

**Mohawk Trail Woodlands Partnership
Approved Executive Committee Minutes
Wednesday, October 13, 2021**

Present: Henry Art (chair), Joe Nowak, Robert O'Connor, Whit Sanford, Rick Chandler

Guest: State Representative Natalie Blais

Meeting was called to order at 2:03 p.m.

1. Approval of Minutes of Executive Committee Meeting, Sept. 23, 2021

Bob O'Connor moved and Joe Nowak seconded a motion to approve the September 23, 2021 Executive Committee Minutes. The motion passed unanimously.

2. Discussion with legislative guest State Rep. Natalie Blais (1st Franklin District)

State Representative Natalie Blais introduced herself to the Committee. She is Vice Chair of the Tourism Arts Development Committee and is on the Transportation Committee and the Ways & Means Committee, representing the 1st Franklin District.

A discussion ensued about current MTWP issues of interest including:

a. Payment in Lieu of Taxes formula

It was agreed that current PILOT payments to rural towns are neither equitable nor sufficient. This fact is reflected in the legislation establishing MTWP. PILOT payments are not enough to maintain rural infrastructure and to help towns increase tourism, which in rural regions is a significant growth sector for their economies. It was noted that wealthier towns in the Northern Berkshire region get a greater share of PILOT payments because the lands the state owns in these towns are valued at a higher rate because land is more frequently developed in these areas.

Representative Blais and Senator Adam Hinds are sponsoring legislation to change the formula and increase the funding for rural towns in MA. There is close to a \$15 million gap between rural and urban/suburban communities. The bill on redistricting will need our help when it has a hearing, so one of us should appear as a panelist.

Whit Sanford stated that the creation of the Partnership, with its mission of rural conservation and development, is perfectly timed for addressing climate resilience and global warming. It is a model for rural regions, especially in New England and the Mid-Atlantic States.

Hank Art noted that the large tracts of land with conservation restrictions under Chapter 61 effect the tax base of rural municipalities because they are protected from taxation. He wonders if we have any legislators in the eastern part of the state who would recognize the inequity of the situation who could act as allies.

There was a discussion about the Partnership. Seventeen towns have joined the MTWP of the 21-towns in the region. As a quasi-governmental, nonprofit NGO, the Partnership umbrella has resulted in grants being awarded to member towns to develop a pilot Climate Forestry Project,

and to support tree planting funds for downtowns and riparian areas. Rep. Blais noted that Senator Comerford has another forest-related bill coming.

b. Commonwealth Shared Stewardship Agreement with USDA Forest Service

The Committee explained that through the Commonwealth Shared Stewardship Agreement with the USDA Forest service the Partnership is working in collaboration with the State and Federal governments. As such, we need an Act of Congress to have a Forest Service representative on the MTWP Board. The Partnership can raise private funding to match state and federal grants and support.

The National Parks Service oversees the designation of Heritage Areas where natural, cultural, and historic resources combine to form a cohesive, nationally important landscape. This federal status is much like the partnering of the MTWP with the Forest Service and may be another avenue for the MTWP to explore for federal support.

Rep. Blais expressed interest in helping the MTWP on this issue as Vice Chair of the Tourism Arts Development Committee.

Chair Hank Art recounted the enabling legislation that calls for a Partnership fund to be established:

c. "SECTION 92. 89. There shall be established and set up on the books of the commonwealth a separate fund to be known as the Mohawk Trail Woodlands Partnership Fund, hereafter referred to as the Mohawk Trail Woodlands Partnership Fund. The fund shall be administered by the Mohawk Trail Woodlands Partnership Board as established pursuant to section 94. There shall be credited into the fund revenues or other financing sources directed to the fund by appropriation, bond revenues or other monies authorized by the general court..."

Committee members explained to Rep. Blais that at some point there needs to be a companion Federal Fund set up for the Partnership and the Board is looking for state legislative support for stable funding. The Finance & Budget Committee had some questions about the State Fund and proposed Federal Fund. It asked: Can the two funds only be state and federal monies? Are the funds considered operating monies for the Partnership? Would it be appropriate to co-mingle public and private funds? The Partnership needs to research these questions to understand the possibilities.

Rep. Blais noted she was part of a meeting with Sen. Neal's office and FRCOG some years ago to discuss funding and expressed support for staying in touch on these issues. It was noted that it is wonderful to work on a landscape basis versus political basis. Whit noted that she would send a list of local contacts to Rep. Blais to stay in touch.

d. Planning for a MTWP Forest Center

The proposed Forest/Interpretive Center is in the legislation for the Partnership and the Committee shared the vision with Rep. Blais of a multi-use center with an information/tourist center, sustainable forestry programs and exhibits, demonstration forest, and spaces for offices and public gatherings. The main goals of the Partnership are to: 1) Improve outdoor recreation tourism in the region, 2) foster better forest conservation and climate resilience, and 3) natural resource-based economic development.

3. Update on Williams College student project for Forest Center needs assessment

The Williams College Environmental Planning Program is working on a concept plan for the Forest Center, which will identify needs, potential locations, and programming. It was noted that the center should be for local people first and foremost to learn about their region, which at the same time will inform tourists about the area and rural living.

Hank and Whit met with student groups on Whitcomb Summit and via Zoom with our student team of two (Abby and Sabine). They will be interacting with the Standing Committees to learn what elements of these committees should be folded into the Forest Center. They will be implementing a regional public survey via the internet and will be interviewing or meeting with individuals from the forestry and outdoor recreation sectors as well as property owners where the center could potentially be located.

Questions for our planning team that came up: Co-locate with a school, e.g., Adams Middle School and YMCA? Local exhibit designers? Educational and vocational training? Adjunct to existing school rather than using the school? A possible Route 2 location near Hager's Farm Market was noted.

4. Scheduling of next Executive Committee meeting(s)

Next meetings: Nov. 9 for the Board Meeting; tentative Oct. 21 for an Executive Committee with Committee Chairs invited to hear more about the students' Forest Center project.

5. Other Items not anticipated within 48 hours of agenda posting – None.

6. Public comment – None.

7. Adjournment

Whit Sanford moved and Hank seconded a motion to adjourn. It carried unanimously, closing the meeting at 3:37 p.m.