

N-S-N Rivers Wild & Scenic Stewardship Council

MINUTES OF OCTOBER 15, 2020 MEETING

By Zoom Video Conference

Voting Member Entities Present:

Towns: Ayer: Beth Suedmeyer; Bolton: Rona Balco and Rebecca Longvall; Harvard: Lucy Wallace;

Lancaster: Alix Turner; Townsend: Joan Wotkowicz

NRWA: Elizabeth Ainsley Campbell, Al Futterman

NPS: Emma Lord

Guests: Linh Phu (USFWS Eastern Complex Refuges Manager); Anne Gagnon, MA Fish & Wildlife

The meeting was called to order at 7:03 PM by the Interim Chair, Lucy Wallace. Due to the Coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic the meeting was held virtually by Zoom.

Administrative

The minutes of the September 17, 2020 meeting were approved as presented.

NPS Updates

Emma Lord reported that Congress had passed a Continuing Resolution to fund the budget through December 11, 2020. As currently proposed, the NPS funding for the coming fiscal year should remain the same as the current level.

Emma announced two upcoming training webinars. The first, a training on creating or improving canoe/kayak access, will be held in four-hour sessions on October 20th and 27th. The second, on bank stabilization which is being given by the River Management Society, will be held on November 4th. The first webinar is free, the second one requires a \$25 registration fee. Emma plans on attending the second webinar and Al expressed interest in attending as well. Emma will send the Council members links to both training webinars.

Policies Committee Update

Two policies were presented to the Council for consideration.

1. *Conflict of Interest:* Lucy noted this version policy had been reviewed at the last Council meeting and sent back to the Policies Committee for additional editing to add a requirement for non-voting member entities to sign a conflict of interest statement. She reported the Committee had discussed this and felt the requirement was unnecessary for three reasons: 1) non-voting member entities would generally be members of the Advisory Committee participating in the meeting to provide particular expertise; 2) non-voting member entities are not defined in the *Stewardship Plan*; and 2) non-voting member entities cannot vote on a decision by the Council. Therefore, the Committee was recommending the policy remain as previously presented. On motion made and seconded, the policy dated 9/24/20 was unanimously approved.
2. *Community Grants Program:* Lucy began by explaining the Community Grants program would be broken into two elements: a general policy and specific, annual Request for Proposals (RFP), noting the Council might emphasize different areas of interest in a given cycle. She then led the Council members through a discussion of the draft dated 10/13/20, section by section:

- Introduction: Several edits were suggested, including adding a reference to the *Stewardship Plan* and link to the website. In addition, it should note that the Request for Proposal (RFP)/grant application form would be posted on the web site.
- Eligible Entities: It was agreed that state agencies should be eligible for a grant, but Anne Gagnon noted that it would be a more complicated process. She felt that it would be easier and more efficient to work with 501(C)(3) organizations or, at the very least, an applicant partner with a 501(C)(3) organization. Lucy reported that Al Futterman had suggested changing “churches” to “houses of worship.” The Council members concurred. Al asked if regional planning commissions should be allowed to apply. Lucy noted MassDevelopment or the Devens Enterprise Commission might want to apply for a project on Devens. Rebecca Longvall suggested adding language including collaborative partnerships as eligible entities.
- Eligible Projects: There was a brief discussion about whether land acquisitions should be eligible projects. It was agreed our funds could be used for due diligence associated with acquisition or for acquiring conservation restrictions. Al suggested keeping the language broad.
- Funding: Lucy explained the Committee had found three options for disbursement of grant funds in other Partnership Wild & Scenic Rivers’ community grants programs. The Council members agreed with the third option: distribution of 50% of the grant awarded funds when the grant is awarded with the balance distributed upon completion of the project and submission of a final report. It was also suggested that any unused grant funds should be returned.
- Application Process and Timeline: Al asked if towns adjacent to the river towns and within the designated rivers’ watersheds could apply for grants. It was agreed they should be able to, particularly if their applications pertained to headwater streams or could further benefit the ORRVs in the *Stewardship Plan*. It was agreed that paragraph setting forth various dates to be met should be deleted from the policy and, rather, included in the RFP.
- Review Criteria: The proposed review criteria were, after some discussion, accepted as listed in the draft document. While they are not listed in order of priority, it was felt the bullets regarding “Thoroughness of planning” and “Leveraging of additional resources” should be moved to positions # 2 and #3. It was also agreed that leveraging should not be required, but remain strongly encouraged, as in the draft. Elizabeth Ainsley Campbell asked if the chart Warren Kimball had created when the Council was first considering interim projects should be adapted to this program and attached to the policy. Anne Gagnon suggested it would be more appropriate to attach it to the RFP as criteria could change year to year based on focus the Council might seek in the grants.
- Reports and Products: The Council agreed with Linh Phu’s suggestion that language be added that projects are to be completed within one year, which would also be noted in the RFP. Beth Suedmeyer felt grant recipients should be able to request an extension; she also suggested a list of second tier applicants be kept in case an entity awarded a grant could not complete it. If that was a part of the policy, the policy should also require that projects be begun with a certain time following award of funds.

Alix Turner suggested that interim reports be required over the course of the grant period, in addition to the final report. The Council agreed; it also agreed that the final report would be due within 30 days of completion of the project. In addition to the items listed to be included in the final report, Elizabeth asked that receipts be attached to the budget and final accounting.

Lucy suggested, and the Council members agreed, that acknowledgements should also include a statement that funding was provided through the Nashua-Squannacook-Nissitissit Rivers Wild & Scenic Stewardship Council Community Grants Program.

Land Stewardship Committee Update

Al provided an update on behalf of the Committee Chair, Ken Hartlage, who was unable to attend the meeting.

Shoreline Survey: To date, 20 of the 23 river segments to survey have been completed. Al hopes to do the remaining segments before the end of October, which include the final mile of the Squannacook (its confluence with the Nashua), Ash Swamp in Townsend, and a mile section of the Nissitissit from Bond Street to the outlet from Lake Potanipo (which will probably have to be walked due to very low water in the river). He noted that each segment surveyed was different, and that the rivers' character changes frequently. He has captured the detail of these surveys on a spreadsheet which he intends to simplify into three main topics: Problems/Concerns; Opportunities; and Highlights. He also hopes to prepare a story map using Google Earth integrating the photographs taken on the surveys to highlight these topic areas.

Project Prioritization: The list of priority projects developed by the Committee contains nine possible projects, most of which have a project lead. Al noted that some of these projects cannot really get underway until the spring of 2021. One that could complement a current NRWA project is further identification of cold water fishery refugia in the Nissitissit and Squannacook Rivers. The current NRWA project, which is being funded by a grant from the Massachusetts Environmental Trust (MET) is being overseen by Martha Morgan. Beth asked if culvert improvements for wildlife crossing and maintenance of stream integrity would be considered as possible project. Elizabeth noted this work had been funded by an earlier grant from MET and suggested Beth contact Martha.

Al provided a more in-depth update on the ninth project, Forest Legacy. He reported that Lindsay Nystrom (MA Forest Legacy Program-Coordinator) had virtually met with local and regional land trusts, Council members and others on October 13th. As no applications have been filed for this past year in Massachusetts, the state is hoping to identify potential participants (in mid-July or earlier) for a fall 2021 application. Al noted the group that met on October 13th had identified approximately 1,000 potential acres for enrolling in a Forest Legacy Program application, the minimum acreage Al feels would need to move ahead with a viable application that would be competitive on the national level. Some possible projects and/or partners include parcels in Mason, NH and even the "High Ridge" initiative in Harvard, Boxboro, and Littleton (within the SuAsCo Wild & Scenic Rivers area). Al clarified that the 11 Nashua-Nissitissit-Squannacook W&S river towns and towns adjacent to them would be eligible for participation in this project. The next step will be to develop a budget for this project, which Al expects to have for the November Council meeting.

Update on Council Projects

Conservation Networking Breakfasts: Al reported that the October 20th breakfast presentation by Nick Nelson, a fluvial geomorphologist and Vice President, Education, at Massachusetts Association of Conservation Commissions, was quite successful. Elizabeth added that a select group of NRWA friends were being offered the opportunity to attend the presentation and suggested other Council members might each want to invite one or two people who would be particularly interested in the topic. The next breakfast presentation will be by Lynn Harper, Director of MA Natural Heritage, on December 1st.

Updates to Towns

Lucy led the Council members through a review of the draft “boiler plate” report to the Boards of Selectmen which had been prepared by Ken Hartlage, Paula Terrasi, and Joan Wotkowicz. The consensus was the document was quite good, although a little too long. Rather, it should be kept to one, double-sided page, be concise, and limit text to the front side and the budget to the reverse side. As Rebecca noted, it should be viewed as basic information to be included in the selectmen’s packets, with the town representatives then using it as a basis for their report at the selectmen’s meeting. She added that information in the document or presented at the meeting could be tailored to the particular interests of the town. Beth suggested adding the names of the other river towns. Lucy will share the Council members’ comments with Ken.

Election of Officers

Lucy presented the slate of officers as recommended by the Policies Committee. She noted she was the only one nominated for a position, as Chair. As no one had volunteered for a position the Committee had asked specific members who had agreed to serve. The following slate was moved, seconded and unanimously approved:

Chair – Lucy Wallace
Vice Chair – Heidi Ricci
Treasurer – Rebecca Longvall
Secretary – Joan Wotkowicz

Lucy reminded the Council members that the *Stewardship Plan* provides for two additional voting member entities to be appointed by the Council and that the Council had adopted a policy for such appointments. She asked that members consider and submit to her a completed nomination form(s) for candidates to be appointed. Lucy hopes to have the two additional voting member entities, represented by a representative and alternate, on board by the end of the year.

Other Business

South Post Artillery Range: Linh reported that she had attended a virtual meeting of the Lancaster Conservation Commission (LCC) regarding an application by the Army to enlarge and shift the location of the current firing range to accommodate automated artillery. No decision was made at the meeting; rather it was continued to October 27th. Although she is the manager of the abutting Oxbow National Wildlife Refuge, she had not received formal notification of the meeting or earlier NEPA Environmental Assessment (EA) of the project. Apparently, the EA found no significant impact under NEPA, so review was now being conducted at the state and local level. Alix shared her concern with the project as well, noting the last minute involvement of the communities. Lucy agreed, noting she had asked Harvard’s conservation agent if the town had been notified – and it had not. There followed a lengthy discussion of the actions, if any, the Council could take before the next Conservation Commission meeting. Elizabeth reminded the Council members of the Council’s policy on advocacy and situations under which it could comment. It was agreed this was merited a comment from the Council, given the presence of threatened species such as the Blanding’s Turtle, habitat needed for nesting, impacts on Slate Rock Brook that feeds into the Nashua River, disturbance of wetlands, and a vernal pool. Linh offered to send a copy of the consultant’s report to Council members, in which she had highlighted the sections most relevant to our work and concerns. She added there was a dearth of information regarding the environmental impacts of the project and, therefore, specific questions to the consultant would be the most effective means to get one’s concerns into the record. Al will draft a comment letter based on today’s discussion. He asked that comments and/or questions be sent to him by Monday, October 19th with the goal of having a letter to

circulate to the Council for review by Monday, the 26th. Lucy will review the final draft before it is submitted to the Conservation Commission.

Squannacook Foot Bridge: Joan reported that a local donor had approached the Squannacook Rail Trail Committee offering to fund the building of a foot bridge over the River at Old Meetinghouse Road (off Route 119) in Townsend. While the proposed bridge would not connect directly to the Rail Trail, it would provide a means of crossing the River to get to the Trail from areas south of Route 119. The donor has offered to fund a consultant to handle permitting as well. Joan will get more information on this proposal to bring to the November Council meeting. Joan noted that she would like input from the Shirley and Pepperell representatives as well.

There being no additional business, the meeting was adjourned.

Next Meeting: November 19, 2020 at 7 PM - by Zoom