

N-S-N Rivers Wild & Scenic Stewardship Council

MINUTES OF APRIL 21, 2022 MEETING

By Zoom Video Conference

Voting Member Entities Present:

Towns: Brookline: Drew Kellner; Dunstable: Leah Basbanes; Groton: Stacey Chilcoat; Harvard: Michele Girard and Lucy Wallace; Hollis: Bernadette McQuilkin
NRWA: Elizabeth Ainsley Campbell, Martha Morgan
NPS: Emma Lord
DEC: Neil Angus

Guests:

Justin Smith, candidate to represent Lancaster

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.

NPS Update

Emma Lord reported that, while it is still to be confirmed, we can safely assume the funding for FY23 has been increased by \$45,000, bringing it to \$210,000 for the coming fiscal year. How the budget could be adjusted would be discussed later in the meeting.

Finances

Elizabeth Ainsley Campbell gave a brief update on March expenditures: 1) An invoice from the NRWA for services rendered in the amount of \$4,521.26; and 2) \$14,566.50 disbursed to grantees through the 2021 and 2022 Community Grant Program. Total March expenditures by the Council came to \$19,087.76. Elizabeth also shared a chart which showed a balance of approximately \$106,284 remaining in FY21 and FY22 funds, which includes approximately \$30,000 in funds obligated under the Community Grant Program.

FY23 Budget

Emma reviewed the adjustments she was recommending to the FY23 to include the additional \$45,000 we should expect to receive, reminding the Council that the FY23 budget based on \$165,000 in NPS funding had been provisionally approved at the March meeting. Based on discussions with Elizabeth on NRWA staff availability for various programs, she had adjusted various categories as follows:

- added \$30,917 to Projects and Stewardship Plan Implementation;
- added \$10,000 to Community Grants;
- added \$4,091 to NRWA Financial Administration (10% of direct costs); and
- made slight adjustments to NRWA Program Support and NRWA Staff Fringe.

The description of these categories remained unchanged, given they were broad enough to cover additional projects and activities that could be supported with the additional funds. Lucy noted that increasing the Community Grants to \$40,000 was reasonable given that we had awarded just over \$38,000 in the 2022 grant cycle. Lucy asked for additional comments or questions on the recommended changes; Council members spoke in favor of the proposed adjustments. On motion made and seconded, the revised budget for FY23 in the amount of \$210,000 was approved, subject to that being the final amount of the NPS award.

Community Grants

Lucy offered three brief updates. First, all but one of the 2022 grant agreements have been fully executed, including the grant to the Groton Invasives Species Committee which had required additional clarification of its scope of work. The one remaining grant is that to the Lancaster Land Trust, which is updating its budget to include in-kind volunteer hours.

Second, the Townsend Board of Selectmen had submitted the final report on the 2021 Adams Dam project, which had been forwarded to the Council members prior to the meeting for review. The Council approved the final report and disbursement of the remaining grant funds.

Lastly, she reported that the only potential application for a Land Protection Grant she is currently aware of is for a project Drew Kellner is working on in Brookline, NH. As grant applications are not due until May 8th, Lucy encouraged members to reach out to their communities to remind them of this program. Michele Girard reported she had notified the Land Trust Alliance of this opportunity, as well as the Harvard Conservation Trust and Conservation Commission.

Administrative

The minutes of the March 17, 2022 meeting were approved as presented.

Squannacook River WMA

Lucy reported that a Notice of Intent has not been filed with either the Townsend or Shirley Conservation Commissions and that the cutting season was now closed until next fall. Therefore, there seems to be time to for the Council to consider its response to this issue.

She also gave an update on activities to date taken by the NRWA. As MassWildlife had not responded to the NRWA's Memorandum by the March Board of Directors' meeting, the Board asked Elizabeth to reach out to Bob Durand, a member of the MA Fisheries and Wildlife Advisory Board representing the Northeast District. On March 31st Bob walked the site with Al Futterman, Martha Morgan, Ralph Baker (NRWA Vice President) and Lucy and was shown the areas proposed for tree removal, especially near the Squannacook River. Elizabeth joined the group at the start and end of the site visit as well. At the conclusion of the site visit Bob offered set up a meeting with Brian Hawthorne, MassWildlife Habitat Program Manager, and others on the project team, in hopes of finding a mutually acceptable solutions to the Board's concerns and requests. Shortly thereafter Elizabeth received word from Bob that he had reached Brian and that Brian would reach out to the NRWA later in April to set up a such a meeting, including a site walk, in mid-May.

Emma noted that she has reached out to an NPS restoration ecologist regarding this project.

Forest Legacy Program

Lucy reported that with the release of the President's Budget in March we had learned our ranking and likelihood of funding through this program. While we did well, ranking #22 out of 44 applications, the President's Budget could fund only the first 15 projects. The Steering Committee has met and is considering next steps, including the possibility of refile for the next grant cycle, FY24. Other options included submitting a smaller application, focused on one of the rivers' subbasins, for instance the Nissitissit or Sqannacook River. In addition, the Committee had been advised by Lindsay Nystrom, the FLP-DCR liaison, that much of the work done for the initial application, such as appraisals and landowners' letters of interest, would not need to be updated. Members of the Committee are now reaching out to the participating landowners to ascertain their willingness to wait one more year. The Hollingsworth & Vose property has been withdrawn from the application as MassWildlife will pursue other funding for its acquisition this year. Drew asked if the loss of one tract would have a detrimental effect in terms of the acreage being covered in the application. Elizabeth responded that as our application covered over 2,000 acres the loss of this 90+ parcel should not hurt our application.

The next meeting of the Steering Committee will be on May 4th at which time a recommendation will be developed to bring to the Council. Elizabeth asked if the Council would support moving forward with this project, either in its entirety or some smaller subset. Michele spoke in favor of moving forward, so long as there would be less need for consultant services and staff time, and that it would not detract from other Council projects in the coming year. On motion made and seconded, the Council unanimously approved moving forward.

[Leah Basbanes left the meeting; Neil Angus joined the meeting.]

2021-2022 Projects Update

StoryMap: Emma reported that she has been working with Bernadette McQuilkin and Jackie Dias, the NPS Communications Fellow based in Springfield, MA. Bernadette noted that they will need members of the Council to provide information on various sites as the map is developed. Lucy asked if it would be useful to form a small working group to develop the StoryMap. Emma added that the NPS has the software to build the map which would be available to the Council. Neil Angus suggested adding a link to the StoryMap on the Apple Country website as it covers three of the Wild & Scenic River communities (Bolton, Harvard and Devens). Emma will let the Council members know when she, Bernadette, and Jackie will be meeting so that those interested in participating in this project can join them.

Signage: Martha Morgan reported on the results of her research on installing signs at river crossings. She noted that the requirements on the application for signage in Hollis are quite extensive and fears the NPS required size may be too large. Emma offered to do a mockup to scale which could be attached to the application. She added that the NPS wants the signs to be consistent (nationwide) which would preclude our using our own design and colors. Currently the federal highway manual does not allow Wild & Scenic River signs on federal or state highway river crossings, a status the NPS is working to correct. Martha is still looking into the ability to post signs on state-numbered routes which are maintained by the towns.

Education: Stacey Chilcoat reported on the 3-part series of adult-oriented environmental education program she is developing to offer in May and June. Titled "Just Beneath the Surface," the 2-hour

programs will focus on the micro-organisms in the water and riverbanks. Sites have not yet been selected, nor have the dates and times, although she is considering weekday late afternoons. Lucy suggested offering a site on the Nissitissit River in Brookline. Drew suggested a couple of sites that would have sufficient parking for 10-15 cars.

Other Updates

In-Person Meetings: Drew asked if there had been any discussion on meeting in person again. Lucy noted that the River Resources Center is not fully re-opened, although individual staff do go in occasionally. In addition, not every member might feel comfortable meeting in-person. One option would be to hold hybrid meetings; the challenge being assuring good audio and video connectivity so everyone is engaged. Drew reported that Brookline is using the OWL camera for its hybrid public meetings. The camera tracks that speaker, is fairly easy to use, and links to a laptop so participants can join remotely by Zoom. Drew recalled the cost of the camera to be approximately \$900. Lucy offered to poll the Council members to see what the level of interest is in meeting in person, in a hybrid format, or continuing with Zoom only.

Earth Day Celebration: Neil announced that the Town of Ayer, US Fish & Wildlife Service, and the DEC will be sponsoring an Earth Day event on April 22nd. One mile of McPherson Road will be closed to vehicular traffic. There will be representatives from various local conservation groups, as well as activities for kids. Emma will provide a table and some materials on Wild & Scenic Rivers; members are encouraged to join her.

There being no further business, the meeting was adjourned at 9 PM.

Next meeting: Thursday, May 19th at 7 PM by Zoom