

Andrews Community Forest Committee

Minutes of Regular Meeting on May 20, 2024

Present:

ACFC: Ian Stokes; co-chair, Daniel Schmidt; co-chair, Julian Portilla, Chase Rosenberg, Brad Elliott, Melissa Wolaver, Cecilia Danks began via Zoom and joined in person at 6:50 pm

Public: Dan Wolfson. Bob Low, Paul Hauf, Sam Pratt, Nancy Zimny and Jeanette Malone via Zoom.

Chase Rosenberg: appointed timekeeper. Brad Elliott: appointed minute taker.

Time stamps refer to video at <https://archive.org/details/RichmondAndrewsCommunityForest05202024>

00:02:00 Minutes of 4/29/24; Additions/Changes to Agenda

Motion to approve: Brad moved, Melissa seconded. Minutes unanimously approved.

00:05:00 Open Meetings Law About Subcommittees

Daniel reported on the Conservation Commission's discussions about this earlier in the month with Selectboard members Jay Furr and Lisa Miller. Daniel recommends following Selectboard guidance to avoid calling sub-quorum groups of members "subcommittees." These groups cannot include a quorum of ACFCers and they cannot make decisions for ACFC to follow. Results of the meetings need to be shared with the public at ACFC meetings. Melissa noted that the recommendations in some of the "gray areas" don't exactly match those of an attorney for the Vermont League of Cities and Towns.

00:12:00 ACFC Bylaws Change re: RCC, RTC Reps & Quorum

Daniel reported that the Selectboard and Vermont Land Trust quickly approved ACFC's request for a change in bylaws so that voting would no longer require the presence of members holding the seats reserved for members of the Conservation Commission and Trails Committee (currently Daniel and Chase, respectively). Quorums still require seven ACFC members to be present.

Action item: Ian will check with Josh about updating the bylaws document.

00:15:00 ACFC Web Page

Brad presented a mock-up for a new ACFC web page, produced with the help of Duncan Wardwell, Assistant Town Manager. Suggestions were made to include links to the full set of Forest rules, a tick warning, a folder organizing Committee documents, a long-standing ACFC Google drive, and Ian's online collection of forest information.

Action items: Brad will revise the layout per the comments. The spelling of Cecilia's name will be corrected.

00:30:00 Wildlife Stewardship Discussion

Chase reported on a discussion at Daniel's house with Brad and Sam Pratt about the ecological benefits and recreational challenges of buffering sensitive habitats by the recommended 100 meters. Two general concepts emerged. One would be to focus new trail development in the south part of the Forest, and keep the northern area in its current state, open to public access on existing trails and woods roads. Another idea

would be to concentrate traffic on a new, less impactful north-south “corridor” connecting through Sip of Sunshine to Jericho trail networks, while discouraging the use of the existing trails and roads. There was general consensus on allowing large sections of the Forest to remain free of new trails and condense impacts on natural communities.

Action item: Daniel will send out the electronic form of the most recent trail concept.

00:39:00 Vision Statement

Brad presented revisions to the second draft of a vision/mission statement about ACFC’s management of the Forest. The changes were based on inputs from Committee members and the public during and since the last meeting. Discussions focused on achieving the appropriate clarity, style and brevity Daniel suggested revising a reference to the Forest’s influence on people’s feelings to pointing to the range of opportunities it offers. Suggestions were made for ways to show ACFC as the document’s author. We discussed the possibilities of inviting local kids to produce a video version of the Vision/Mission students, perhaps with visuals of local species typical of the Forest.

Action item: Brad will revise the document, send it to the members and present a new version at the next meeting for a vote. Members can correspond with Brad individually but not via a “Reply All” email.

00:55:45 “Hot Spots” Discussion

Julian shared a list (attached) of “things we agree on” and “things we may not agree on” – aka “hot spots,” “sticking points,” etc. He sees the list as a guide for ACFC in clarifying the topics and efficiently resolving differences. Julian invited members to review the list and submit any thoughts on it to him before the next meeting. The group discussed several items on the list:

Dogs: Wright described strong community interest in having places where dogs can walk and play. He feels restrictions on taking dogs into the Forest are likely to encounter pushback from some dog owners. Melissa described Audobon’s policy of allowing leashed dogs in one part of their forest but prohibiting dogs in another. Sam Pratt pointed out complications of people taking dogs into the ACF via connections to neighboring properties such as VYCC and Sunshine. Chase questioned the practicality of trying to enforce leash laws in remote parts of the Forest. Nancy Zimny agreed that restrictions won’t be universally popular but that they’re well-justified by research on the harm caused to wildlife by dogs, including fear invoked by the scents they leave behind. She urged ACFC to make decisions affecting the Forest’s health need to be strong enough to stand up over time to politics, including for decisions on behalf of wildlife that can’t take part in the debate. Julian advocated for creating a culture that inspires protecting the Forest rather than expecting rules, guidelines and enforcement to do the job on their own. Cecilia suggested that we join others in town advocating for a dog park in a suitable place. Brad suggested that we accompany any restrictions on Forest use with explanations of their need and benefits.

Night use: Cecilia asked if we might relax the current restriction on night use of the ACF to allow such visits “with special permission.” She noted at times it might be worthwhile for organized events such as owl prowls as well as for ceremonies by indigenous cultures.

Connectivity: Melissa requested that Julian’s list of agreed-upon points include one stating that we wouldn’t build trails connecting to trails on other properties unless the neighboring landowner gave written assurance

that he, she or future owners would keep the connection open and accessible to the public. The guarantee would be recorded with the Town Clerk to run with the deed. This would prevent having trails originally built as connections to become dead ends. Chase said David Sunshine is interested in crafting such a document to cover his property.

Existing roads: Cecilia said that the Committee will need to address what will be permitted on the Forest's existing trails and roads, given the requirement that we keep the Forest open to the public. Wright reported that on his property trees will be left across old logging roads to reduce but not encourage traffic. Cecilia looked for clarity regarding winter closures, and recommended being prepared to address resistance, as with restricting dogs. Chase noted the ability of snowshoers and skiers to go off-trail in the winter with relative ease.

Modes of access. Julian recalled Sue Morse saying the options offered by dispersed trails can reduce off-trail meanders. Cecilia cautioned against expecting that closing a trail would end bushwhacking. Dan Wolfson recommended that ACFC base its decisions on Meredith Naughton's research compilation.

Daniel said public accessibility to the Forest is a main component of the Management Plan. He advocated for closing existing trails and logging roads in the northern part of the Forest because he feels they're too difficult for many in town to use. He would like to see them replaced by a single, well-built and -maintained trail accessible to all users. Brad advocating for keeping the northern part open to public access without encouraging more traffic by building new trails in that area. He listed locations of some of the 30 or more miles of trails in town now, recommending that ACFC assess local trail offerings and needs in the broad context.

Action items: Julian was complimented on the open, lively, respectful discussions his document prompted. Daniel suggested that we continue conversations around these and other topics at subsequent meetings. Cecilia suggested that where we found areas of disagreement we develop options for resolving them, with each listing its pros and cons. Wright said he felt the Selectboard would prefer to have one option presented to it, and Cecilia suggested presenting one as the ACFC's favored approach but showing the others as well.

Members were invited to comment on, discuss and suggest refinements to Julian's list before the next meeting. Comments should be emailed to the entire group, though responses should not use "Reply All" to comply with Open Meeting Law. Ian reminded the Committee of the amount of material that will need review and recommendations. Daniel said he's working on a suite of updates to the current Plan that he'll share with members before the next meeting.

02:00:00 Next meeting and adjournment

The ACFC will come together next on June 24 from 6-8 p.m. The meeting adjourned with unanimous approval at 8:05 p.m.