

MIDDLESEX CONSERVATION COMMISSION
Thursday, May 7, 2020
Meeting Conducted Remotely via Zoom

Minutes

Commissioners Present: Sorsha Anderson, Larry Becker, Heather Katz, Ross Lieblappen, George Longenecker, Dell McDonough, Lee Rosberg, Dave Shepard, Jon Udis
Guests: Sky Barsch, Steve Juiffre, Britt Haselton, Bryan Redmond, Bill Rossmassler, Paul Zabriskie

1. Administrative Operations

Meeting called to order at 7:05 p.m.

a. Minutes of Previous Meetings

Lee made a motion to approve the January 2, 2020 meeting minutes with a second from Sorsha. The minutes were approved. Lee made a motion to approve the April 2, 2020 meeting minutes with a second from George. Ross noted one instance where Jon's name was misspelled. With that correction noted, the minutes were approved.

b. Treasurer's Report

Heather reported the current fund balances as follows:

- Conservation Fund: \$9035.48
- Special Projects Fund: \$1415.63
- Operating Budget: approximately \$150.00

The balance in the operating budget is approximate due to a reimbursement for Lee apparently being charged to an incorrect account as it should have come from the operating budget.

2. Project Reports (point person shown in parentheses)

a. Trail Subcommittee (George, Jon and Dave)

The Trail Subcommittee has not met since February due to COVID-19. The North Bear Swamp Road site visit to view the beaver dam flooding has not taken place yet, also due to COVID-19 restrictions. A map has been produced with information from the survey showing the parcels of landowners who expressed interest in having a trail on their property. George reported on recent guidance from the Green Mountain Club on conducting trail work in the time of COVID-19.

b. Emerald Ash Borer (Sorsha)

Sorsha reported that she has experienced technical problems with the mapping app. Ross offered to assist with the technical issue.

c. Amphibian Migration

Lee reported that he made it out to East Hill Road on April 13th, as did Bryan Redmond and Sky Barsch. Observations included spotted salamanders, eastern newts, wood frogs and spring peepers. Susan Warren and Dave were on Brook Road the same evening and observed the same

species. Traffic was very light, presumably due to COVID-19.

d. Middlesex Town Forest (Dave and Ross)

Several Notch Road residents joined the meeting for a discussion of access and parking for the Middlesex Town Forest (MTF). Residents along Notch Road have noticed an increase in traffic and cars parked at the Middlesex Notch Wildlife Management Area (WMA) and along the upper section of Notch Road, likely from users of the MTF. Bryan stated he is supportive of the conservation of the MTF. He recounted his safety concerns with the current situation, particularly in winter when users of the MTF are walking up the last portion of Notch Road that is fairly narrow and not maintained by the Town since it is Class 4. He also noted that use of the Chases Mountain Trail this spring, perhaps due in part to COVID-19 having people recreating closer to home, has led to some damage to the trail. To that end, if the MCC was interested, he volunteered to act as a trail steward to close the trail via signage or other means, during appropriate times such as the spring mud season. Bryan's preferred approach to parking for the MTF would be to upgrade and increase the size of the current WMA parking area along with upgrading Notch Road to the base of his driveway to provide a greater width and site lines to more safely accommodate pedestrian traffic. He would provide a plow turn-around at the base of his driveway so that the WMA parking area would no longer need to also function as the plow turn-around. This would allow for removing the current confusing signage referring to the plow turn-around and new signage could be installed to inform users of the MTF that there is vehicular traffic ahead for an additional distance as they walk along Notch Road to access the MTF. Other options under consideration for parking include creating an MTF and possibly new WMA parking further up Notch Road past Bryan's driveway, or creating parking at the Town gravel pit.

Steve said he and other neighbors on Notch Road have concerns with the traffic and parking situation. He feels the Town has had a hand in generating this issue by creating a resource in the MTF that people want to visit without providing adequate parking. He has both environmental and crime related concerns about moving the parking to a currently undeveloped and more secluded location further up Notch Road. Steve described an old logging road that leads from the Town gravel pit to the MTF as another potential access that would also create a gentler trail that could be used by most anyone compared to the more demanding climb up Chases Mountain. Bryan responded that even if parking was created at the gravel pit the current WMA parking area would remain popular since it is closer to the MTF and would appeal more to people who just want to walk up Notch Road to the beaver ponds. Road foreman Paul Cerminara will be working up a cost estimate for the parking options and upgrading Notch Road from the WMA parking area to Bryan's driveway.

Bill Rossmassler provided some historic background that the gravel pit may be nearing the end of its' lifespan as a source of gravel. There had been some discussion years ago during the MTF management plan public meetings about the gravel pit potentially being an area for motorized recreation once the gravel resource was exhausted. Lee asked if motorized recreationists have been involved with the Middlesex Trails Group (now subcommittee). Jon replied that Aaron Weed has been involved representing the Vermont Association of Snow Travelers (VAST).

Bryan said that many of the parking and access issues may take some time to resolve but that the signage issue should be addressed in the near term. Lee said the MCC could likely fund some

improvement of the signage to reduce confusion about winter parking and alert users of the MTF and the Class 4 section of Notch Road about staying to the side of the road for safety due to vehicular traffic beyond the parking area. Lee will also make and post a sign concerning mud season use of the Chases Mountain Trail.

Ross made a motion to appoint Bryan and Sky as trail stewards for the MTF to post signage for seasonal closure of the Chases Mountain Trail during mud season. A second for the motion was provided by Sorsha and the motion passed.

e. Seidman/Harrower Property

There was a break in discussing MTF issues to hear from Britt Haselton with the Vermont Land Trust (VLT) who joined the meeting to describe a request for funding from the Middlesex Conservation Fund (MCF) to support VLT and the Vermont Housing and Conservation Board (VHCB) in this project to purchase a conservation easement on 80 acres of Sarah Seidman and Scott Harrower's property on Culver Hill Road. VLT submitted an application for funding for this project to VHCB in March. He explained that funds for agricultural land conservation through VHCB come mainly from the US Farm Bill and the state of Vermont. VLT typically requests funding from towns that have conservation funds; the funding is helpful to the cost of the overall project and it is an important show of local support in their application to VHCB. Funds this year from VHCB are likely to be reduced due to the overall economic situation so local funding is more important than ever. The amount to be requested from the MCF has not been finalized yet but would likely be around \$5000. This project would provide access to affordable farmland for a first time farm buyer and ensure that this farmland in Middlesex is not further subdivided and developed in the future. The funding being sought would pay for the conservation easement which Britt explained is the difference between the market value of the property and what the farm buyer will pay. The breakdown is as follows:

- Full fair market value of the property: \$661,000
- Value with the conservation easement: \$276,000 (this is what the farm buyer will pay)
- Value of the easement: $\$661,000 - \$276,000 = \$385,000$ (Sarah and Scott are actually asking for \$372,000 for the easement or \$13,000 less than full market value)

Larry asked what is the value of the funding from the MCF to the overall project? Britt replied there are many projects seeking funding from VHCB and that projects with town financial support and a sale at less than full market value are helpful in leveraging funding. Jon asked what would happen if the farmer wants to sell at some time in the future? The VLT easement includes a right to purchase the property at the agricultural value (right of first refusal). Future purchasers of the property are limited to family members of the owner or other farmers. Dave asked about public access to the property. Britt replied the prospective buyer is amenable to public access but that guaranteed public access is not typically mandated in conservation easements on agricultural land, given that farm activities may not be compatible with public access. He can look into this further as to what type of public access might be able to be incorporated into the easement. The intent of the buyer is to operate a diversified vegetable and herb farm with direct retail sales and Community Supported Agriculture. She is also interested in hosting community events at the farm.

Middlesex Town Forest (continued)

Regarding trail signs, Lee has not heard back as yet from Brian Prendergast about potentially crafting signs for Chases Mountain Trail.

Dave reported that word was received from the Vermont Department of Forests, Parks and Recreation (FPR) that the application for work on the Chases Mountain Trail submitted by the MCC was not selected for funding this year. The notice from FPR stated there were 29 grant applications with requests of almost \$2 million and there was not sufficient funding for all the applications. Dave has sent an email to FPR asking for any feedback they might be able to provide on the grant application.

Scott Beaudin recently reached out to the MCC about his plans for upcoming logging on his property adjacent to the northeast boundary of the MTF and offered to allow the Town to bring out logs across his property in conjunction with his harvest. Lee has reviewed the MTF management plan for Stand 1 which is the closest to the area being logged on Scott's land. The County Forester might be an option for reviewing the timber harvest potential of Stand 1.

f. 3 Mile Bridge Road Parcel (Larry)

Larry has spoken to Greg Western with the Cross Vermont Trail Association (CVTA). There will likely be a work crew with CVTA starting in late May and work on mowing and installing the sign at this property will be one of their first projects. Larry has checked with the Montpelier Post Master about the mailboxes on the roadside of the property and found out that two of them are still in service. The Postal Service doesn't want to move the mailboxes and it was agreed the current location of the mailboxes is not a problem.

g. Green-Up Day (Sorsha)

Sorsha reported that Green-Up Day is still on but awaiting more guidance on how it will be conducted. There is a large dumping area on Portal Road that could use attention. Sorsha will be organizing a project to clean this up. A metals container and collection for trash picked up from the roadside will be staffed by the MCC and will be at the usual location adjacent to the auxiliary fire station.

Meeting adjourned at 9:05 p.m.

Minutes recorded by Dave Shepard, MCC Secretary