

MINUTES
Woodlands Partnership of Northwest Massachusetts
Full Board Meeting – February 26, 2025
Virtual Meeting via Zoom

Board members in attendance: Joe Nowak, Jay Healy, Deb Donaldson, Art Schwenger, Alain Peteroy, Liz Kidder, Sam Haupt, Chris Skelly, Jonathan Lagreze, Elayne Murphy, Bob O’Connor, Chris Cozzaglio, Rhonda Anderson, Mark Phelps, Keith Ross, Dicken Crane, Hank Art, Russ Richardson, Kimberly MacPhee (appointment in process), John Waite, Greg Cox (joined later)

Board members absent: Hannah Poplawski, Larry Flaccus, Sheila Kelliher, Ron Bosley, Alice Houghtaling, Mary Wigmore, Doug Brown, Rick Peltier, Keith Nislow, Connie Carpenter

Staff/partners in attendance: Lisa Hayden – Administrative Agent/NEFF; Kate Conlin – Coord./NEFF;

Guest Speaker(s): Stephanie Schilling, fundraising consultant;

Public in Attendance: Jeffrey Thomas (Lever, Inc.), Melanie Glynn (Savoy), Mary Lynn Sabourin (FLT), Carina DeBarcelos & Phil DeCologero (State Auditor’s Office), Jessica Atwood (FRCOG)

1. Call to order, Welcome: Board Chair Dicken Crane called the meeting to order at 6:03 p.m. D. Crane invited former Board member Jeffrey Thomas, Ex. Dir. of Lever, Inc. to share a brief update as he cannot stay for public comment. J. Thomas reported that Lever has received grant funding to move ahead with developing the market for various regionally derived wood products. Lever is in conversations with Habitat for Humanity on affordable housing, and Greylock Works, which sponsors artisanal bazaars. The Woodcraft Collaborative will sponsor booths for local wood crafters at events. Another company, Revvit, is developing prototype electric vehicle charging stations and is working with Cruckfather, wood framer based in Charlemont, to design a wood shelter to cover the charging unit. D. Crane said he hopes the Partnership can continue to support this work.

2. Roll Call Attendance of Board (introducing new) & Guests: K. Conlin read the roll call for attendance, and noted Kimberly Noake McPhee was pending as a newly appointed Board member from FRCOG (it was clarified that she was voted in but minutes or appointment letter had not yet been received).

3. Review and approval of December 2, 2024 Board Minutes: A. Schwenger motioned to approve, seconded by L. Kidder. C. Skelly noted a correction that he attended the Dec. Heath meeting in person. S. Haupt abstained; minutes unanimously approved with the correction, through a roll call vote.

4. Successful passage of name change legislation—ongoing legislative outreach efforts regarding funding

Agent L. Hayden reported that the bill officially changing the Partnership’s name from “Mohawk Trail Woodlands Partnership” to “Woodlands Partnership of Northwest Massachusetts” passed both the Commonwealth’s House and Senate during the informal session in Dec. and was signed by Gov. Healey on Jan. 8. She thanked Board members who wrote emails in support of the bill, which while a simple change, was still not easy to get adopted. L. Hayden also gave an update on federal funding amid news that many federal grant funds were being frozen or canceled. NEFF has been monitoring the federal situation and forwarded a list of the 3 USFS grants managed on behalf of the Partnership, as well as

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other grants to the MA Attorney General’s office. There has been no notification that any Partnership grants have been canceled, but some submitted invoices have not yet been paid.

5. Priority setting with Stephanie Schilling, newly hired Fundraising Strategy Consultant, to chart the course of the next 3 years and beyond. L. Hayden introduced S. Schilling, who was hired following interviews with a group of Board members through the \$25,000 Catalyst Fund grant to work on a 3-year fundraising plan, list of prospects and support for high-priority grants. S. Schilling presented slides about goals and led a discussion with Board members about the highest priorities for fundraising. Highlights of discussion include:

- K. Ross reiterated a strong interest in conservation and supporting partnerships between towns and landowners to understand the options for conserving land, such as paying for transaction costs such as appraisals and parcel surveys because many deed holders are “land rich and cash poor” or to provide match for farmland preservation.
- J. Healy expressed support for working lands and farmers, foresters and loggers helping to keep the land viable and the work of businesses that support other businesses. He explained concern by towns about the loss of tax revenue from conserved land and wanted to support positive economic and educational opportunities that go hand in hand with conservation.
- H. Art noted that the WP region is now eligible for the federal Forest Legacy program and the Partnership should facilitate conservation through these programs. A. Peteroy noted a recent Forest Legacy proposal in W. MA may be on hold with a change in federal priorities but agreed that due diligence funding is key to help conservation projects move forward. She noted that core administrative roles by Kate and Lisa would not be supported in a year (if state funding for another Agent contract is not forthcoming) to keep them doing the Agent staff’s good work.
- D. Crane remarked on the need for balance for conservation (biodiversity, clean air and water, etc.) and how communities that are providing the conserved land benefitting people in other places – and how to get that message out.
- R. Anderson emphasized the importance of educational opportunities regarding what conservation and healthy forestry and community production means amid recent confusion and opposition to the opportunity for a climate-smart forestry project in North Adams.
- C. Skelly noted the state’s focus on housing and that a set of plans for accessory dwelling units done with timber framing could be a beneficial local product. R. Richardson noted the opportunity of Non-Timber Forest Products such as medicinal plants.
- In response to questions about exploring donor-advised funds managed by community foundations and what elements of a fiscal sponsorship agreement are most of interest: M. Phelps expressed concern about ensuring due diligence with any non-profit the Partnership works with. J. Waite: the vast majority of non-profits are doing good work. Foundations that could provide quick access to funding would be beneficial.
- Cash or gift acceptance policies can vary among governance documents. S Schilling recommended a Board-approved budget for the year with fundraising targets. K. Ross said that would work fine if the Partnership had its own 501(c)3 but right now that function is performed by NEFF as Agent.
- A. Peteroy said it’s a good time for the Partnership’s Board to get opinions from a CPA, auditor and attorney of what it means to be a public agency and engage in fundraising – the importance of understanding how Community Foundations work. Now’s the time to understand the options

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for financial structure, perhaps still working with NEFF as Agent, but what else the Partnership is able to do.

- D. Crane is interested in working with a donor-advised fund where donations could directly benefit projects that the Partnership supports rather than going through the Agent.

Among the following sources of income, S. Schilling asked for feedback on what the Partnership most wants to pursue: 1) Grants, 2) earned income (i.e. example of charging for filming at beautiful locations), 3) public appropriations and 4) individual donations.

- C. Cozzaglio said in theory all 4 are applicable, but most likely grants and public appropriations. He noted a shift to individual donations might be warranted in the current environment. A. Peteroy noted that individual donations take time and work to cultivate donors. S. Schilling noted that all the Board members have networks who could be activated to support the Partnership if there was a mechanism to collect donations from ongoing communication.
- K. Conlin asked if others shared concern about poor optics of seeking individual donations in a region that has been described as lower-income and with less opportunity. C. Cozzaglio cautioned about generalizing when each town has its own socio-economic characteristics. S. Schilling underscored the importance of messaging and the idea of fostering the culture of philanthropy even among youth and among corporate entities. J. Healy noted the importance of the Partnership in fostering communication across all the towns in the region in being aware of all kinds of opportunities, not just monetary ones.

Re: measures of success, C. Cozzaglio said for him, dollars raised and programs supported, are important performance benchmarks. J. Healy said for him, as important as the vision, is how much we've been able to accomplish in the real world. B. O'Connor said the number of people involved in educational programs is a good measure.

S. Schilling's observation gleaned from feedback is that a priority need is sustainable funding for a full-time executive director or fund developer, beyond efforts of the Agent to kick-start program funding – i.e. big outcomes come from follow-up and consistency and stewardship. Former Board Chair H. Art agreed that has always been the key priority, because the amount of work and scope for a Board chair is exhausting, and even with "heroic efforts of NEFF," an executive director is going to be needed if the organization is going to survive. S. Schilling will include feedback in her report and will attend the June meeting in person, when she hopes to meet with Board members and key partners.

6. Municipal public safety study update ([surveys and upcoming events](#)): S. Haupt reported that the Collins Center at UMass is conducting a study of public safety capacity in the 21 towns related to present and future tourism demand on the region. He encouraged town public safety officials and first responders to take the public survey. This information will be helpful to the Partnership as it explores a National Heritage Area study and application. L. Kidder noted that public safety is an evolving situation with firefighters also serving as EMTs, and challenges to ambulance service. We need them and residents to participate and share their experiences. A public forum on the survey will also be held the next evening in Shelburne Falls.

7. [Pursuing Equitable State-Owned Land Reimbursements for Municipalities](#): Vote to "support the promotion of the recently released report on PILOT reform."

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Phil DeCologero, who leads communications, and Carina DeBarcelos, Division of Local Mandates, from state Auditor Diana DiZoglio’s office, provided an update on the latest report, dated Feb. 26, from this office on the inequities of the PILOT formula in which towns are reimbursed for loss of tax revenue for state-owned land. Phil noted that further action will require partnerships with legislators and other parts of the state. Carina gave an overview of key findings and recommendations of the report and focused on towns with between 1000 and 5000 acres of state-owned land. In fiscal year 2024, \$1.6 million was distributed to Woodlands Partnership municipalities. There are proposals to increase the \$53 million distributed in FY25. Proposals include a funding floor of \$75 per acre (currently some towns only receive \$5 per acre); a hold-harmless provision so that no town loses funding; and a legislative increase to PILOT appropriations.

A. Schwenger moved and M. Phelps seconded a motion to adopt the proposed agenda measure “to support the promotion of the recently released report on PILOT reform.” The Board voted unanimously to adopt the statement of support (including G. Cox who had to depart before the vote.)

8. Agent Update: [Deerfield Wild & Scenic and potential joint efforts](#); [Community Resilience Grant](#) through [Climate Smart Communities Initiative](#); Heritage Area feasibility study; consolidated Agent budget

K. Conlin has been attending meetings of the Deerfield Wild & Scenic River designation to explore whether this effort could complement the Partnership’s work on a National Heritage Area, for which she has started to draft some sections of the report. The Agent staff is looking into applying for a Community Resilience grant with FRCOG, Trout Unlimited & FLT. L. Hayden reported that NEFF’s Accounting department has prepared a consolidated budget recently presented to the Finance Committee. She briefly showed a snapshot of the remaining totals of the Agent contract and 2 state, 3 federal and 1 private foundation, grants that NEFF manages for the partnership. She invited Board members to reach out with any specific questions.

9. Board Chair Update: NRBED Committee Chair vacancy; [North Adams Notch Reservoir](#); [Legislative Breakfast](#) in Dalton March 7, 2025; [DCR Pittsfield Complex RMP](#)

D. Crane and Agent staff noted that a chair is needed for the Natural Resource-based Economic Development Committee; a link was shared to the City of North Adam’s late Dec. announcement halting the climate-informed forestry project at Notch Reservoir; upcoming March 7 legislative breakfast was noted and a recent presentation about Resource Management Plans for the Pittsfield complex of 12 forest and park properties. D. Crane noted the importance of engaging with land trusts, trail riders, sportsmen’s groups and various user groups for what they want to see reflected in the plans.

10. Public Comment: None.

A. Schwenger moved to adjourn, seconded by L. Kidder, adopted unanimously at 8:09 p.m.