

MINUTES
Woodlands Partnership of Northwest Massachusetts*
Full Board Meeting – February 29, 2024
Virtual Meeting

Board members in attendance: Rhonda Anderson; Doug Brown; Constance Carpenter; Marybeth Chichester; Dicken Crane; Deb Donaldson; Larry Flaccus; Sam Haupt; Liz Kidder; Elayne Murphy; Joe Nowak; Bob O'Connor; Alain Peteroy; Hannah Poplawski; Russ Richardson; Keith Ross; Art Schwenger; Chris Skelly

Board members absent: Hank Art; Ron Bosley; Paul Catanzaro; Greg Cox; Chris Cozzaglio; Jay Healy; Alice Houghtaling; Sheila Kelliher; Keith Nislow; Rick Peltier; Mark Phelps; Amy Shapiro; Jeffrey Thomas

Staff/partners in attendance: Lisa Hayden – Administrative Agent/NEFF; Kate Conlin – Coord./NEFF; Vanessa Farney (EOEEA)

Guest Speaker(s): Erik Kreusch (Regional Coordinator, NE Regional, NPS) and Elisa Kunz (SE Regional Office NPS), Lois Bruinooge (Ex. Dir. Last Green Valley)

Guests: Melanie Glynn, Savoy; Chris Stein, NPS; Caleb Mitchell

1. Call to order and Land Acknowledgement

- 6:02 p.m. D. Crane – Board Chair; Land Acknowledgment K. Conlin- with update on plans for improving the Land Acknowledgement narrative for future use.

2. Roll Call Attendance of Board Members and introduction of guest speakers.

3. Review and approval of minutes of June 20, 2023, and November 15, 2023

- Motion made by A. Schwenger, and seconded by S. Haupt, to approve 6/20/23 minutes, C. Skelly, J. Nowak, R. Richardson, and L. Kidder abstain.

- Motion made by L. Flaccus, and seconded by S. Haupt, to approve 11/15/23 minutes, J. Nowak and H. Poplawski abstain.

4. Guest Speakers: Erik Kreusch and Elisa Kunz (NPS) and Lois Bruinooge (LGV)

- E. Kunz described the possible avenue for becoming part of the National Heritage Areas (NHA) program of the National Park Service. The Feasibility Study is the primary tool used by groups to assess and prioritize regions or areas worthy of application to the NHA program. The review focuses on natural, cultural, historical and scenic attributes of a place. There are currently 62 NHAs in 36 states focusing on the shared heritage, place-based resources for the preservation and conservation, recreation and educational attributes and economic development of these distinctive landscapes and regions. Generally, there is no federal ownership of lands or buildings. Common themes also include art/food/music often with an interwoven story, and Heritage Areas are lived in and representative of the national experience. There is always the need for a local coordinating entity, and strong support through the process by residents, business interests, non-profits, tourism development groups, state, local and then federal support, which includes annual funding and technical assistance. There is generally a high degree of integrity of the resources that are the focus.

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- The example reviewed by L. Bruinooge of The Last Green Valley, completed in 1994 and the 4th one in the program to be approved, was a strong public/private partnership with Congressional support. The area is 84% forest and farms, covering 35 towns in eastern Connecticut and south central Massachusetts, with a natural resource conservation focus and water quality and outdoor education being an important goal, although it has no regulatory authority. The LGV does not have a signature battlefield or one focal historic site, however the colonial and industrial heritage of the region are important, with notable sites (such as the Prudence Crandall Museum, a school that admitted young black and brown women in 1833). L. Bruinooge emphasized the need for local fundraising and membership efforts to help match the federal funding dollar for dollar and to pay close attention to tribal involvement and to remain sensitive to land rights and privacy. A federal bill authorizes funding for the Heritage Areas through 2037 but Congress will need to approve actual funding each year. An Alliance of National Heritage Areas holds an annual Congressional outreach event each Feb. and provides monthly calls and an annual conference. She noted that the Upper Housatonic NHA in the Berkshires hosted last year's conference.

5. Board discussion and vote: Authorization of Agent staff to pursue National Heritage Area designation and research best strategy for completing the required feasibility study.

- Discussion: there are \$50,000 in additional funds under the Agent contract through EEA (extended contract until Dec. 2025). A. Schwenger supports exploring the idea but questions if this effort will actively displace other Partnership objectives? The Partnership staff are already managing 4-5 other grants. As a solution to this concern, perhaps a consultant is hired to assist Agent staff with components of the Feasibility Study.
- Motion made by L. Kidder to authorize moving forward to pursue study of a Heritage Area, S. Haupt seconded. Discussion: L. Kidder suggests perhaps expanding to include more of western MA, not just the WP region, and that the Feasibility Study could determine the boundary. D. Crane notes that the Partnership region is distinct in many ways from surrounding towns and that adding too many additional towns would dilute that distinctness. K. Ross – supports land conservation focus, we need to move forward as written. M. Chichester - we should explore the application. C. Skelly - approve of motion in general – criteria will be important to designate the area, so there are many possibilities to include such as forestry, manufacturing mills, agricultural.
- A. Schwenger brings up goal of securing the Trust Fund \$\$ and is still concerned with spreading the Board and staff too thin, if we take this on. L. Flaccus is supportive, encourages looking at a broader region – to include Greenfield, Petersham, Stockbridge, and Historic Deerfield. B. O'Connor encourages sticking with the mission and focus of the Partnership and the established footprint and folding the Feasibility Study into what we are already working on, as the Partnership Plan may already include many components. Discussion that outreach needed for NHA designation is something the WP needs to be doing anyway.
- Discussion about wording and whether to strike “pursue” and replace with “explore” or “investigate.” Motion on table as written to “pursue NHA designation”; B. O'Connor brings motion, A. Schwenger seconds. All in favor- unanimous.

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6. Funding for Forest Center next steps:

- L. Hayden updates that there is \$18,000 left in awarded funds for a Forest Center building space needs study. If this isn't deemed a crucial or appropriate goal right now, the Partnership needs to get permission from the USFS to use the money for something else, which might be educational and outreach events related to forest health, conservation and stewardship. The Board has a general feeling that the money could be better spent elsewhere. Agent will investigate how else we can use the funding and will need to review with grant monitor whether a modification will be necessary.
- D. Donaldson suggests that once the grant-funded Virtual Forest Center web site is up and running, that might help provide a better view of what kind of physical space may be needed.

7. Chair Update:

- D. Crane reviewed recommendations included in the Forests as Climate Solutions Study.
- Recognition of the effect moratorium has had on wood products industry.
- Looking forward to the Canopy event at UMass that will be held March 21, 2024.
- Stressed the importance of having Partnership Region input listened to and included in state policy and objectives.

8. Agent Update:

- Notice of Committee Chair Summit & Executive Committee hybrid meeting taking place in Windsor town offices on April 16, 2024.
- Senator Mark's name change legislation submitted to Environment and Natural Resource Committee on 2/15/2015 - Bill SD2960.
- Events coming up, funded by EEA grant: three landowner events – March 7, virtual workshop on setting goals for your land, planning a second event which is an Estate planning forum with Atty. Elizabeth Wroblicka, and lastly a woods walk in early May at John Sears' place in Hawley.
- The Partnership is an official supporter of the Friends of Silvio Conte who submitted funding priorities (a "look book") to Congress. We submitted a request for funds to conduct additional programming. Perhaps this idea can also be applied to the \$18,000 allocated for a space needs study.
- D. Crane and L. Hayden recently met with Stephanie Cooper and Melissa Hoffer. Hoffer asked what the Partnership needs. Agent is working on a list of bulleted priorities to send. Invitation to the Board to email Agent to share additional ideas.

9. Public Comment none

10. Motion to Adjourn by D. Crane and seconded by S. Haupt, approved unanimously.

*On Oct. 11, 2022, the Board of the public body created in 2018 voted unanimously to change its name from the "Mohawk Trail Woodlands Partnership" in its bylaws to operating as the "Woodlands Partnership of Northwest Massachusetts" and requested the state legislature and USDA Forest Service to officially establish and recognize the new name.