she will begin work on shortly with Michele Girard. They will consider invasive plants (land and water) and insects, and offer techniques for removal, including community work-days.

Shoreline Survey: To date, Al and Council members have surveyed just over 50 miles of shoreline, some of which could not be done by boat due to shallow water. Al is in the process of finalizing the spreadsheet on the 17 sections and may work with Emma to create an interactive story map to provide more specific detail on selected sites.

Mapping Open Space Ownership: Anne Gagnon hopes to continue work on this project shortly.

Culvert Improvement: Ken acknowledged this is less a specific project than an activity that should be undertaken by providing support to towns and their DPW superintendents. It would be a continuation of an MET grant the NRWA received and Martha managed.

Update on Council Projects

Conservation Networking Breakfasts: Al reported that the next breakfast presentation on December 1st will be by Lynn Harper, recently retired Habitat Protection Specialist for the MA Natural Heritage & Endangered Species Program at MA Wildlife. Her talk is entitled “An Eagle’s View of the Watershed” and interested Council members are welcome to attend.

Canoe Access: Al and Ayer’s Conservation Agent, Jo-Anne Christoff, are continuing to investigate an access site for the Nashua River off Rt 2A.

Forest Legacy: Al reported that he has touched base with every town and nearly all the local or regional land trusts within the targeted watershed area (the 11 river towns and those towns immediately abutting them) to alert them to the possibility of participating in a 2021 Forest Legacy application. LeeAnn offered to reach out to Beaver Brook Association if that would be helpful. Al’s next step will be to have the local contact (i.e., Representative) letters to landowners whose holdings might qualify for inclusion in a Forest Legacy Program (FLP) application. He added that initial inquiry letters and emails are already being sent to landowners. He is on a very aggressive schedule to have sufficient acreage and willing landowners identified by the end of December so as to be ready for July 2021 MA FLP application deadline. At Lucy’s request, Al is working on a budget for this project, noting the challenge of accounting for the ebb and flow of his time that will be required. He added that it will be important for the Representatives to get the word out in their towns, noting their help is critical if this is to succeed. It would improve the chance of being awarded a FLP grant if there are also landowners in New Hampshire included in the application.

Updates to Towns

Lucy reported the handout for Representatives to share with their Selectmen had been updated as suggested at the October meeting. She added that Representatives could add information as they felt would be appropriate for their town. The update was approved as the basic, uniform message to be given to the towns. The goal is for Representatives to meet with their Selectmen before the end of December.

Other Business

Invoice: Elizabeth reviewed the invoice in the amount of \$11,828.86 which she had prepared for the NPS covering NRWA expenses for the period July 1 – September 30. She noted that \$1,250 had previously been invoiced to NPS and paid to NRWA for expenses during that quarter. To date, therefore, a total of \$13,078.86 has been spent of the \$150,000 NPS funds for FY2021. Elizabeth reported that, according to Council policy, Lucy, as President, had reviewed and approved the invoice being presented at this meeting. Rebecca, Council Treasurer, had also reviewed the invoice and Elizabeth’s accounting of expenditures. Elizabeth also explained that the chart shared with the Council tracks the elements in the Work Plan approved by the NPS. Of particular note is that Al’s time is reported both as his work as Outreach Coordinator and related to support for specific Council projects. The Council members agreed that the chart’s format was an acceptable way to track expenses going forward. Michele cautioned that Al’s time not be overwhelmed by the Forest Legacy Program project. Elizabeth agreed to track it carefully.

Voting Member Entities: Lucy reminded the Council members that the *Stewardship Plan* provided for the Council's 13 voting member entities (the 11 river towns, NRWA and NPS) to invite two additional voting member entities to join the Council. As provided by Council policy, she had sought nominees for these two seats and had only received two: Devens Enterprise Commission (DEC) and the Northeast Office of MA Division of Fisheries and Wildlife (MA F&W). She explained she had spoken with Linh Phu to see if she wanted the Refuge Complex to be a voting member entity. While Linh does sit on the SuAsCo Wild & Scenic Rivers Council, she preferred to be appointed to the Advisory Committee to be called upon when needed. By motion made and seconded, the DEC and MA F&W were approved as the two additional voting member entities. Lucy will send letters to the respective agency's chair/director inviting them to join the Council and to request appointment of Representatives and Alternates.

Heidi Ricci suggested we seek representation from local indigenous people/Native American tribes to serve on the Advisory Committee. Neil suggested contacting the United Native American Cultural Center located on Devens.

There being no additional business, the meeting was adjourned.

Next Meeting: December 17, 2020 at 7 PM - by Zoom