

MINUTES
Woodlands Partnership of Northwest Massachusetts
Fall Board Meeting
December 2, 2024 - Heath Community Hall and Zoom

Present:

In Person: Alain Peteroy; Art Schwenger; Hank Art; Dicken Crane; Sheila Kelliher Comstock; Mark Phelps, Jon Lagreze; Joe Nowak.

Via Zoom: Chris Cozzaglio; Chris Skelly; Jay Healy; Deb Donaldson; Bob O'Connor; John Waite; Elayne Murphy; Liz Kidder; Keith Ross; Russ Richardson; Rhonda Anderson; Hannah Poplawski; Constance Carpenter;

Absent: Doug Brown; Ron Bosley; Greg Cox; Alice Houghtaling; Sam Haupt; Larry Flaccus; Rick Peltier; Keith Nislow; Mary Wigmore

Project Staff: L. Hayden – Administrative Agent/NEFF; K. Conlin – Coord./NEFF; Bob Wilber—EEA; Vanessa Farny—EEA

Guest(s): Stephen Foley, Collins Center project staff, Ned Wolf (Heath resident, Finance Committee Member and local historian)

Public: Arianna Collins—HooRWA; Glen Ayers—Greenfield

Call to order and welcome - 6:02 p.m.

Roll Call Attendance of Board & Guests – Introduction of new board member Jon Lagreze of Colrain; announcement that Mary Wigmore of Ashfield has also been appointed to fill the town's vacancy. Ned Wolf gave brief introduction on the history of Heath including conservation efforts in the town and people of note connected to Heath.

Review and approval of June 26, 2024 Board Minutes – A. Schwenger moves, Sam Haupt seconds, M. Phelps corrects that he was in attendance at the meeting. Motion passed unanimously. J. Lagreze abstains.

Board vote on vacant Treasurer position on Executive Committee – C. Cozzaglio has put his name forward. Per the bylaws, a majority vote by the board is needed. M. Phelps motion, K. Ross seconds. Motion passed unanimously.

Municipal public safety study update, request for Board input regarding stakeholders, venues, and general outreach strategy – L. Kidder- Leyden worked with the Collins Center and Stephen Foley to create an intermunicipal agreement with Bernardston and rebuild the fire department. She recommended the Partnership look at the public safety capacity of the 21-towns to inform region-wide capacity issues. She speaks highly of Stephen Foley's involvement.

S. Foley: the wide geographical area makes it difficult to gather information, as a lot of entities are involved in gathering incidence reports. Data collection will be supported by the Collins Center staff in the form of a table that organizes this disparate information. Hand-filtering is often needed to determine how to organize and pull this data. S. Foley asks for input regarding how to interact with

individual towns and the EMS system (which is not a mandated service in the Commonwealth). He mentions how needing to resort to mutual aid can slow down response times.

- Arianna Collins asks if water rescues are being counted and if training/equipment is sufficient in towns. S. Foley: each community has an emergency management team (police chief, fire chief, school committee, at large) - one of their jobs is to complete a hazard analysis and if a capacity lack is identified they determine what resources to call.

- C. Skelly asks how the Collins Center and the state are thinking about these issues as well. S. Foley mentions a lot of regionalization efforts and projects statewide. Asks if FRCOG is a stakeholder in this project.

- S. Kelliher Comstock asks about water safety and if research will identify areas where there is high potential of public safety risk and where there is no cell service. S. Foley: yes. K. Conlin: FRCOG had the idea to put phone boxes along the river or a cell booster connected to the power. S. Comstock – Deerfield, primarily owned by power companies.

- C. Cozzaglio, as to who to talk to in towns for input, beyond the police chief, the town administrators are key. BRPC, PVPC involvement as well as FRCOG.

- S. Foley mentions that repeaters in emergency response vehicles can boost the signal for cellphones and this will be a likely recommendation. S. Comstock reminds that this wouldn't help in the public being able to reach out for help.

- D. Crane – if the Partnership is successful, there will be more people in the woods (recreating, working). How can we evaluate the situation now but also increased gaps should this occur?

- J. Nowak mentions that water rescue, given the urgency, is often conducted by private citizens (this wouldn't be captured by an emergency call log, perhaps the survey can address this).

- A. Schwenger stresses that financial information be studied. It may be helpful to know how much operational budgets go to public safety.

- A. Peteroy wonders if the pandemic trends (outdoor use increased) can be captured by collecting the last 5 years of data. During FLT's bike race, they use ham radios with trained operators. K. Conlin reminds that the data collection is a one-year period but wonders if the survey can address this. S. Foley wonders if town annual reports can also be used for this.

Update on National Heritage Area feasibility study – L. Hayden reports that as part of the Agent contract extension there is \$50,000 to begin a feasibility study for the National Heritage Area designation. The Partnership's Ten-Year Plan can inform much of this study, but a lot of new content will also be needed. This funding will help support hiring the regional planning agencies as well as an Indigenous consultant for plan components. K. Conlin notes a major component of the study is identifying a "nationally significant" story of the region. To capture this, broad community participation is needed. S. Comstock mentions that there is likely an overlap with the Deerfield Wild & Scenic.

Heritage Area Board and guest discussion regarding nationally significant characteristics and history of the region – Two groups for discussion (one in person, one online) based off worksheet questions.

Zoom:

- K. Ross: If the designation is received does that mean the area will receive greater opportunities for funding? Is the idea the area will then experience increased tourism or recreation? The area could be highlighted for its high-quality timber as well as wilderness areas. If you define what you're trying to do, perhaps that helps get to the answer.
- G. Ayers: The Mohawk Trail is the key characteristic of the region, as an Indigenous pathway through the region. He thinks this should be a focus of a Heritage designation. Ceremonial stone landscape elements in the region are overlooked by recreators, but it was a sacred land to the original people before the invasion occurred. Rewilding of natural spaces should be a priority and a focus of the effort.
- R. Anderson: There is a need for education as to very concerted agricultural pursuits and silviculture, the defined and intentional management of forested lands for 10-12 thousand years. There is myth/folklore that the landscape was "wild." It was heavily managed with reciprocity and relationship, not as a resource and "taking" from it. It's important to be able to tell the story of Indigenous Peoples along the Route 2 corridor, the source of foods from the forest, and to manage myths.
- J. Healy: Existing attributes of the area – the rivershed is scenic, scenic roads all over the place, biggest area of biodiversity in the state, intact landscape – building on this with aspects others have discussed.
- B. O'Connor: Ten criteria/guidelines in the Heritage Feasibility Study. He compared them to the goals in the Partnership Plan. 7 out of the 10 guidelines have already been met. The areas we need to work on – nationally distinctive and cultural themes. Rhonda's contribution is important. In the Northeast, a lot of the Heritage areas are colonial themes. Rural, intact area close to many cities - "still intact nature close to many people."
- G. Ayers: Large amount of state-owned land in this region. The state park system has been under-resourced and neglected for so long. Exhibits and nature centers have closed. This could draw attention and bring in federal funds. Indigenous focus.
- B. Wilber: Reinforcing importance of Indigenous cultural richness as a primary lead in terms of defining the region, intact natural systems (natural resources and ecosystems), one of the most scenic parts of Massachusetts, proximity to dense population areas.
- Economy based in nature, tourism, recreation – rivers, Appalachian Trail, VT Long Trail access, Charlemont businesses Berkshire East, Zoar Outdoors. Class A watershed. 10 of the 21 towns have populations of less than 1K.
- D. Donaldson: old cemeteries in the woods.
- L. Kidder: maple sugaring.
- E. Murphy: Sand Springs in Williamstown was used by Indigenous People but is now a non-profit pool, the water comes out year-round at 72 degrees.
- C. Carpenter: Does every town have a tree warden? This is a unique attribute nationally.
- R. Anderson: Working with Mass Cultural Council is supporting designated cultural districts and byways. It would be great to collaborate with them and connect some of the towns in a cultural way and bring in more Indigeneity. This is a project of Rhonda's that could be collaborative between the Cultural Council and a Heritage Area.

- K. Ross: Develop a mentor program to get junior and senior high school students interested.

In-Person:

- Age-old question: are we in the Berkshires right now? We wound up acknowledging that there are two distinct regions in the Partnership – Berkshires and the Deerfield River Watershed. We are one together, but we don't need to be the same thing. What defines us more broadly, as compared to our surrounding towns outside the region, is a lack of economic opportunity.
- Agrarian heritage is still intact in a real lived experience type of way.
- Forms of industry throughout time, quite a lot in the region – charcoal, soapstone quarries, trees tall enough for ship masts, wood near river, boxes that built America.
- Reminded that the beginnings of the Partnership stressed the economically depressed area.
- Hoosic Tunnel, Susan B. Anthony's birthplace, New Ashford first woman to ever vote in a presidential election, Mt. Greylock, Cider Days, Heath Fair, Ashfield Fall Festival.
- Immigrants and different neighborhoods in towns like Adams.
- Fly fishing, leaf peeping.
- Cotton mill in Adams. Subsequent decline when industry leaves.
- Land as a path forward in the form of tourism and conservation.
- Old cemeteries can reveal marginalized populations based on desirable/undesirable locations.

Agent Update: Catalyst Grant fundraising consultant; IRA landowner outreach grant pending; RCP conference recap; Regional Wood Bank Initiative; Board-led regional video project; Indigenous-led book club and future programming; NRBED Committee Chair vacancy:

- Successful in Catalyst Grant. 25K for a fundraising consultant. Looking for someone who can create a 3-year plan for strategic fundraising and identify 2-3 grant opportunities for us to put effort toward. Job posting has received roughly 25 responses. The Executive Committee will be reviewing the candidates later this month.
- The IRA grant was submitted in August. Thanks to many Board members who worked in a small group to get that together. Bob O'Connor helped with drafting.
- Regional Conservation Partnership panel discussion about the Partnership and its unique position. Bob O'Connor, Dicken Crane, Lisa Hayden, and Tom Matuszko presented (Art Schwenger planned to attend but was sick, though his notes were shared).
- Final Indigenous-led book club will be tomorrow night. It's been a great experience. We are thinking about future programming to include Indigenous mapmaking panel to communicate how Indigenous communities look at land and how this represented on paper often looks quite different. They vary from community to community.
- Regional wood bank – J. Lagreze and J. Healy are involved. Conway, Charlemont, Buckland, and Colrain all have some variety of wood bank/wood bank initiatives. Disparity between what towns can take on administratively. The four towns are considering a MOU about regionalization or shared services, in whatever way that might look, potentially very simple to start. Sean Mahoney and Bob Dean are both involved. DCR already plays a huge role in labor to create the firewood every year. If this is of interest, let K. Conlin know. A. Collins: Ashfield supplied wood in "Share the Warmth" and asks if Ashfield can be a part of it. K. Conlin: so far organically formed

and other towns are welcome to join. A wood bank connects to the Partnership goals in a few ways – inequity between towns and what they can provide; local resource displacing fossil fuels; forest stewardship. Wood is sourced from roadsides, maintenance of trees, but also log-length sections are purchased for a processor.

- Board-led regional video project, short content about our region, no updates, but still going to happen.
- If interested in filling the NRBED chair vacancy, let Kate & Lisa know.

Board Chair Update: Video series of Woodlands Partnership Region with Ethan Tapper; recent events (Savoy woods walk, Ethan Tapper reading) - Savoy State Forest woods walk held well in advance of even laying out the job. This is an important step for the community to get a chance to be involved before anything is done. A neighbor had a concern over opening an area up near the road where they walk their dogs. This was addressed from the outset.

Ethan Tapper book reading in Shelburne Falls at Raven Used Books was a great event and well attended. Ethan Tapper's communication strategy with the public is worth emulating. Engaging the public early and often helps them understand ecological restoration. We are planning on working more with Ethan and producing videos of the region that can be shared widely.

Any item(s) not anticipated within 48 hours - none

Public Comment – Glen Ayers: Appreciates the discussion but wants to talk about how the Partnership is perceived by the public – right now, bad publicity from the project in North Adams. Over 2000 people signed a petition in opposition to the climate-informed forestry project. 300 individuals sent letters to Mass Audubon and state officials about logging in a watershed. There is a movement afoot to amplify the negative publicity about the Partnership and to contact state and federal officials requesting to defund this organization. We would be wise to take a hard look at that project in an environmental justice community and cancel it as a way to redeem reputation. You should have some concern about what you are doing to your image. Be careful.

K. Conlin clarifies that the project in North Adams is dictated by the City, so it's not a project we would have the ability to cancel. We are supporting it through grant funds as the work isn't financially feasible without this.

Adjournment 8:06, Sam Haupt moved, Art S. seconded. Motion adopted unanimously.