Essex Conservation and Trails Committee (CTC)
Regular Meeting Minutes
81 Main St. Essex Jct., VT 05452
September 10, 2024

Minutes Submitted by Clerk Duane Millar Barlow, September 12, 2024, Approved October 8, 2024

Attendees

Committee Members:

Present: Ken Signorello, Chair; Shannon Jackson, Vice Chair; Duane Millar Barlow, Clerk; Bino Cummings; Paul Davis; Steve Dowd; Betsy Dunn; Morgan Kirk; April Peterson;

Staff: Kent Johnson

Public: Chuck Vile (Town Tree Warden)

1. CALL TO ORDER

Meeting called to order by Ken Signorello at 6:30 PM, The committee confirmed they had a quorum.

2. AGENDA ADDITIONS/CHANGES

No additions or changes.

3. PUBLIC COMMENTS

No public comments.

4. POTENTIAL ACTION ITEMS

a. **Approve Indian Brook Fall Clean-up Date**

   The committee discussed setting a date for the Indian Brook Fall Clean-up. After considering various options and potential conflicts, they settled on **September 28th** as the primary date, with September 29th as the rain date.

b. **Advise on Planning Commission development applications**

Mainly an informational update about ongoing planning processes, with no new applications requiring immediate action from the Conservation and Trails Committee.

c. **Action on advisory on trail relocation in Mattheu Forest**

There's a 300-foot section of trail in Mathieu Forest that is inside private property without an easement.

Duane presented a potential alternative trail route using old, existing paths and clearings.The proposed route would stay on town property, avoiding the private land issue.

It would require some work like raking, minor grading, and building a small bridge over a stream.

The committee decided to write a memo to the Parks and Recreation Department recommending this trail relocation. The memo will mention that this issue is currently holding up trail mapping.

The committee voted to approve sending this advisory memo, with the motion passing unanimously.

d. **Ratify changes to Tree Nursery MOU**

Steve reported on his extensive survey of trees in Essex, driving through every street to assess tree needs.

He found 7 trees that need to be removed or replaced, and 3-4 dead trees in one neighborhood.

The discussion highlighted the need to separate the tree nursery plans from immediate tree removal and replacement needs for the fiscal year 2026 budget. Ken and Steve agreed to work together to create two separate documents: a. An updated MOU for the tree nursery b. Budgetary recommendations for fiscal year 2026 for tree removal and replacements.

They discussed potential grant applications for funding these projects.

The committee decided not to ratify changes at this meeting, instead opting to review the revised documents at the next meeting.

There was additional discussion about the need for planting trees in areas without existing trees and the importance of maintaining and expanding the tree canopy.

The main outcome was a decision to refine and separate the MOU and budgetary documents for clearer presentation and decision-making at the next meeting.

e. **Approve budget recommendations for tree removal planting FY26**

Specific budget recommendations were not approved, and the committee is working on creating a separate, detailed budget proposal for tree removal and planting for FY26, to be presented at the next meeting.

f. **Riverside Boat Access - update and approve next steps**

g. **Discuss Conservation Fund Policy and Approve Conservation Fund Application Form**

Agenda items **f** and **g** were discussed together.

The committee reviewed a potential site for a boat access point on the Winooski River, located on a 1.52-acre triangular piece of land south of River Road in Essex.

The committee had a meeting with town officials, including the town manager, to discuss the project's feasibility and next steps.

The committee realized they should have filled out a Conservation Fund application form with their initial memo to the select board, as per the Conservation Fund policy.

They were advised to meet with potential partners, including the Winooski Valley Park District, who suggested conducting a feasibility study for the boat launch.

The committee is considering applying for a grant from the Vermont Housing Conservation Board to fund the feasibility study.

They discussed the need to confirm that no other plans exist for the property before proceeding.

The committee approved submitting the conservation fund application for the land purchase.

Next steps include:

- Finalizing and submitting the conservation fund application
- Seeking formal documents from the HOA regarding the property
- Applying for a grant to conduct a feasibility study
- Exploring partnerships with organizations like Winooski Valley Park District
- Investigating any Act 250 limitations on developing the site

The committee also discussed the potential for this project to be part of a larger "blue way" trail network along the Winooski River.

The main outcome was the approval to move forward with the conservation fund application, with language that is clear that the parcel is worthy of conservation regardless of whether it's used as a boat launch, and to continue exploring the feasibility of the boat access project.

h. **Potential Action on Indian Brook parking area clearing**

The committee discussed a small triangular piece of land near the entrance to Indian Brook Park, by a large rock.

This area has been cleared of all trees except for one or two.

Betsy reported that she had spoken with Adrian (from Parks and Recreation) about the possibility of creating a pollinator garden in this cleared area. Adrian was supportive of the pollinator garden idea.

Betsy mentioned she would talk to Mike Kieran, an expert, about how to implement the pollinator garden.

Morgan offered to help with the project if needed.

No formal action was taken during the meeting, but there was general support for moving forward with the pollinator garden idea.

i. **Approve Advisory to reinstate Trail Caretakers Program**

Duane presented information about a previously existing Trail Caretakers Program that had become inactive.

The program has existing documents including liability releases, instructions, and a spreadsheet of past participants.

The program would involve volunteers doing minimal trail maintenance like pruning and reporting issues, but not using power tools like chainsaws.

There was discussion about how to market and reinvigorate the program, potentially at the upcoming Explore Essex event.

Concerns were raised about maintaining enthusiasm and providing proper training for volunteers.

The committee discussed the need for a designated person from the committee to act as a Trail Caretaker coordinator.

There was mention of potentially organizing educational events about trail maintenance, invasive species, and conservation to support the program.

The committee decided not to take immediate action but to bring a more formal proposal to the next meeting.

Duane will meet with Adrian on September 24th to discuss concerns and logistics.

The main outcome was a decision to develop a more detailed proposal for reinstating the Trail Caretakers Program, to be presented and potentially voted on at the next meeting.

j. Discuss and approve revised committee mission statement

Ken proposed a simple rewriting of the current mission statement, with the main change being the removal of the phrase stating that the committee "maintains the trails."

The discussion then shifted to a broader conversation about the committee's structure and responsibilities.

Ken reported on a meeting with the Select Board chair, where the idea of the committee becoming a commission was suggested.

The potential benefits of becoming a commission were discussed, including:

- Having a dedicated budget
- More autonomy in decision-making
- Ability to represent the town in certain situations
- Ability to apply for grants directly

Options discussed included:

- Simply becoming a commission
- Splitting into two committees/commissions (one for conservation, one for trails)
- Becoming a commission with two monthly meetings

The committee did not make a decision on these changes at this meeting.

The main outcome was a decision to postpone the mission statement revision in favor of a broader discussion about the committee's structure and responsibilities at the next meeting.

k. Action on the EMS Project proposal

Ken mentioned that he and Chuck were planning to meet with Essex Middle School about tree maintenance, but this meeting hadn't happened yet.

Betsy reported that she had spoken with Adrian about the issue. Betsy also mentioned talking to Gary Scott, the facilities manager for EWSD.

The main outcome was that this topic needs further investigation and discussion, with more concrete proposals to be presented at the next meeting.

5. UPDATES AND REPORTS

a. **Act 171 outreach needs and suggestions**

Ken mentioned that some work needs to be done on Act 171, particularly regarding public outreach.

April offered to find a time to connect with Morgan and Paul to discuss the project further.

Ken emphasized that while nothing had happened yet, this project needs to move forward.

The committee didn't take any specific action during this meeting, but agreed to follow up on scheduling a time to discuss what needs to be done.

The main takeaway is that while no concrete plans were made during the meeting, there's an acknowledgment that Act 171 outreach needs attention, and the committee is preparing to take action on this in the near future.

b. **Report on Sand Hill Park/Mattheu Forest trail issue**

Skipped this agenda item, as it was covered in 4.c.

c. **Indian Brook Trail grant**

This was briefly mentioned in a list of items, but no detailed discussion took place.

d. **Report on Committee Chair meeting with Selectboard Chair**

Ken attended a monthly meeting of committee chairs with the Selectboard chair.

During this meeting, the topic of the Conservation and Trails Committee's active status came up.

Tracey Delphia, the Selectboard chair, expressed interest in hearing proposals for expanding the committee's responsibilities.

e. **Footpath Network Map in Town Plan**

Ken introduced the concept of a footpath network map that could be included in the Town Plan.

This map would show where the town wants roads and footpaths to be in the future, even if they don't currently exist.

Once included in the official Town Plan, these proposed paths would need to be considered in future development plans, even if they cross private property.

The suggestion was made that the committee should produce something similar for trails, particularly focusing on connecting forest blocks.

While no immediate action was taken, Ken presented this as an important concept for the committee to consider and potentially work on in the future. Creating such a map could be a powerful tool for future trail and conservation planning in Essex.

f. **Update on Town Tree Policy**
g. **VT Urban Community Forest Program Tree Planting Grant Application for January**

No concrete actions were taken during this meeting regarding the grant application.

The main takeaway is that while this grant opportunity is on the committee's radar, they are waiting for other related work (like the Tree Nursery MOU) to be completed before moving forward with the application. More detailed information is expected to be presented at the next regular meeting.

h. **Update on development landscaping zoning regulations**

Deferred until the next regular meeting.

i. **Tree City Costs spreadsheet and staff expenditure update**

Shannon mentioned that there's a spreadsheet on the shared drive that everyone has access to for logging Tree City-related hours and costs.

Committee members were reminded to log their hours for various activities, including:

- Planning for the Indian Brook cleanup
- Putting up posters around town
- Arbor Day activities
- Spring cleanup

Ken suggested keeping this item on the agenda for every meeting to ensure regular check-ins and updates.

6. READING FILE

A brief description of Reading File items in the agenda packet.

7. ADJOURN

Motion to adjourn: Moved by Shannon, seconded by Betsy (9-0).

Adjourned the meeting at 8:25 PM.

MOTIONS

- September Meeting Minutes changes. Motioned by Betsy, Seconded by Morgan (9-0)
- September 28th/29th for Fall Cleanup. Motioned by Morgan, Seconded by Betsy (9-0)
- Advise P&R to create the new trail, Motioned by Morgan, Seconded by Shannon (9-0)
- Approval for Conservation Reserve Fund Application, Motioned by Betsy, Seconded by Duane (8-0) Bino Abstained
- Adjourn Motioned by Shannon, Seconded by Betsy (9-0)

NEXT STEPS

- Duane to make requested changes to August Regular Meeting minutes.
- Kent to print big and small posters for Fall Cleanup (Indian Brook, September 28/29)
- Ken to write a memo to Parks & Rec recommending the new trail in Mathieu Forest
- Duane & Betsy to investigate purchasing a parcel to clarify the Sandhill Park trail situation
- Steve & Ken to produce two documents: a. Updated MOU for the Tree Nursery b. Budget recommendations for tree removal/planting FY26
- April to incorporate figures from the above MOU for VT Urban Community Forest Program Tree Planting Grant Application
- Shannon to get confirmation/price from the HOA for the boat launch property
- Ken to pursue meeting with potential partners and explore feasibility study for the boat launch
- Betsy to move forward with planning a Pollinator Garden at Indian Brook
- Duane to prepare signage for Explore Essex to solicit trail volunteers
- Ken to prepare a more comprehensive proposal for the Committee's mission and structure for the next meeting
- Ken to add agenda item for next meeting to discuss changing the meeting time
- Betsy to prepare a proposal for the EMS Project for the next meeting
- Kent, Morgan, and Paul to coordinate on Act 171 outreach efforts
- Committee members to continue logging hours for Tree City USA requirements
- Duane to meet with Adrian on September 24th to discuss Trail Caretakers Program

Video: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WfXLc_YWN9Q

Next Meeting: October 8th, 2024 6:30pm