CONSERVATION & TRAILS COMMITTEE
Essex Town Offices, 81 Main St., Essex Junction, Vermont 05452

Minutes of Tuesday, February 11, 2020

In attendance
Conservation & Trails Committee (CTC): Cristine Hammer, Chair; Alan Botula; Elisabeth Coleman
Town Staff present: Darren Schibler, Town Planner; Chuck Vile, Tree Warden; Mark Gibson, Indian Brook Park Caretaker
Members of the public: Carl Laverty, Val Laverty, Susan Brown; Kristen Balschunat, WNRCD

A reception for the Trail Caretakers was held from 6:00 PM to 7:00 PM.

AGENDA ITEM #1: Public Comments

Hammer called the meeting to order at 7:07 PM.

Carl and Val Laverty of 68 Osgood Hill Road presented a map of the trails around the middle school that they had created using GPS data as part of an Eagle Scout project. They hoped the Town would find it useful in creating updated trail maps. The Conservation and Trails Committee (CTC) thanked the Lavertys for their work on the project, and suggested that their troop consider mapping other public trails as well.

AGENDA ITEM #2: Agenda Changes and Approval

Schibler recommended switching agenda items 3 and 4 because Art Lyle was not present to discuss item 3, but Kristen Balschunat was in attendance to discuss item 4. Schibler also noted that an additional development review project for 21 Pinecrest Drive should be added to agenda item 5.

AGENDA ITEM #4: Winooski Natural Resources Conservation District Rain Barrel Event

Balschunat provided background on the Winooski Natural Resources Conservation District (WNRCD) and its mission to support agriculture and water quality initiatives within the Winooski River watershed. She noted that they have four program areas: agriculture (including technical assistance for farmers); conservation (including wildlife habitat enhancements and grants for invasive species management); stormwater management (including promoting rain barrels and downspout disconnection); and riparian habitat restoration (including buffer plantings).

Balschunat also discussed WNRCD’s plans for a rain barrel building event to be hosted in Essex in late April or early May. She explained that rain barrels are designed to detain rainwater from rooftops to reduce erosion and contamination of waterways, and that they are partnering with the Town’s Stormwater Coordinator, Annie Costandi, to educate homeowners on how to build and set up rain barrels on their properties. She invited the CTC to table at the event and staff stations at the event. Members of the CTC expressed interest, provided that they were available on the date.
Balschunat also invited the CTC to table and help staff WNRCD’s annual tree sale, which would be hosted at the state office complex at 111 West Street in Essex Junction on April 25. Finally, Balschunat noted that WNRCD would like assistance from local conservation commissions in scoping the work for potential projects, and that they had applied for a grant to meet with commissions one-on-one to start on that work. She also asked if the CTC would help promote WNRCD’s work and programs to landowners. The CTC suggested sharing brochures and information at Town Meeting and the bi-annual Clean-Up Day events, and expressed interest in meeting to discuss scoping for watershed restoration projects. Botula suggested that one project could include reducing erosion along Alder Brook within the Mathieu Town Forest, since there were significant landslides and risk of further erosion.

Hammer thanked Balschunat for taking the time to meet with the CTC, and that they looked forward to working more with WNRCD.

**AGENDA ITEM #3: Trail Maintenance on the Horton and Unsworth Properties**

Schibler described the 53-acre Horton property at 200 West Sleepy Hollow Road, which was donated to the Town in 2018 and was intended as a conservation area given its remote location, lack of vehicular access, and numerous important habitat features. Recently, Art Lyle, a nearby resident, had asked if the trail system maintained by former owners of the property and adjacent landowners could be revitalized. Town staff do not have time or resources to dedicate to trail maintenance and do not want to encourage intensive trail use, but support informal use and care by nearby residents.

Schibler also described the 166-acre Ray Unsworth property, which was donated to the Town in 2018 as part of a residential subdivision along Indian Brook Road. A small portion of the land abuts the Indian Brook Park property and extends to Old Stage Road, providing a possible trail connection from the sidewalk and nearby neighborhoods. Gibson expressed concern that providing such a connection would allow additional ways for people to circumvent the admissions gatehouse, which is already a problem. Schibler agreed and noted that given the terrain, which includes steep slopes, wetlands, and dense vegetation, it would be difficult to blaze a trail through the property to provide access anyway. Schibler noted that there is an existing snowmobile trail (maintained by VAST, the Vermont Association of Snowmobile Travelers, but with no formal easement) that runs north-south through the eastern part of the property, and will need to be re-routed due to the approved development. Town staff are supportive of the relocation, but are providing only limited assistance and no funding to VAST.

Val Laverty expressed a desire to have a connection from the Horton property to the Ray Unsworth property.

Schibler noted that the Deputy Town Manager and Parks and Recreation Director had asked the CTC to develop management plans, or perhaps shorter policies, on the use of these properties. Given the CTC’s limited capacity and long work list, Hammer suggested adding those tasks to the work plan for 2020-21.

**AGENDA ITEM #5: Development Review**

2/13/2020 Planning Commission Meeting

1. 21 Pinecrest Drive (consent agenda)
Schibler indicated this application had been postponed from a previous PC meeting. He explained there is a previously-approved senior living facility that has been on hold due to the prohibitive cost of extending sewer along Pinecrest Drive to the site. Currently sewer only goes part of the way down Pinecrest Drive, but the applicants have proposed a more cost-effective solution that would connect to the existing senior housing facilities at Joshua Way. The project will also include adding a pump station, and town officials noted they need to include a driveway and easements to access the sewer pump station. The CTC had no comments on the application.

2. **74 Essex Way**

Schibler described the proposal to develop open space Parcel D-2 approved under the overall Lang Farm master plan and subdivision. Though there is no permit condition specifically prohibiting development on the parcel, research of this approval indicates that the land was intended as a 100-foot buffer or setback between the Inn at Essex and what is now the Woodlands neighborhood. The landowner now seeks an amendment to the previous approval to allow development. Botula and Hammer strongly objected to the proposal because it is inconsistent with the intent and community understanding to maintain a buffer, and allowing it to develop would set a precedent for similar developments elsewhere. The buffer also contributes to the aesthetics of the Inn at Essex.

**2/27/2020 Planning Commission Meeting**

1. **124 Colchester Road**

Schibler noted that Jason Leo’s Automotive had proposed an expansion to their automotive repair shop as well as a storage building for cars waiting for repairs or for rental as long-term vehicle storage. He noted that there are some erosion concerns because the property is located atop a steep ravine into Indian Brook, and that additional landscaping would be required. Vile noted that the proposed Austrian pine is not a native species, is susceptible to disease, and is not a very attractive landscaping element. He also noted that the proposed red maples located along VT-2A are not salt-tolerant. Schibler will pass on recommended changes to the landscaping plan.

2. **84 Susie Wilson Road**

Located at the end of the old Susie Wilson Road (and inside the Susie Wilson Bypass), this lot is across the street from another recent development proposal. The plan is for a residential planned unit development (PUD-R) with a total of 8 lots, seven of which would contain single-unit dwellings (one existing), and the last would be a commonly owned lot including the community septic area as well as open space capturing steep slopes and the Indian Brook river corridor. In order to obtain a density bonus to allow for an additional lot, the applicants have proposed a public access trail to a scenic waterfall, but the trail and the private road would need to be relocated out of the riparian buffer area. Hammer asked about the anticipated sale price of the homes, and Schibler noted that they are expected to be market-rate starter homes, but not necessarily “affordable” by the Town’s definition.

**AGENDA ITEM #6: Town Meeting Day Preparations**

The CTC reviewed the logistics for Town Meeting night, which is scheduled for Monday, March 3rd, 2020. The meeting begins at 7:30 PM but the community dinner starts at 6:30 PM, so Schibler recommended arriving around 6:15 PM. Schibler would drop off tabling materials and handouts earlier
in the day and would be available to help table. Hammer and Coleman were available, and Schibler indicated that Jones likely would be as well.

AGENDA ITEM #7: Work Plan and Calendar Check

- Schibler added the WNRCDD rain barrel event and tree sale to the work plan, as well as the task to develop management plans or policies for the Horton and Ray Unsworth properties.
- Botula suggested amending the trail mapping task to include possible partnerships with Scout troops on GPS mapping.
- Gibson added that placing mile markers around the trails at Indian Brook would also be a great Scout project; Vile noted that some of the water bars on the trails also need repairs.
- The CTC discussed the upcoming meeting for the landscaping guidelines subcommittee on February 20, 2020 at 10:30 AM, and agreed that the intent is to set general goals for the project and desired changes.
- Botula raised the issue of pursuing TreeCity USA recognition for the Town in 2020, noting that the main work item was to adopt landscaping ordinances or policies and host an Arbor Day celebration. Schibler would ask Elise Schadler about the requirements for the ordinance standard, and Botula offered to set up a planting at the elementary school, which has a notable lack of trees on the campus.
- Schibler noted that staff have not found time to work on writing the Saxon Hill Management Plan due to other deadlines and priorities, and asked if the CTC would be able to do some of the writing. Hammer noted that there wouldn’t be much time until spring, but they could re-evaluate at that point.
- Botula noted that he would not be available for the March 10 CTC meeting; Schibler noted that there should be quorum because St. James and Jones should be present, but if there are no pressing issues, it may make sense to cancel the meeting.

AGENDA ITEM #8: Minutes: October 8, 2019; November 12, 2019; December 10, 2019; January 3, 2020

Due to a lack of quorum, approval of previous meeting minutes was postponed to the March 2020 meeting.

AGENDA ITEM #9: Communications

There was discussion of an invitation by Selectboard Chair Elaine Haney to discuss the proposed Town/Village merger plan at an upcoming meeting. Due to the fact that Botula will miss the March meeting, and that there are still two open seats on the CTC, it was agreed that meeting in April might be more productive.

The CTC also discussed the release of the Vermont Forest Planning Toolkit and upcoming workshops and trainings.

The meeting adjourned at 8:39 PM.