

## Board Meeting Minutes

### Woodlands Partnership of Northwest Massachusetts

Wednesday, November 5, 2025, 4 - 6 p.m.

Ashfield Community Hall, 521 Main St., Ashfield MA

**Present:** Avril Levesque, Lever Inc.; Helen Payne Watt, Shelburne; Mary Wigmore, Ashfield; Dicken Crane, Windsor; Chris Skelly, Buckland; Deb Donaldson, Conway; Bob O'Connor, MA EOEEA; John Waite, FCCDC; Alain Peteroy, FLT; Greg Cox, Hawley; Jonathan Legreze, Colrain; Russ Richardson, MFA; Mark Phelps, New Ashford; Rhonda Anderson, OCC; Sam Haupt, Peru; Art Schwenger, Heath.

**Absent:** Jay Healy, Charlemont; Hannah Poplawski, Rowe; UMASS rep, Keith Nislow, Alice Houghtaling, Monroe; Elayne Murphy, HRWA; Keith Ross, SAF; Liz Kidder, Leyden; Joe Nowack, Adams; Doug Brown, BNRC; Chris Cozzaglio, BRPC; Shelia Comstock, Florida.

**Guests/Public:** Kim McPhee (FRCOG), Lisa Primiano (DCS Director of Conservation), Caleb Mitchell (Peru, former town admin), Cosmo LaViola (Savoy), Hank Art (former Board Chair), Jessica Atwood (FRCOG/Consultant), Dr. Jessica Dolan, Ph.D. (Consultant)

**Project Staff:** L. Hayden – Administrative Agent/NEFF;

- 1. Call to Order and Welcome:** D. Crane, 4:27 p.m. following refreshments
- 2. Roll Call:** Introduction of guests and new members
- 3. Review and Approval of June 24, 2025 Board Minutes:** As amended to correct attendance, M. Phelps motion, A. Schwenger seconds, All in favor.
- 4. Agent Overview of Natural Heritage Area feasibility study process:** Review of the definitions. Funding range of \$150,000 to \$750,000 annual federal, plus local match. There are currently 62 NHA's in 36 states with three National Park Service administrators. Currently the Woodlands Partnership has money to complete the ongoing feasibility study with focus on the Indigenous inventory and cultural assets. Also, in process are the regional assets assessment with the county planning agencies, considering the remaining funds could be used for outreach and public community events with the partnership being the 'Local Coordinating Entity'. The Partnership is a fledgling organization that is bringing together a variety of groups and looking for more stable annual funding sources. Consider expanding region to towns such Hancock. Could funding flow to municipalities and tribal entities.
- 5. Board Chair Report:** Introductory meeting with representatives of the Stockbridge Munsee Band of Mohicans. D. Crane reported on the productive conversations,

though the Stockbridge Munsee communicated that they wished the Partnership had asked whether they wanted a NHA before embarking on the process. They discussed how the federally recognized tribe, now based in Wisconsin, but with homelands, offices and land they are stewarding in NW MA, could participate and be in communication with the Partnership and including possible program support. The Stockbridge Munsee have had a challenge funding a tribal member to steward their lands, which could possibly be an area of interest and collaboration.

**6. Update on Indigenous-Focused Natural & Cultural Assets Inventory as part of the NHA. Jessica Dolan, Ph.D. (Cultural Anthropologist):**

Jessica is reviewing the Indigenous heritage of the past/present/and future in the western MA region. Her work also included support for exploring opportunities and understanding about how to initiate and build relationships between the Partnership and the Indigenous groups with a focus on the National Heritage Area designation, which could support the co-management and stewardship of conservation lands in the region.

Methods of research: met with Stockbridge Munsee leaders, Nipmuc/k and Abenaki Nations. Drafting a historic timeline, land deeds, museum records as part of gathering background; understanding relationships between Native communities with historic homelands and contemporary Nipmuc/k communities. The Stockbridge Munsee are potentially interested in working with the partnership but may not currently have the capacity to. Odanak Nation is interested in caring for black ash forest stands; an Odanak member is a descendent of “Greylock” – could help demystify the history of Greylock in an interpretive center. The Nipmuc/k Nation has concerns with naming issues and may be interested to continue activities such as work by the non-profit No Loose Braids. The Mahican-Mohawk trail became Albany Road/Route 2 and in the mid 1700’s the line of forts in Colrain, Heath, Rowe and North Adams were built and defended. Many Nipmuc/k people became part of local communities and never left western MA, while other native groups returned after diaspora - being forced from their homelands due to war and colonization - including the Stockbridge Munsee and Wabanaki peoples. Dr. Dolan reports her research is showing that NW MA, as a place of travel and struggle, was a significant place in the history of the US, rich in living Indigenous heritage.

**Ethical questions to discuss:** There was significant wealth created during the 1600 and 1700’s with military might of colonial powers. How do we recognize this disparity? Will the Partnership collaborate, or consult with, regional nations? Dr. Dolan explained that a formal collaborative relationship with shared decision-making respects the sovereignty of tribal governments. The partnership could support leadership from native groups in discussions when they are offered lands but do not have the capacity to own and care for the lands properly. Relationship needs to be reciprocal, not extractive, understanding how Indigenous communities would like their history to be taught. Can the partnership create a dedicated paid position for a native representative?

**Report on Heritage Area assets and statistics, Jessica Atwood:** Basic study themes include Historic Resources, Arts and Culture, Scenic Byways and Dark

Skies. Notes from board members during brainstorming discussion on important themes including: sheep fever, eastern woodlands forest stewardship, diversity of ecosystems, how did communities live in this region, forest succession as a metaphor for the region's history, agricultural restoration. This place is seeking restoration & active management, resilience in farming and forest communities, smaller-scale stewards, landowners & towns, micro businesses, entrepreneurs. Looking ahead, there is a lot of hope in restoration. People and communities are coming together in partnership.

- 7. Potential Collaboration with DRWA:** The wild and scenic designation effort is ongoing. Potential to combine both the NHA and W&S into one effort of seeking Congressional support.
- 8. Committee Updates:** S. Haupt reports that he testified on behalf of Peru at Revenue sub-committee hearing of legislature – only had 3 minutes – and reserved right for WP to submit testimony on Pilot Reform bill. In Peru, 31% of land is state-owned – funding formula doesn't recognize the public health benefits of the land we protect. Caleb Mitchell from Peru, who served on an early advisory committee, commented that the state lands dramatically affect property value for the tax base.
- 9. Other Agent Reports:** Lisa reports on \$75,000 EEA "Voices for the Forest" grant secured. This will support \$20,000 for small grants to local schools in both counties, \$10,000 to landowner coordination, \$17,000 for more video/photo content such as for Ethan Tapper and staff time. Lisa suggested the board discuss the contract. Dicken would like to see more of the funding go to content not staff time and administrative fees to NEFF. There is also a future need to confirm how the partnership can accept private donations such as through a 501-c3 arm of the partnership. Tree planting is scheduled at the Hawley Town Garage Nov. 15-16, volunteers wanted. The tree planting grant has more funds to support additional planting sites and work. Board members were invited to offer input on the latest version of the Land Acknowledgement.
- 10.** Meeting adjourned at approximately 7:40 p.m.

*Respectfully submitted- Alain Peteroy, Clerk, 12/8/2025*