

Andrews Community Forest

Monday, August 23, 2021, 7pm: Special meeting re: trail design proposal – minutes

Present

Committee members attending: Caitlin Littlefield, Jim Monahan, Jesse Crary, Nick Neverisky, Tyler Merritt, Amy Powers, Ellen Kraft, Wright Preston, Cecilia Danks (remote)

Members of Sinuosity and Arrowwood attending: Aaron Worthley, Brooke Scatchard, Mariah Keagy, Dori Barton

Members of the public attending in-person or remotely: Rebecca Roman, Pete H, Bard Hill, Scott Silverstein, Sam Pratt, Andy Solomon, Kate Kreider, Chris Wasser, Max Krieger, Paul Hauf, Hannah Harrington, Jeanette Malone, Kit Emery, Brad Elliott, Mike Donahue, Berne Broudy, Nick Bennette, Pete Halvorsen

Minute taker: Nick Neverisky

A: Additions or Deletions to the Agenda

None

Review and accept minutes of July 28, 2021 Meeting

7/28 minutes approved

Presentation of ACF Ecological Trail Design Project Report by Arrowwood & Sinuosity

- **Arrowwood presents**
 - Arrowwood reviews goal of trail design - a balance with tradeoffs between trail-based recreation and wildlife habitat integrity. Reminds that the original concept map was not ground truthed.
 - Deliverables were ecological assessment, trail design, and report/poster.
 - The timing of the project (when in the year) allowed for some aspects of ecological review but did not allow for others that would be dependent on certain season conditionals.
 - Arrowwood referenced existing information from Audubon, VLT, UVM field naturalist program, Ethan Tapper county forester, and other sources in addition to their ground truthed assessment.
 - Stresses that the resource map represents items they found in person or from previous assessment documents and that this map may not be comprehensive.
 - Rerouting trails in the proposal may encounter other sensitive ecological resources. An absence of an ecological feature on the map does not guarantee one is not there.

- In defining sensitive areas:
 - small intermittent streams received a 20 foot buffer from center line.
 - Larger streams received a 100 foot buffer from center.
 - Vernal pools got 100 foot buffers
 - Arrowwood stresses that there is no way to avoid all of the areas encompassed by these sensitivity areas and develop trails on the property. This caused them and Sinuosity to develop guiding principles for managing trail design tradeoffs.:
 - Use existing trails as practical
 - Minimize stream crossings
 - Minimize trails in sensitive areas
 - Avoid trails running parallel to streams
 - Plan trails that view sensitive ecological features from a distance.
 - The farm road at the time of their evaluations was discharging sediment and eroding. Arrowwood advises that if it is to be used for recreation it would need improvement to be ecologically sound. This is why they did not include it as a route in the proposed trail map.
 - The middle trail in the northern section follows an existing woods road. It is through a sensitive area but Arrowwood reports that this trail was already being used during their study.
 - They decided to have no trails through the NW quadrant to avoid the vernal pools and to reduce habitat fragmentation. Avoiding the vernal pool in the NW area is a priority for Arrowwood.
- **Sinuosity presents**
 - When field truthing the trail route on the concept map they found sections of the trail that went up a cliff and one that went through a stream indicating that the concept map route was not viable entirely as indicated.
 - ACF has many cliff areas and steep-sided drainages. This constrains trail route options. Sinuosity indicates this is particularly true in the NE corner.
 - Having no trails in the NW area because of ecological sensitivity requires having a more dense allocation of trails in the NE area to achieve the same amount of trail opportunity for users.
 - Of the three NE trails...
 - The eastern one is steep and has switchbacks. Suitable for bike climbing. Switchbacks may not be desirable for walking. Sinuosity says bikes descending this trail could cause erosion in the corners because they are tight and steep turns (wheels may skid).
 - The middle one is mostly on existing logging road. The trail deviates from that road in part to switchback to reduce grade. This route is relatively direct and may be desirable for walking. The switchbacks are tight and therefore may create erosion if bikes descend on it.
 - The western one is a more meandering trail. It is less steep than the others. It may be the best of the three for bikes descending.

- Trails as proposed cross some logged areas. These areas in particular may need ground rebuilding to allow for a solid trail.
 - Trails are generally moderately technical (e.g., rocky, rooty, or otherwise requiring technique to traverse). Sinuosity reports they are intended to be similar in technical character to other trails in Richmond.
- Middle area trails allow for shorter loops. This area is also “kind of rugged.” Middle area loops include some viewpoints.
- Lower area has a high water table and wetlands. It is also steep with rock outcroppings. These factors limited trail opportunities although Sinuosity tried to find opportunities for more trails there and for less technical trails there.
- At the time of their work on the ground the western VAST trail was very wet - they found tadpoles in the VAST trail in the middle area. This is why they did not route a trail along that route. To use it as a trail, Sinuosity recommends the town first address the wetness or build a boardwalk.
- Trails proposed would be suitable for biking and hiking (as discussed above), snowshoeing, fat biking if they were groomed. Trails would not likely be suitable for backcountry skiing.

Questions from ACF Committee (*Questions and responses noted below not necessarily verbatim unless in quotations*)

- The trail design team should start with the concept map as guidance. Can you comment on how trail design departed from the concept map?
 - The concept map did not appear to be field truthed. Trails on the map were not in viable nor sustainable locations. The concept did not have as many ecological resources identified as the new ground truthed map - the trails on the concept map therefore would go through some ground truthed ecological resources.
- Management plan specifies trail density targets above and below the powerlines. Could you comment on if these targets were feasible with what was on the ground, and the relationship of trail density targets with the proposed condensed trails in the NE area.
 - Some density targets like the south-of-powerline target were not suitable based on ground truthed evaluation (the SW area is not suitable for significant trail development yet it is specified in the management plan as a location where there should be high trail density). They followed the concept of having higher trail densities close to the parking area and lower trail densities farther to the degree allowed by the landscape, the ecology, and the objectives (connect to Sip of Sunshine). Sinuosity emphasizes that ACF could be “a very very popular place” and recommends keeping that in mind when developing trails. Arrowwood says “the ecological sensitivity drove that density” in the NE area. They did this to avoid impacts in NW area via trail use.
- One concern expressed relates to total trail density north of the power line. Is there a trail north of the power lines that could be removed feasibly?
 - Sinuosity says “you’d have to decide what user group you prefer. There would be user created erosion... so you’d have to choose who you’d like to be most

comfortable” on the trails north of the powerlines. Retaining all three trails would reduce trail user conflicts. Sinuosity: “if you would like hikers and bikers to access sip of sunshine [the proposal] is your option.” Sinuosity: “They are all designed to be do-able by bikers and walkers.”

- Please comment on buffer distances between proposed trails and ecological resources, especially related to the 400 foot concept referenced by a community member.
 - Arrowwood: They used a general concept (described earlier) for buffers, then increased those in specific instances when warranted. Buffers were designed to protect the resource and use best practice standards. Wildlife corridors specifically is “more nuanced” regarding how far to buffer it. This is a complex feature that it is difficult to put a one size fits all buffer on, they instead looked at the most sensitive areas and what they found to define a trail route. Arrowwood: “It;s easy to say there are specific rules, but there aren’t specific rules.” “If the goal is to have human recreation on this property there will be impact. Then the question becomes where the impact can be focused.” Underscored that the vernal pool in the NW area is important and sensitive and that trails should be routed away from it. Arrowwood comments on the sensitive area on the east side of the ravine that touches the ravine (proposed trails go through this): This is a dry oak white pine community. It is “not super rare... it merits extra care but it’s not like a bobcat den where there’s an extraordinary amount of sensitivity.”
- There’s a leg of the VAST trail that goes NW of the powerline. Why was this not included as a trail in the proposal?
 - It is “very very wet.” It is not suitable for use outside of the winter without significant work. Wright reports: this route is used to connect to Valley View and that is it heavily used, therefore we should manage it and include it in our trail mileage. Arrowwood: we don’t have a detailed assessment of that area because they eliminated it as a possibility early on. Arrowwood reports the VAST trail in that area was heavily travelled by foxes and coyotes when they were evaluating that route. Discussion and disagreement among committee members re: how much the NW VAST trail is used by Valley View or other residents. Arrowwood: Our understanding was that the routes on the land already would remain, we did not evaluate old roads to decide if they should be closed.
- Tyler comments: “It’s unique that we forced you guys to work together... I’m impressed with the ecological and the trail layout.”
 - Arrowwood: “It was challenging... that results in a balance.” “It was laid out to be an equal partnership, no one had veto power.”

Questions from Selectboard and Easement Holder Representatives *(Questions and responses noted below not necessarily verbatim unless in quotations)*

- Bard Hill: In an ideal world would you want more information over more seasons or to have wildlife corridor mapping? And what are your thoughts about the more common significant rainfall events in the future? Arrowwood: They identified the main wildlife corridor. What they don’t have are population studies which would be multi year studies.

They are not recommending that the town get these studies done, they are not saying these are necessary for this project. Sinuosity: “The sustainability guidelines we follow should accommodate for [increasingly heavy rainfall events.” This would include making sure bridges are built according to best practices. Arrowwood: “We’ve worked trail projects as ecologists where we need to be the hammer... and that wasn’t the case here, these guys have a good handle on that.” Bard Hill: Re: the feasibility of closing trails or existing roads, this is challenging, is it something we could realistically do / how would one close something? Sinuosity: In places with active logging “you can’t because they need to be opened again.” Arrowwood: “We would recommend a more comprehensive ecological assessment - getting a better handle on where all your wetlands are. All the really high value ones have been identified, but there’s lots more out there... We didn’t have the right seasons or time and budget.” “We’re not saying you need to do this comprehensive inventory to review and approve the trails that have been proposed... we’ve done the assessment and approve these trails.”

- Rebecca Roman, VLT: No questions. Comment “It’s really awesome that your community is able to hire such awesome communicative consultants.”

Questions from Public (*Questions and responses noted below not necessarily verbatim unless in quotations*)

- Pete Halvorsen: “I’m really happy with the report the organization has provided. I support the trail networks in the proposal... there are a couple areas that might warrant a little scrutiny but it’s really well done.” Pete’s question: How does the public like me contribute to the final design and its acceptances?
 - Jesse: The ACF committee reviews the proposed based on the management plan and then goes through a selectboard process. There are multiple opportunities for the public to engage in this process. Members of the public could voice their concern to the ACF committee and/or the selectboard.
- Berne Brody: “I want to congratulate the committee for sticking with this process and coming up with an amazing plan... I would love to see a connection to VYCC” and that there’s a structure put into place for more trails in the future.
- Paul Hoff: “We might have the most studied... trail system proposal in the state. I’ve never heard of anything like this happening before.” Comments that this process is good and that it takes a lot of time. Proposed trail may be less intrusive than the historic logging. The greater risk “is from the logging.” “Please move forward as quickly as possible.”
- Brad Elliot: “I commend you for taking care of the vernal pool but I don’t see that level of care for the wildlife corridor.” Saw a bobcat crossing route 2 in line with the wildlife corridor. If we don’t know how wildlife uses it it’s too great a risk to have a trail hug it. I also don’t understand why the middle trail runs through the largest deer yard on the property. The trail connecting to sip of sunshine also runs through a deer yard. The New Hampshire study from which the 400 foot recommendation comes uses as its metric the

distance at which wildlife would be impacted by human travel. I don't think we're protecting that wildlife corridor. Brad provided a map showing his estimate of 400 foot buffers intersecting sensitive areas.

- Kit Emory: "I echo Brad's sentiments" particularly related to the winter deer area. I was there last winter, it was the larger deer wintering area I've seen. "I'm here to support the wildlife perspective and I hope the trail plan doesn't impact the wildlife up there."
- Arrowwood responds: Planning can be fully ecologically focused or fully trail focused, this is a compromise. Re: the deer wintering areas, we do significant work with that topic. What we noticed about this property is that "there are scattered patches of very nice hemlock forest. None of them individually are large enough to be considered necessary habitat to support wintering deer, but taken as a whole the deer move in and amongst these through the winter. You can't say any one of these patches are critical to deer survival in the winter" although as a whole they do support deer to survive the winter. The trail that goes through the deer wintering is far from the parking lot and steep, Arrowwood anticipates that user rate would drop off significantly during the winter. That area was not so critical to deer survival that occasional human entry into it would jeopardize deer survival.
- Mike Donahue: Thanks the committee and the consultants. It's great that this property is conserved by the town. "I think this is a great plan.... The trail design looks awesome, it addresses a lot of different uses." Encourages the committee to move forward trail implementation.
- Scott Silverstein: Will there be a chance for public comment regarding the forest generally?
 - The committee intends to move forward with a design plan this evening, now is the time for comments related to this proposal. Please comment outside of the trail topic at the end of the meeting.
- Max Krieger: "Just want to reiterate other folks comments" and emphasize "that this is somewhat of a vanguard project," is not familiar with other projects built with a partnership of ecologists and trail designers.
- Cecilia: The committee should revisit exactly what needs to happen regarding the selectboard. Clarifies that logging will not happen again for another 10 to 15 years.
- Chris Wasser: "The plan strikes a great balance."
- Nick Neverisky: There are mixed opinions in the community about whether or not to include trails. As per the original public engagement, some community members want trails, others want no trails.
- Tyler Merritt: Many other trails in Richmond are on private land and therefore not secure. ACF trails would be public. We don't want ACF to be "under utilized."
- Caitlin Littlefield: Agree with the private land concerns. Disagree with Tyler's use of "under utilized" because adding trails is a trade off of utilization types.
- Berne Brody: Encourages the committee to move forward with trail development, says trails will not have significant impact on wildlife. Frustrated that logging moved forward quickly and trail planning is moving forward slowly.

- Brad Elliot: Sip of Sunshine is on private land, questions the utility of connecting to it because private land does not have secure access. The logging was done to provide ecological benefit.
- Ellen Kraft: If trails were built in phases, what would you recommend? Sinuosity: You might start close to the trailhead, but you might also consider budget and which trails cost what amount. IN this case, the trails closest to the trailhead may be the most difficult to build so I would think about starting with the middle section.
- Tyler: Should we clip the trail corridor to mark it in case it is difficult to find flags in the future? Sinuosity: We flagged before leaf out. "I don't suggest doing much cutting other [than branches] before you have an idea of how you construct or who will be doing that" because it affects trail building. "Cut branches as need be but I'd be hesitant to cut saplings." Adding more flagging could be an option. FLags are on the side of the tree that they recommend the trail is on.

Discuss and Consider ACF Trail Design for Recommendation to Selectboard (*Questions and responses noted below not necessarily verbatim unless in quotations*)

- Caitlin: "I would advocate a compromise of eliminating the western most trail in the NE quadrant." Managing human interactions is a reasonable tradeoff for allowing the central wildlife corridor to be unimpeded.
- Wright: "I am also looking for a compromise. We really need to ascknlowdned, and I think it's disingenuous if we don't, that the western VAST trail is a utilized trail. It is one of our most heavily used trails." When that is included with the full proposal trail mileage above the power lines is above the target in the management plan. If we acknowledge that NW VAST is actually a trail I would support Cialtin's proposal. The plan says 4.05 miles and this would put us only slightly above that target. "I am concerned about the three trails in that northern belt and the westernmost trail's proximity to the ravine."
- Jesse: "I'm open for compromise... We should give a lot of deference to the professionals we hired." They did a lengthy iterative process. "I am concerned about the committee coming in and placing its own view on that... we need to think carefully if we divert from that." Re: the west VAST trail, the management plan says that the measured trail mileage is to be a multi-use trail, and the pitch of the VAST trail is suitable for motorized traffic, not the traffic ACF is now being managed for. So if we include the VAST trail in counting that mileage we need the committee to commit to making it be truly multi-use.
- Amy: How does the VYCC connectivity factor into trail miles? Committee members respond that it is included in the proposal's estimates of VAST miles.
- Caitlin makes a motion: Accept the proposal as is with the modifications: count all of VAST as a trail, eliminate the westernmost of the three trails in the NE area.
 - Motion is discussed by committee and public.
 - Votes in favor: 4
 - Votes against: 4
 - Abstentions: 1
- Jesses makes a motion to approve the trail design in the proposal, Tyler seconds
 - Votes in favor: 6

- Votes against: 2
- Abstentions: 1
 - This motion passes with 6 votes

Update from Subcommittee on Proposed ACF Management Plan Amendments for Recommendation to Selectboard

Postponed to a subsequent meeting

Other and old business follow-up

- Public comment from Scott Silverstein representing the Richmond Racial Equity group. This is a follow up from the preliminary conversation had via email re: Abenaki access to the forest for hunting and gathering “and perhaps holding gatherings and potential trail naming and interpretive signage.” Jesse advises that the committee would like to hear more about this than the committee is capable of tonight and invites Scott to our next meeting. Scott will send the committee materials prior to the next meeting and the committee will discuss it at the next meeting.
- Committee votes unanimously to approve \$500 funding for invasives removal.
- Committee votes unanimously to allow Wright to remove unused culvert materials

Adjourned