

TOWN OF AMHERST
Conservation Commission

April 8, 2020

APPROVED-Amended 4/22/2020

In attendance via Zoom: Rob Clemens – Chair, Bill Widmer – Treasurer (alternate), John Harvey, Vick Bennison, Frank Montesanto, Rich Hart, Peter Lyon – BOS Ex-Officio, and Bill Stoughton (Alternate).

Staff present: Dean Shankle – Town Administrator; and Kristan Patenaude – minute taker.

Public present via Zoom: Will Ludt – Chair, Amherst Heritage Commission

Chairman Rob Clemens called the online meeting to order at 7:01 pm.

ADMINISTRATIVE:

1. Chair Comments

Rob Clemens thanked Town Administrator Dean Shankle for hosting the ACC's Zoom meeting. He also thanked the group for their work on the Buck Meadow acquisition. He stated that the Buck Meadow closing went well. The Commission will be using roll call voting for this meeting.

Jared Hardner entered the meeting. Mike Cohen (Alternate) entered the meeting.

2. Minutes (3/11, 3/25)

Vick Bennison moved to approve the meeting minutes of March 11, 2020, as presented.

Frank Montesanto seconded.

Roll call vote: Rob Clemens – aye; Frank Montesanto – aye; Rich Hart – aye; Vick Bennison – aye; Jared Hardner – aye; John Harvey – aye. Motion carried unanimously.

Wes Robertson (Alternate) entered the meeting.

Vick Bennison moved to approve the meeting minutes of March 25, 2020, as presented.

Rich Hart seconded.

Roll call vote: Rob Clemens- aye; John Harvey – aye; Rich Hart – aye; Vick Bennison – aye; Jared Hardner – aye; Frank Montesanto – aye. Motion carried unanimously.

3. Treasurer's Report

Bill Widmer presented the Treasurer's Report. He stated that, year-to-date, the ACC has spent \$5,099 of its budget. He has projected out the cost for Kristan Patenaude's services to the ACC. He has also included the cost associated with the materials and supplies voted on for Frank Montesanto's construction projects, and Vick Bennison's signs. He looked into the \$3,250 expenditure for the Scott property mowing and invasives project. This was voted on during the June 26, 2019, ACC meeting. The work has since been done and an invoice presented to the ACC for payment. This will be paid for out of this year's budget. The Conservation Fund sits at about \$235,000, after the \$381,000 Buck Meadow transaction. There is also about \$16,000 left in the gift account.

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Chairman Clemens stated that the Commissioners should be thoughtful of the amount of money left in the budget to put towards Kristan Patenaude's education and outreach efforts, in conjunction with her minute taking work.

John Harvey moved to accept the Treasurer's Report as presented. Frank Montesanto seconded.

Roll call vote: Rob Clemens – aye; John Harvey – aye; Frank Montesanto – aye; Vick Bennison – aye; Rich Hart – aye; Jared Hardner – aye. Motion carried unanimously.

4. Planning and Permitting

Chairman Clemens stated that the Board of Selectmen is going to be processing a few appointments to the Planning Board. There are 11 applications for three spots on the Planning Board; Bill Stoughton is one of those applicants, for an ACC seat on the Planning Board.

Peter Lyon explained that the Board of Selectmen has sent a series of questions to all of the applicants for them to answer. Next Monday and Tuesday, the Board of Selectmen will hold interviews with the applicants and make a selection for the three seats. While there are no guarantees, the Planning Board is accustomed to including an ACC member as one of their seats. The next scheduled meeting for the Planning Board is May 6, 2020.

Town Administrator Shankle stated that the Planning Board Chair and Community Development Director have been looking into having a meeting prior to the May meeting in order to discuss the organization of the Board with its newly appointed members.

5. Buck Meadow Update

Chairman Clemens stated that the closing and purchase of the Buck Meadow property has been concluded. He had a Zoom meeting with Jared Hardner, John Harvey, and Craig Fraley, Recreation Department Director, to discuss next steps.

Jared Harder revealed some of the draft public rules for the property, including: park hours 6am-9pm, no alcohol or tobacco use, no dogs, no fishing, no motor vehicle use outside of the parking area, and no trail use if the area is wet/muddy.

In response to a question from Bill Stoughton, Jared Hardner stated that the use of personal mobility devices for disabled people will have to be properly worded and added to the list.

The group agreed that they hope this property will lend itself to ADA compliant trails in the future. Bill Stoughton stated that the town of Mason, NH, has a short policy regarding personal mobility devices that might be helpful to the Commission.

In response to a question from Mike Cohen, Jared Hardner explained that the language regarding 'visiting the property at one's own risk,' comes from language found at the other recreation parks in town.

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Bill Stoughton suggested a rule for 'no hunting' on the property.

The group discussed that this property lends itself to walking dogs on leash. However, Craig Fraley has indicated that it is usually fairly incongruent to allow dogs on the other recreation fields in town.

Jared Hardner stated that even one person allowing their dog off leash in the grasslands of the property would lose the nesting birds in that area for the season. Craig Fraley has also made it clear that dogs are not allowed on the playing fields in town.

Chairman Clemens stated that he would be opposed to dogs off leash on the property, but would possibly consider a strict leash law.

The group discussed enforcement of these rules on the property. They decided to continue to look at and draft the list of public rules.

John Harvey explained that there will probably be a request made of the nearby condo owners to try to keep their cats inside at night, if possible.

Chairman Clemens stated that there will be a brief article on the acquisition coming out in the next Citizen edition. The Police Department has also been briefed and will put the parking lot area on their patrol route. Craig Fraley is looking into cameras for the property. The equipment that came with the property is being inventoried and Meridian Land Services is continuing to look into improvements to the current access way and a possible access point on Stearns Road. He explained that Craig Fraley will lead the effort with the Highway Safety Committee to look into the access point concerns. The owner of the Amherst Country Club came by the property to give advice on invasives and turf management.

Chairman Clemens stated that they are hoping to open up the property to the public in May, if allowed for by town and state guidelines. Jared Hardner and John Harvey will be doing a site walk to look at possible trail layout options soon.

6. Public Education and Outreach Materials

Mike Cohen thanked the Commissioners for their help in reviewing the educational posters. He explained that he and Vick Bennison are working on looking at printers for the materials, and Kristan Patenaude is working on editing them and promoting Earth Day virtually.

Kristan Patenaude explained that she created a survey that has been distributed on the town Facebook sites, asking people for their addresses and interest levels in a variety of items. She has been distributing ACC Trail Guides to those interested for the last couple of weeks. The survey will allow the ACC to have a running list of people in town interested in becoming stewards or in other volunteer opportunities.

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Mike Cohen stated that the total for all of the materials he would like to have printed is about \$1,500. He would like to do this in rounds, so that some of the materials can be printed out of this year's budget. The first round could include one set of the educational posters, 200 system-wide trail map inserts, and a reprint of the ACC banner. This would cost approximately \$700. A second round of printing could then include a second set of educational posters and some of the large posters created by NRPC.

Vick Bennison moved to approve an expenditure of up to \$700.00 for the specified educational materials. Jared Hardner seconded.

Roll call vote: Rob Clemens – aye; Vick Bennison – aye; Jared Hardner – aye; John Harvey – aye; Frank Montesanto – aye; Rich Hart – aye. Motion carried unanimously.

7. Trails Update

Vick Bennison stated that he has distributed the 'You Are Here' maps at Caesar's Brook. Rob Clemens explained that he is going to request that Eric Hahn, DPW Director, consider helping the ACC to put some gravel down at the Caesar's Brook parking area.

John Harvey explained that the Purtell/Atherton Commons trail is now blazed in orange and open about $\frac{3}{4}$ of the way. The final $\frac{1}{4}$ of the trail will require a lot of work out to Amherst Street. This will connect directly onto the sidepath being created soon. The stone wall at this exit point is in poor condition and he is recommending making a way through it, instead of over it.

In response to a question from Mike Cohen, John Harvey stated that the new trail is 0.6 miles long.

Will Ludt, Chair of the Heritage Commission, suggested that some of the members of his Commission go to look at the condition of the stone wall and make a recommendation after that.

Frank Montesanto stated that the Pulpit Brook trail is partially flooded from beaver activity. He has put a temporary fix of about 70 feet of new bridge along the trail. The trail steward has cleared out the dam but the beavers have simply rebuilt it. Eventually, either the beavers will need to be removed, or the ACC will need to do something similar to the Pond Parish walkway at this location.

John Harvey stated that he has a potential project for the Bicycle and Pedestrian Advisory Committee. The Old Mail Road project looks to have a short gravel section along Horace Greely Road, creating an approximate 4 mile long flat trail from Winterberry Road to Pulpit Rock. The segment along the road is about 275 feet and there are three existing bridges along the route that will need to be upgraded.

Jared Hardner explained that the Bicycle and Pedestrian Advisory Committee has a list of all the potential trail ideas around town transposed onto a map. The group then tries to work on these

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projects during already scheduled road work, and utilizes grant cycles for additional funding support.

Chairman Clemens stated that the ACC could take the lead on the non-road sections of this potential trail, leaving the Bicycle and Pedestrian Advisory Committee to work on the section along Horace Greely Road.

Chairman Clemens stated that many people have been out using the town's trails during the pandemic. Some parking areas, such as at Joe English, Betty Arnold, and Grater Woods, have been overflowing onto the street. Extra hiking and biking on the trails has also exacerbated the muddy sections. He questioned if the extra activity is causing health safety concerns, and/or having a deleterious effect on the town's properties. He stated that Hollis closed their trails due in part to the influx of people coming up from Massachusetts. While he's hesitant to close the town's trails, there is the question of how to deal with the additional users in terms of the public's safety.

Jared Hardner explained that he was out on the trails last weekend and saw some aggregations of people that would not be considered in compliance with the guidelines laid out by the health officer. There was also heavy usage of many wet trails in town, leading to larger issues in these areas. He would like to curtail the usage of the trails by people from out of state.

In response to a question from John Harvey, Jared Hardner stated that the town can make its trails invisible on trail websites for a temporary period of time in hopes of dissuading people.

Chairman Clemens suggested that the ACC work to get the word out to Amherst's townspeople through social media, while working with groups like NEMBA to get the word out to mountain bikers. This will be an attempt to educate people and get them to behave better on the trails.

Wes Robertson stated that some of the overcrowding is COVID-19 specific, but that the parking lot for Grater Woods sees an abundance of people parking on the road most of the time. This is a safety concern for abutters. He believes there would be short-term and long-term benefits to posting No Parking on the Road signs at this location.

Peter Lyon stated that, with the Police Department and DPW's assistance, temporary No Parking signs could be put out in trail parking lots. These orders are not enforceable, as there is no ordinance behind them, but it might still have the effect being sought.

Jared Harder stated that No Parking signs should be put up at the problem areas in hopes of dissuading non-locals.

Town Administrator Shankle stated that the town was having issues with social distancing at the school fields, leading to those being closed. If the same thing is being noticed along the trails, the town might ask for them to be closed as well.

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Chairman Clemens suggested that ACC Commissioners and possibly trail stewards take the upcoming weekend to stake out the parking lots in town to observe the conditions and see if there is any abuse going on. The ACC can then make a better informed decision as to what to do. Town Administrator Shankle stated that any No Parking signs should directly mention that this is due to the Governor's emergency orders.

Chairman Clemens agreed that the heavy parking lots should be closed and No Parking signs should also be placed along the roads in these areas. This should be done at Betty Arnold, Grater Woods, and Joe English.

Peter Lyon suggested that the short-term issue of parking be taken care of immediately, while also fixing the long-term issues that seem to be occurring at the Grater Woods lot.

The group discussed closing the lots at Grater Road, Austin Road, and Betty Arnold. There was some discussion about closing the trails at these areas as well, but it was ultimately decided to only close the parking lots for now. The group agreed to get the word out about this on social media to the townspeople as quickly as possible and to not close the Joe English parking area at this time.

8. Other Business

Chairman Clemens stated that the Gleason easement is ready to be heard at a joint meeting with the Board of Selectmen for acceptance. This will happen through a joint Zoom meeting shortly.

Rich Hart asked about putting up signage at the development off Route 122 which has a stream that runs into Peacock Brook regarding the significance of the stream and a map of the public trail there. Chairman Clemens stated that the burden is on the developer to do this, as was initially suggested.

Bill Stoughton stated that he will be updating the property spreadsheet in the Dropbox and also adding in some property deeds.

Chairman Clemens stated that the ACC will meet on April 22, 2020, and May 13, 2020.

**John Harvey moved to adjourn the meeting at 9:09pm. Vick Bennison seconded.
Motion carried unanimously.**

Respectfully submitted,
Kristan Patenaude

Minutes approved as amended: April 22, 2020