Andrew’s Community Forest Committee Monthly Meeting

DRAFT Minutes 3-29-22

Attendance, Committee Members: Tyler Merritt, Nick Neverisky, Caitlin Littlefield, Jim Monahan, Jesse Crary, Amy Powers, Daniel Schmidt, Cecilia Danks

Attendance, public: Paul Hauf, John Kart, Nancy Zimny, Becca Cunningham Weiss, Betsy Hardy, Bob Lajoie, Brad Elliott, Catherine McIntyre, Ed Wells, Elizabeth Wright, Ian Stokes, Jeanette Malone, Kit Emery, Lauck Parke, Lisa Kory, Marcy Harding, Martha McSherry, Martha Nye, Melissa Wolaver, Bob Low

Notetaking: Daniel Schmidt

Note that the meeting started at 7:30 as the key Jesse received was not the correct key to the meeting room. The committee and several members of the public were present for the in-person meeting but were unable to attend in person on account of the room being locked. A suitable space was not available for the meeting and the committee decided to move the meeting to zoom and postpone the start time from 7:00 to 7:30.

A: Roll Call, Confirmation of Quorum and Appointment of minute taker (2 minutes)

B: Additions or Deletions to the Agenda (1 minute)

Moved item H “VYCC Water Quality Collaboration at Andrews Town Forest (10 minutes)” to the start of the meeting on account of the late start.

C: Review and accept minutes of February 28, 2022 Meeting (1 minute)

We will review two month’s worth of minutes at the next meeting.

H. VYCC Water Quality Collaboration at Andrews Town Forest (10 minutes)

Kristen Balschunat presenting from VYCC

This is in regards to potential ACF water quality projects in the community forest. VYCC has funding through a DEC block grant to do up to two weeks of work in the ACF that focus on water quality improvements such as erosion reduction, stream enhancement, and trail/road improvements. This would be work done by VYCC crews at no cost to the town.

This work could happen in July or August and could be one week in July and/or one week in August. Also noted was that this would involve local youth and would provide a great education/outreach co-benefit.

The committee spent some time talking about potential projects. Jim Monahan suggests some culvert work. Nick noted that there are areas of heavy sedimentation downstream of these areas. Daniel suggested the potential to walk the skid trails and logging roads to look for areas of erosion and install water bars or other erosion control structures.

As a next step Daniel will work with Kristen to set up a site visit and will include other committee members should they want to join. The committee was willing to commit to this work and was appreciative of VYCC’s efforts in helping implement water quality improvements in the ACF.

D: Public Comment (15 minutes)

Ian Stokes: Regarding the comments that have been submitted. It is clear that there are concerns about the trail proposal by Sinuosity and Arrowwood. Refers to the Sinuosity website and the images shown there. Asks to pare down the current trail plan so that it is compatible with all trail users.

Jon Kart: Expresses that there has been a lack of clear communication and public engagement. Cites numerous concerns with the purpose, from the trail maps to the mechanism for public engagement. Says that the committee needs a rubric for assessing the public comments. Tells the committee to not move forward until there is a process that feels comprehensive enough. There needs to be a more thorough process for answering people’s questions and the fact that this hasn’t happened is leading to the current tension around the trail design plan.

Paul Hauf: Adding to his comment on google docs – no other trail system in Vermont has gone through this type of scrutiny. To say that this process has been too quick fails to recognize how thorough the process has been to date. The fact that the committee has had a collaboration between a trail building company and an ecological design company is unprecedented. The balance between conservation and recreation has favored conservation and the current plan does a good job of balancing conservation and recreation.

G: Discussion of Public Feedback on Proposed Trail Design (60 minutes)

Jesse framing: Tonight’s goals: consider the comments and find general themes; identify the key questions that need further considerations; then circle back on these questions as a committee. The committee may have the answers to these questions or we will need to seek out further expertise.

The amended trail plan approved by this committee will trigger a revised management plan. Once we have a trail design plan we will go through a revised management plan process that includes a more robust public engagement component.

Another goal of this committee is to lower the temperature between recreation and conservation. There is goodwill and common interest between these user groups.

Tyler Merritt adds a comment that he wants to make sure that we are not delayed by a small minority of people who are opposed to the trail plan.

In terms of process for this part of the agenda, Jesse proposes that we hear from the committee members about what we read from the comments. He asks the question - broadly speaking, what are the main takeaways from committee members?

Nick notes that there was a fair amount of comments about process. Jesse states that 75-80% of comments were supportive of the trail design. However, in terms of process, we need to figure out how we balance the concerns of those who are for the current trail design and those who are asking for further information about or modification to the current trail design.

As a side note, even though the majority of the comments were supportive of the plan, just on a quantitative level, there is concern that the comments are not a fair representation of the town or potential users. It might be the case that this is a fair representation given the fact that the committee advertised on FPF and there has been opportunity for most of the town to weigh in. However, we can’t be sure that these comments are an accurate representation of the town residents as a whole.

In fact, it may not be the best idea to base any decisions on numbers. The committee received dozens of thoughtful pieces of feedback that were focused on the process of public engagement. We would be moving in the wrong direction if we just do a quantitative analysis of the comments (pro vs cons). To avoid oversimplifying the process, we need to consider the content of the messages and not just the number of certain comments.

It is noted that there is a potentially slippery slope of weighing certain votes over other people’s votes.

The conversation returns to process and how the committee has engaged in the public engagement process and communication. It is noted that the committee may not have engaged the public adequately after the plan was created to ask how the committee might make additional revisions. This could be partly due to COVID (it’s difficult to get people in a room to do the type of ideation necessary) but, regardless, there wasn’t as much of a robust revision process. It’s worth taking the time, even if this means additional months.

It may also be the case that the management plan was too aspirational/rosy-eyed. The management plan asks for a lot and it may be the case that all the objectives can’t be met to the degree that the management plan aspires to. Another consideration is that the town does not have a recreation vision or plan that defines that overall role of recreation in Richmond. The public is not currently able to see the community forest in the context of a wider plan. Some of that work has been done as part of a public envisioning process but the results of that work are not clear to the committee or the general public. It is not in the auspices of the ACFC to take on town-wide visioning but this is something we could support if we wanted to take this type of discussion forward. It would be good for the town to have a bigger vision for recreation in Richmond.

The conversation then moves to the character of the proposed trails. The conversation is framed by acknowledging that the ACF is the only large tract of town land. Preston, Sunshine, Prelco, Robbins mountain are all conserved land. Of these Prelco is the largest pieces of land. Most of the town recreation is done on private land.

Ian Stokes earlier comment referenced the Sinuosity website that has pictures of large features and bike parks. The committee members agree that the proposed trails are not a bike park but would be much closer to what is in the Preston forest. The trail suggestion is for a hand built trail and not large machine built trails. In other words, true multi-use trails. However, it’s not just the type of trails but the density and their location. There are many ways that a trail system can have an impact on the ecology of the ACF.

One way to assess the impact of trails would be to set up a monitoring program. The committee has the ability to adjust trail use based on wildlife impacts. Other potential impacts to monitor would be erosion. This might lead to an adaptive management approach, where we implement several things, like build a few trails, and then monitor to learn more about impacts. The process is iterative and we can make adjustments to the trail plan, use, etc. as we learn more about the impact.

Side note that references Naughton master’s thesis. It is best to consolidate trails. The lack of trails in the northwest corner and the elimination of the ridge trail reflects the recommendations from that master’s thesis that consolidating trails, and keeping some areas free of trails, reduces the ecological impact.

Back to the public engagement process. What might this public engagement process piece look like?

There might be other pieces of the public engagement process that can help the committee with many pieces of the management plan. The goal of this type of public engagement process would be to ensure trust in the committee and to ensure credibility. To determine outcomes, we should hear from others who have more experience in this type of work.

One option for a process for public engagement would be to hold a meeting and frame it as not about any type of decision making. The committee would present the updated management plan, take notes, get feedback and then get the plan ready to send to the select board. Let the select board know of the process that we went through, and areas of disagreement, along with the updated plan. Instead of, or in addition to, a public engagement meeting, the committee might make a video or a power point where we could show people the type of public engagement that we have done. This would help the public to see that there has been a robust process. Regardless of outcome, we need to invest in the process. So that the committee has credibility and we can disagree while still feeling heard.

Question about potential next steps. Does this mean that we’re going to put together the revised management plan, the trail plan, and the land acknowledgement as a package and then use this as the basis for a public engagement process?

Does the committee want to hire a professional to help with the public engagement process? We might be able to get conservation reserve funds for this type of process.

As a counterpoint, it is noted that we may not get new information from additional public engagement. The comments that were really opposed to the adoption of the trail plan were comments we’ve been getting a long time. The new information from an additional comment period might just be a reiteration of things we’re already hearing. Perhaps we need to just get to the next step of the process and be able to say – here’s what we heard from the public comments and here is the next step.

Public comments

Paul Hauf: When the creamery was being redeveloped it was a very contentious process. They did their best to get public input and were able to get about 500 results from a public survey. He thinks that the process for public engagement might have diminishing returns the more we ask for public engagement.

Bob Lowe: Appreciates the meeting. He states that the committee should “gather your thoughts, bring it to the public, make a decision, then go back to the public.” Put changes to the trail plan along with changes to the master plan. They need to go together.

Brad Elliot: Feels that his questions aren’t being answered. He referenced Sue Morse’s comments and these also weren’t addressed. This is more than just getting an opinion about trails or no trails but getting answers to more substantive questions. Brad has not seen scientific studies in the consultants’ report. The public engagement process needs to involve answering questions.

Nancy Zimny: Doesn’t feel like mountain bikers are the problems but she doesn’t see how multi-use works for other (i.e. non-mountain bikers). Why do we need to have two trails instead of just one? Because mountain biking is so popular, there are going to be a higher density of users. This increased density of users will have an impact on the forest.

The public struggles to see how other users (non-mountain bikers) will fit into this trail network. Nancy thinks we need to talk about what we want our trails to feel like. So that the public has a sense of what the trail is going to “feel” like.

The committee responds by acknowledging that it needs to do a better job of communicating what this trail system is going to look like. It’s not going to be a mountain bike park but that is the impression by some members of the public. It may be possible to provide examples from other trails in town that can be used to demonstrate the type of character the trails will have.

Nancy notes that there are also larger questions of climate change, wildlife habitat, and recreation.

The committee responds by noting that the management plan calls for 6-8 miles of trails, so while we need to address bigger questions of climate change and habitat, our job is not to question whether we’re going to have recreation in the forest but to consider what types of trail we’re going to create.

F. Consideration of Next Steps re Public Process and Approval of Trail Design (as proposed or further modified) to be included in Proposed Amended Management Plan for recommendation to Vermont Land Trust and Richmond Selectboard (20 minutes)

Now getting into next steps.

The committee poses the question – What are some broad questions we need to answer in order to move the process forward?

We have a trail plan that meets the conservation and recreation goals but have we done it in a way that minimizes the ecological impact?

What role would a facilitator play and what might the committee do as the first part of that process? (perhaps start with an FAQ?)

The committee would want to do this concurrently with the three components: management plan, trail plan, land acknowledgement. Our next step would be to address the questions that have been posited. Then perhaps we engage the facilitator.

We might review the questions and consolidate them into a set of themes and provide answers that address most of the questions. Some of these are going to be simple, some complex, and some are just about communicating better.

The next step is for a subcommittee (Nick) to develop a list of questions and concerns. Caitlin will work developing the answers once the list of questions and concerns has been created. TBD on next steps with the facilitator.

The hope would be that this would get us to a point where we address other conservation measures that can add nuance to the trail plan. These will be incorporated into the management plan and will demonstrate not just the addition of trails but the addition of a number of conservation measures.

On a practical note, Cecilia adds that we need to put the boundaries of the forest and trail connections on the map that is on the town website.

Chase Rosenberg will be joining the committee to take the place of Tyler as the representative from the trails committee.

I: Other and old business follow-up (10 Minutes)

1. Forest Management/Logging Update

Caitlin and Daniel helped finish the forest management work along with Ethan tapper and 3 UVM students.

1. Richmond Historical Society Donation to ACF in Memory of Geoff Urbanik

We put off discussion of this donation until we have further information to gather.

Notes from the chat

Me to jcrary (Direct Message) 07:38 PM

Hey Jesse, do we need to record the meeting?

From Cecilia Danks to Everyone 07:39 PM

Is this being recorded? Should we record it?

From Brad Elliott to Everyone 07:41 PM

Would controlling invasive plants in a vernal pool qualify? Big patch of phragmites in the NW quadrant v. pool.

From jcrary to Everyone 07:42 PM

Hey all. I am attempting to record to my computer. Fingers crossed.

From Marcy Harding to Everyone 08:09 PM

Absolutely, tech issues.

From Cecilia Danks to Everyone 08:29 PM

Here is a webpage https://vtcommunityforestry.org/node/4293/town-forest-stories-pod/richmond

From Brad Elliott to Everyone 08:29 PM

We should include the Richmond Land Trust's properties into the inventory of lands and trails open to the public for recreation.

From Cecilia Danks to Everyone 08:30 PM

https://vtcommunityforestry.org/sites/default/files/pictures/richmond\_plan\_document\_final.pdf

That was the reportabove

From Brad Elliott to Everyone 08:34 PM

In Richmond and surrounding towns

neighboring towns, per a trails website

From Cecilia Danks to Everyone 09:00 PM

Ellen, I appreciated that you ask people attending the meeting to pipe up. Jesse, Can we ask that again? I see at least one hand up.

From jeanettemalone to Everyone 09:02 PM

Great Idea Daniel!

From Cecilia Danks to Everyone 09:12 PM

For the next map -- whatever we decide to put in the full plan that goes out for comment and and public meeting, we need to show boundaries, connectivity and more detail on important ecological features. But I appreciate someone did make this revised map!

From Lisa Kory to Everyone 09:15 PM

Are the proposed trails designed to meet up with other trail networks?

From Caitlin Littlefield to Everyone 09:15 PM

Lisa, yes -- connect to Sip of Sunshine (off Jericho Rd) and ultimately to VYCC.

as called for in the mgmt. plan (as well as the principles in the town plan)

From Brad Elliott to Me (Direct Message) 09:16 PM

Nice points on detail, Daniel.

From Cecilia Danks to Everyone 09:22 PM

I had to step away because my daughter came home from the sitter. Did we just vote on anything?

From Nick Neverisky to Everyone 09:22 PM

No

From Caitlin Littlefield to Everyone 09:23 PM

nope, all good Cecilia!

From Cecilia Danks to Everyone 09:23 PM

Thanks :)

From Brad Elliott to Everyone 09:42 PM

Could the 200' buffers be shown around the sensitive areas … or put it around the trails so we can see degrees of encroachment? Would be very helpful.

From Caitlin Littlefield to Everyone 09:45 PM

Sure thing Brad!

From Amy Powers to Everyone 09:48 PM

Thanks to Caitlin and Daniel for getting out there this weekend!

**\*\* PLEASE NOTE – MATERIALS RELATED TO THESE AGENDA ITEMS (IF ANY) WILL BE POSTED AND AVAILABLE ON THE ANDREWS COMMUNITY FOREST WEBPAGE AT http://www.richmondvt.gov/boards-minutes/conservation-commission/richmond-town-forest/**