

**July 2022**

### **Overview of RCC comments on ACFC proposed trails**

The RCC would like to publicly acknowledge the hard work and efforts of the Andrews Community Forest Committee. The following is an overview of the Conservation Commission discussion on the proposed trails. Individual commissioner comments follow below:

The Commissioners on the RCC are not at this time unified in their positions concerning the proposed trails. Some have concerns about the process as it has unfolded; they want more engagement and discussion with the public. There also for some concerns about the degree to which the guiding documents, the Conservation Easement and the Management Plan, are being followed, with required changes in the latter case yet to be forthcoming. Other members are positive about the process and believe that it has been open and has engaged the public.

The Conservation Commission has reviewed the public comments solicited by the ACF, most in favor of the proposed trail plan. The Commission also has reviewed the extremely well put together response to the issues raised by the public. There is divided opinion regarding the degree to which issues such as those raised above have been addressed. Some Commission members favor the current trails proposal in which one of the originally proposed trails was dropped.

One key issue has been who gains precedence in developing a trails plan: recreationists or conservationists/human use or ecology. Resolution of this issue must avoid the notion that one or the other prevails. Rather, the path forward is to develop an appropriate balance that honors the requirements of the Conservation Easement and the implementation guidelines provided by the Management Plan. In getting there, the town should determine what is the best path to follow in responding to the decision-making process as was laid out in the original Town approved documentation.

### **Individual comments from Richmond Conservation Commissioners concerning the Andrews Community Forest Committee's request for comments on the proposed trails**

**29 June 2022**

Max Krieger

My brief thoughts are as follows:

The ACFC was tasked with fulfilling the management plan for the ACF. Part of that plan mandates that the land be used for recreation, including hiking and mountain biking. The management plan specifically acknowledges that it is a living document that will need to be amended at certain times, including when approving a new trail design. The ACFC has hired experts to provide an environmental consultation and a recreational trail consultation, and to design a trail system that addresses both needs. The ACFC provided access for the public at meetings with the designers. The ACFC has further tried to answer all questions regarding the

design. Further, the ACFC has been transparent in its process and has taken steps to receive public comment (in person and via online submissions), respond to said comments, and adjust the proposed plan accordingly to reflect the wants and desires of the public. I personally feel that the ACFC has gone above and beyond in their due diligence in enacting the management plan to-date. I am content that they have and will reach a balanced solution between ecological and recreational considerations, and that their process has been thoroughly vetted by Town residents.

I believe that given the efforts described above, the RCC should support any decision that comes out of the ACFC at this time. I do not see the RCC as having a supervisory role over the ACFC or the ACF. As comments from the RCC were requested regarding the latest design, I believe it would be appropriate for the RCC to comment upon the steps taken to-date to ensure the ecological integrity and recreational usability of the ACF. My personal comment is that the process to-date has been sufficient, that ecological and recreational needs/desires have been appropriately balanced, and the resulting trails and forest will provide a balance between the two.

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Kathryn (Kate) Kreider:

To the Andrews Community Forest Committee (ACFC):

First I would like to thank all of you for the volunteer time and effort that you have put into planning and managing the Andrews Community Forest! I am a relatively new member of the Richmond Conservation Commission with no background in conservation. However, I have reviewed a good deal of the public resources you have provided, I have participated in Conservation Commission discussions, and I have heard updates from others who attend ACFC meetings.

Ideally, I would love for the entire upper section of the forest to be completely free of trails, but I know that this is not possible. The management plan specifies some upper trails and I know that connectivity with Sip of Sunshine is also a priority. In considering your updated trail proposal with two upper trails, I do still have some concerns regarding possible negative impacts to wildlife. However, I do not personally have a better or alternate suggestion for trail placement. In summary, I feel that the current trail proposal including two upper trails is the best option available at this time. I support the current trail proposal.

I have heard that the ACFC is planning to host at least one in-person public forum. I feel that this is a great opportunity for members of the public to feel heard and express any concerns that they still have. I also feel that the public forum process may help to increase the public's trust in the ACFC's decision-making process. I would suggest that the ACFC considers using a professional facilitator for the forum, and that the ACFC considers hosting additional public forums if the public expresses interest.

Thank you again for all that you do!

Respectfully,

Kate Kreider, Richmond Conservation Commission Member

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Kit Emery

Questions for the ACFC:

1-Since traffic volume is a key factor in both trail and ecological degradations, as well as defining management and stewardship needs, what are the forecasted traffic volumes for the trails over the next few years?

2- When and how will the public be notified of the changes that ACF is requesting to the Trails Map and MP? Will there be a public meeting devoted to this change?

3- The unnecessary encroachments on sensitive wildlife habitats identified by the ecological consultants. As the maps show, these intrusions are in clear conflict with the MP\*s conservative guidelines-more so with a fast majority of scientific literature. The one exception was the decision to keep at least the central wildlife movement route free of trail traffic. A more southerly section would still be disturbed as well as the forests largest winter refuge area for wildlife. Do the “zones of influence” apply to ACF?

\*Master Plan

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Judy Rosovsky

I appreciate the work that the ACFC has put into trying to reconcile the different opinions that exist about the proposed trails at ACFC. I realize that you were looking for public comments on a specific set of trails but this is attached to a larger issue that needs to be resolved.

Because the trails issue has been so controversial there is a need for public forum and public discussions. The RCC encourages facilitated public engagement. Have the ACFC make a case for the trail locations and let all sides share their views, in a safe, respectful setting. Let conservationists, no-trailers, and whomever air their views.

The ACF has different and deep seated meanings to different groups. For example, have you heard from hunters about the trails and their effects on the deer yard and in general? Consider bringing in a deer biologist and reaching out to this community.

The SE group was quite successful in involving the public in the development of the initial management plan. Perhaps we could use CRF money to hire them to help us work through the best way forward with the trails. There are legitimate concerns about the trails plan that could be settled with better communication.

And why not use the existing management plan? You can revise it later. Figure out a way to reconcile the contradictory instructions, perhaps by making a policy decision. How does the

existing trail proposal differ from the current management plan? Can these be reconciled?  
Involve the public in answering these questions in a facilitated public meeting.

Another thing to ask ourselves is have we asked the right questions and gotten the right answers?  
Is the information that the ACFC has readily available to the public?

This is a public policy decision versus a science decision. Resolution requires public involvement. The ACFC can explain its plans and decisions and must allow time for discussion from different viewpoints. Be transparent and open. Justify decisions and develop trust. Make time for questions and answers. Engaging in productive dialogue will allay fears and may lead to better trails and well supported decisions.

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Elizabeth (Ibit) Wright

I feel that I need more information. It is hard to keep track of comments at meetings. Documents or letters like that provided by Sue Morse are very meaningful and well thought out in comparison with comments like "Trails are great". That's the problem with numeric counts of comments. Narrow interest on trails v more thoughtful responses are hard to weigh. And the only data available is from the spring. I would like to see more data. Widen the scope to include phenology. This is a special piece of land. It makes sense to know what effects we are going to have on it and its non-human inhabitants.

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Daniel Schmidt

I see this issue through 3 lenses; VYCC, Liaison from RCC and as a Richmond resident. As VYCC recreation and conservation staff I have these conversations all the time. This is an unprecedented amount of research and knowledge. As a liaison, the management plan needs to happen. This is done with the best intentions from ACFC. I would like a nicer tone and approach from both sides. As a Richmond resident – this is a larger question for Richmond and we should try and have this conversation.

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Bob Low

The ACFC has asked for RCC to provide an opinion on the Trails proposal for ACF. I fully would expect the Selectboard will ask for input / advice as well.

I do not know enough at this time to be able to vote yes or no regarding the current trails proposal for the ACF.

I have reviewed the response of ACFC to the issues / questions raised in its recent Google survey.

- I find the response extremely well done: a LOT of hard and very productive work. While it may not satisfy all comers, I feel it focuses future discussion, with missing pieces,

should they exist, to be reviewed at future meetings including the proposed public session(s).

- My assessment of the responses.
  - The need for additional buffer (50-foot) and seasonal ecological assessment is to be satisfied, a very positive step forward, though leaving the possibility of some trail relocation.
  - The need for developing a management process is specified and as is indicated in the Management Plan. Good next steps, though needs high priority given nothing is in place at the moment.
  - A major very positive statement is that minimalist trail building techniques are to be used.
  - The need for investment in trails / recreational opportunities on public lands is clear and should be pursued.
  - A key issue here is the degree to which the Management Plan is “aspirational”. That certainly applies to certain of its guidelines, for example the desire to provide a 200-foot buffer between ecologically sensitive areas and trails. As I look at the sensitive areas defined by Arrowwood and myself map a 200-foot buffer around proposed trails, I find that but one, East Climb, actually comes close to fulfilling the desired 200-foot buffer.
  - I do not feel other guidelines are “aspirational”. Perhaps most importantly, I do not see conflict between statements regarding ecological protection and human uses / trails. The context of the Management Plan and certainly the Conservation Easement tells me of the prime importance of protecting forest ecology / wildlife when understanding what the balance should be between ecological protection and human use. I believe that places more constraint on trails deployment in the Northeast Quadrant than is provided by the current Plan, now with Hemlock and East Climb trails plus Sip-Of-Sunshine connection (see above discussion of 200-foot buffers). Unequivocal guidance could not have been expected. Put another way, unequivocal guidance presumably would have meant adhering to the Concept Map for areas such as Northeast.
  - I agree that minimizing human impact would mean no trails. However, I find almost universal agreement that trails should exist in the Forest and are specified by the Conservation Easement and Management Plan. Trails there should be! However, I feel locating in ecologically sensitive areas needs to be kept at a minimum. Here, for me, the Concept Map indicating a single trail in the northeast area should carry the day, also satisfying as best it can the Management Plan desire to strive for 200-foot buffers (see above).
  - The Conservation Easement and Management Plan indicate to me that trails in the northeast area should be limited. Removing the Ridgetop trail in the original trails proposal certainly is in accord. What remains in the current Plan is by my calculation a 17% increase in trail mileage in this very ecologically sensitive area. I feel that requires further justification. Have tradeoffs been mitigated to the maximal level possible? The larger issue here is the ratio of trails above and below the power line, where I feel the guidance in the Management plan is not “aspirational” but a clearly specified if not expected outcome.

- There is important discussion of the community angst regarding the impact of biking. Not included, but important to recognize is that walkers / hikers can be more intrusive in some cases / situations, such as taking shortcuts where trails zig-zag.
- Given the described need for additional studies, what is it the Selectboard would be approving? A final plan? A plan contingent on possible further changes (requiring what sort of final approval)? Trails matching the current overall locations but exact location(s) still to be determined by further survey (e.g. two trails in NE area)? Go back until final locations are drawn out and then approve?
- The public rose issues related to compliance with the Conservation Easement. That still needs to be addressed.
  - I need to see the full plate of revisions to the Management Plan and possibly changes to the current trails plan that might then result. (Some have raised the issue as to what body / group / committee should oversee updates in the context to the group that created it.)
  - With regard to the Management Plan, I previously have shared in October, 2021, my views and concerns about trails plans with RCC members and the ACFC (attached). They include my view of the stature of the Management Plan as the determining document. Related is a summary of how the Consultants (Arrowwood / Sinuosity) took into consideration the ecological requirements specified in the Conservation Easement and the ecological evaluation provided by the Management Plan, particularly with regard to added trails in the NE quadrant.
  - I need to hear and evaluate the views of the “Friends” group that was mentioned at the 5/10/22 RCC meeting.
  - I need to evaluate comments made at the public meeting(s) ACFC has indicated would be taking place.
  - I would like to hear the opinion of the Richmond Land Trust.
  - I encourage a continuing, indeed, expanded public dialogue such as ACFC has proposed. The argument, here, has been made that public opportunity for comment has been adequate, such as provided at ACFC regular meetings (recently restricted by Agenda to 10 minutes, with further public discussion disallowed during ongoing ACFC deliberation. A useful yardstick might be the level of public dialogue that went into development of the management Plan\*.

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\* Results from the public input process are available on the [Town of Richmond website](#). and is summarized below:

- *Visioning Workshop* – A public workshop was held on January 18, 2018 with about 80 community members in attendance. Attendees gave their input on a vision, management balance, and appropriate activities and facilities for the community forest.
- *Visioning Survey* – A survey, open from January to March 2018, asked similar questions to those posed at the workshop. The survey received 317 responses from residents of Richmond and surrounding towns.
- *Stakeholder Interviews* – Small group interviews were held on June 14 and June 18, 2018 to discuss the future of the property with five stakeholder groups: hunters/trappers, neighbors,

education, trail-based recreation, natural resources, and others. Other interested members of the public were invited to join.

- *Draft Strategies Workshop* – A public workshop was held on July 12, 2018 to present the progress of the plan and hear feedback from the community on draft strategies for the future development and management of the property.
- *Community Forest Committee* – The Community Forest Committee met twice a month through this process. The committee also met as smaller working groups to inventory and plan for each resource in the property.
- *Public Input on Draft Management Plans* -- 44 people attended a presentation of the 1st draft of the management plan on 9/20/18; an additional 14 people submitted comments in writing. The comment period was open for two weeks. A second draft plan will be released on 10/21/18, followed by a two week comment period and including another public meeting.