

TOWN OF AMHERST
Conservation Commission

May 13, 2020

APPROVED - Amended

In attendance via Zoom: Rob Clemens – Chair, Jared Hardner – Vice Chair, Bill Widmer – Treasurer (alternate), John Harvey, Vick Bennison, Rich Hart, Lee Gilman, Peter Lyon – BOS Ex-Officio, Wes Robertson (Alternate), and Bill Stoughton (Alternate).
Staff present: Kristan Patenaude – minute taker.

Chairman Rob Clemens called the online meeting to order at 7:02 pm.

ADMINISTRATIVE:

1. Chair Comments

Rob Clemens stated that he would like the Commission to try to stay on topic during the Zoom meetings in order to be most efficient.

Frank Montesanto entered the meeting.

2. Minutes (4/22)

The Commission agreed to review these minutes at their next meeting.

3. Treasurer's Report

Bill Widmer stated that he has updated the Treasurer's Report with some actuals. The previously requested amounts of \$700 for Mike Cohen's educational materials, and \$2,200 for Frank Montesanto's infrastructure materials have been projected to be included. In projecting forward on the budget, the Commission has approximately \$1,936.91 left to spend in the next two months, before the end of the fiscal year.

Bill Widmer explained that the Buck Meadow transaction has cleared, and thus there is approximately \$231,000 left in the ACC Land Account. There is also about \$16,000 left in the Gift Account.

John Harvey noted that there has been some work done regarding laying out the 2021 budget. This budget will likely only be slightly higher than the current year's.

Rob Clemens explained that there is a Meridian bill from their work during late February to survey the parking lot and access areas for Buck Meadow. This should be paid out of the Land Account. He also explained that the ACC owes \$91.00 for parking trailhead closure signs due to COVID-19.

Bill Stoughton noted that these signs are probably appropriate for reimbursement under the COVID-19 expense reimbursement. Peter Lyon agreed that that the bill could be paid and then submitted to the Finance Office for reimbursement.

Bill Widmer explained that the ACC previously voted to expend up to \$2,500 for invasives' treatment at Lindabury Orchard. To date, he has not been able to find an appropriately licensed

May 13, 2020

APPROVED - Amended

person to perform the work. He will continue to look, but noted that the funds will not be expended until the work has actually been performed.

Mike Cohen (Alternate) entered the meeting.

John Harvey noted that he may need some funds for the bird box programs. He also explained that he has briefed the Bicycle Pedestrian Advisory Committee, regarding a public outreach campaign for a possible new donations program. He has drafted a two page document that explains how donations, such as land, property, easements, goods, etc., can be given. After talking to Cheryl Eastman, Finance Director, he discovered that the town has a federal EIN#, similar to a 501(c)(3). This allows charitable donations to the town to get a tax rebate.

Bill Widmer noted that this type of program could be used to determine the value of conservation easements. This information could then be provided to the donating landowner as proof that identifies the cost/value of the easement.

In response to a question from Rob Clemens, Peter Lyon stated that the Board of Selectmen will be reviewing a potential spending/hiring freeze at their next meeting. This will most likely affect large scale projects and expenditures. There may be an impact to DPW staffing and their ability to provide mowing support to the ACC.

Wes Robertson noted that the Gowing Woods' owners have some interest in placing 'private property' signs potentially at three different places where the easement crosses their land. There are other possible locations on town trails that these signs could be useful. He explained that the signs cost about \$20/each and that he will come back with an estimated cost.

Rob Clemens moved to accept the Treasurer's Report as presented. John Harvey seconded.

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

4. Planning and Permitting

Bill Stoughton, representative from the ACC to the Planning Board, explained that the Planning Board will meet next Wednesday to hear two applications, believed to be non-controversial. The Board will also discuss the Master Plan process and impact fees.

5. Buck Meadow Update

Rob Clemens explained that he hasn't yet heard from Meridian Land Services about analyzing the Buck Meadow points of access, egress, and parking. The advisory group has met twice and recently completed a site walk of the area. There is some interest in restricting the hours there from dawn – dusk. The hours could possibly be set to be from 6am – 10pm, to otherwise accommodate activities scheduled in the clubhouse.

May 13, 2020

APPROVED - Amended

Jared Hardner stated that, while he understands that this property is different in how closely it abuts the condominiums, he believes the hours should be set to maintain consistency with other town properties.

Rob Clemens stated that there is no opening date currently scheduled for the property. The Police Department has been patrolling the area and asking people to stay out unless they're working on the property. He, John Harvey, and Bill Stoughton have reviewed the trail for the possibility of making a mobility-assisted trail. There are some concerns regarding the stability and slope of the potential area.

Bill Stoughton stated that he spoke to the NH Governor's Commission on Disability, which informed him that surface grass cannot be considered as a stable surface, and that there may be issues with trying to close the trail to mobility-assisted users when the area is wet and ground is soft. He explained that there is a grant program open every year for recreational trails in New Hampshire, which allocates up to \$80,000 of federal funds managed by the state. There is a possibility that this type of grant could be used to put down a more solid surface such as gravel, however, this is probably not feasible for this year.

Jared Hardner explained that one of the ingredients used to make cart paths is recycled asphalt. If the group wants to consider this type of a solid surface in the future, the DPW has a tremendous amount of this material ready to be used.

John Harvey suggested that the group move forward with taking out the camber of the trail with a machine and also expending some money to install a sign out in front of the Buck Meadow entrance. He explained that the Amherst Country Club described that golf greens can be converted to pollinator gardens by running a roller over them to tear up the turf.

Rob Clemens explained that there is a short proposed trail on the property that goes out to the pond and back that could also be considered as a first step in the mobility-assisted pathway. He would like to see a design of the possible trail and a cost estimate, but would otherwise recommend moving forward with creating an ADA compliant trail in this area.

The group discussed whether the sign would read Buck Meadow or Buckmeadow. This will be further discussed.

Bill Stoughton noted that the draft impact fee study mentions a recreation component. The recreational fields portion of Buck Meadow could be appropriate to include as the impact fee study moves forward.

6. Trails Update

a. Closures, conditions, and use

The group discussed the possibility of reopening the closed trail parking lots in town, in complying with the state reopening certain things.

TOWN OF AMHERST
Conservation Commission

May 13, 2020

APPROVED - Amended

Wes Robertson noted that he believes the lots should be opened, but that the signs on the roadsides should remain.

Rob Clemens noted that the Police Chief has begun the process to get permanent No Parking signs installed along Grater Road. The ACC has provided the Police Chief with a road map of the area and the reasons for the permanent closure. This will be brought up at the next Highway Safety Committee meeting. The temporary closure signs will be left up until this is completed.

In response to a question from Rob Clemens, Wes Robertson stated that his reasoning for requesting No Parking signs along Austin Road as well is due to the width of the road and the volume of cars occasionally seen parking there.

Rob Clemens noted that the closure along Grater Road would be for the entire stretch, on both sides, that borders the conservation land.

Jared Hardner explained that the No Parking signs on Austin Road would have to go the entire stretch, or parking issues could be made worse. Wes Robertson agreed and noted that some of that area is private property.

Bill Stoughton stated that Austin Road is a scenic road and he believes that there should be as few signs as possible along that type of road. He would vote against permanent signs along this road until a greater need is shown.

Jared Hardner explained that, if the ACC opens the closed lots, there should be signs in the lots setting rules for lot use.

Rob Clemens stated that the permanent signs for Grater Road will move forward and that the temporary signs for Austin Road will be left for now.

Jared Hardner noted that the lots were originally closed for three reasons: due to sensitive, wet trails being used during a period of overuse; overflow of people causing overuse; and to conform to the Governor's order regarding large groups gathering in the lots. He believes the wet issues are being worked through, along with the ACC doing extra work on the trails to deal with their overuse. As other towns/states start to open their trails again, the amount of overuse should lessen. Also, people should understand by now what they need to do health-wise regarding COVID-19. He stated that the signs in the parking lots should explain that there is to be no tailgating, that people should move on if the lot is full, that people should not use wet trails, should not alter the trails, and should carry in/out all trash.

Rob Clemens moved to authorize an expenditure not to exceed \$75.00 for new signage for the Austin Road, Grater Woods, and Haseltine lots, from the Water Crossing Repair and Maintenance line item. Jared Hardner seconded.

May 13, 2020

APPROVED - Amended

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

b. Highland modifications

Wes Robertson explained that currently the Highland, Bullwinkle, and Plumb trails all converge at the southern end of the property. There is an approximately 1/3 mile trail that leads out to Brook Road. It is a well-worn and frequently used trail by local residents. The issue is that there are steep slopes on the property. He is suggesting a loop trail that will bring users back to connect onto either the Highland or Plumb trails. This would bring users by a high spot where glacial pilings can be seen. He explained that there is a separate access point on the northern side of the property which is better suited for an access point onto Brook Road.

Jared Harder noted that the town has a deeded right of way on this property, as a primary access point for forest management. Bill Stoughton stated that he would like to see a document that notes this, as it is not reflected in the land records.

The group discussed that closing the small access trail to Brook Road would likely lead to an enforcement problem due to the subset of people that would continue to use it. Wes Robertson suggested that some of the issues may be reduced if the ACC offers a better alternative, such as the suggested loop trail on the northern end of the property.

The group discussed the legality of posting private property signs on a public right of way.

Rob Clemens suggested that the short trail not be closed, but that it not be placed on any maps, and that other alternatives be given. The discussion on new You Are Here maps will be tabled until a sketch of the alternate Brook Road access trail be shown.

Vick Bennison moved to approve an expenditure of up to \$1,000 for two new trailhead maps in Joe English, and approximately 25 You Are Here signs, from the Water Crossing Repair and Maintenance line item. Jared Hardner seconded. Roll call vote: Rob Clemens – aye; Jared Hardner– aye; Vick Bennison – aye; Frank Montesanto – aye; Lee Gilman – aye; John Harvey– aye; and Rich Hart – aye. Motion carried unanimously.

c. Woolsey/Grater Woods

John Harvey explained that the Woolsey property was bequeathed to the ACC and Merrimack Conservation Commission (MCC) in 2000. A consent decree to drop the MCC and add a public trail on the property followed. The property is about 12 acres, and abuts the Ackley property that is about 3.5 acres and is also owned by the town. There is a 0.9mi long trail through the Woolsey trail. It is a narrow single track trail, with about 130' of ascent. There is an unmarked entrance to this trail on Wilson Hill Road, with a small parking area. There is some possible connectivity to Pond Parish. The habitat under the power lines here could have some of the best shrub land in the state.

May 13, 2020

APPROVED - Amended

Wes Robertson stated that this is called the Fisher Cat Trail by locals.

Rob Clemens explained that this trail is not labeled and is not on any ACC maps, but has been abused as a dumping ground lately. He believes the ACC should better mark the trail, in hopes of showing the public that the ACC is taking care of it, and to promote its use. This could be a great connector to the Grater Woods property. The MCC would also like to see it better taken care of and recognized as a conservation property.

John Harvey noted that there is a small section of the trail that will need to be rerouted around private property, or the ACC will need to get permission from the landowner. He and Wes Robertson will look into this.

7. Public Education and Outreach update

Mike Cohen explained that the group previously agreed to building on the Buck Meadow acquisition with a thematic approach to various educational activities throughout the year. Although COVID-19 has hampered some of these ideas, it may still be possible to entertain some of these items virtually. He suggested that the ACC might look into doing a webinar to introduce the public to the Buck Meadow property. He also explained that the donation idea presented by John Harvey could be used to expose the public to various activities that the ACC is involved in outside of land acquisitions and trails, such as wildlife management, opportunities with the Recreation Department, etc.

John Harvey noted that Chris Buchanan, Chair of the Bicycle Pedestrian Advisory Committee, has the capability to obtain drone footage of Buck Meadow for the ACC to use during a virtual introduction to the public.

Rob Clemens stated that word of this virtual introduction to Buck Meadow could be placed in the Citizen and on Facebook.

Mike Cohen explained that pollinator gardens on the property could also be a good way to bring in other groups in town. This is a good alternate way to educate the community during this time.

8. Bird Box Program

John Harvey explained that the mission of this program is to assist bird populations by enhancing their breeding opportunities. There is a possibility to have a program to build and install well-made bird boxes in certain habitats around town. Mark Wowetz has already built about 5-6 of these bird boxes for installation, in conjunction with George Rollend. This program will require stewardship, as the boxes need to be maintained monthly from June – August. The stewards will also be used for bird counting.

John Harvey explained that there are two bird boxes (for screech owls and wood ducks) already placed in Ponemah Bog by the ACC. Other boxes there were placed by George Rollend. The boxes have the ACC logo stenciled on the back. If people wanted to donate to this program, their name could be stenciled on the back instead.

May 13, 2020

APPROVED - Amended

John Harvey moved to expend up to \$500 from the Water Crossing Repair and Maintenance line item for a number of bird boxes. Vick Bennison seconded.

In response to a question from Rob Clemens, John Harvey noted that no box will be placed without a steward to maintain it.

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

9. Other Business

Vick Bennison moved to approve an expenditure of up to \$60.00 for two signs to be placed at the end of the south field, and that he will look into the possibility of using cheaper materials for these. Jared Hardner seconded.

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

Bill Stoughton noted that property monitoring is in full swing.

Mike Cohen noted that he is responsible for updating the report on the group's educational activities every six months. He requested that each member of the group write down any educational activities performed between January and the present time.

Bill Widmer left the meeting.

Rob Clemens explained that Skip Lisle, the person who originally installed the beaver deceivers in town, came out to check on a couple of them. The one at Walnut Hill is operating well. He also looked at the deceiver at Pulpit Brook, which also appears to be working okay. He believes that raising the trail in this section is the way to go. The extremely high water flows in the spring seem to be making the issue worse.

Rob Clemens stated that he met with DPW Director, Eric Hahn, and Assistant DPW Director, Eric Slosek, regarding a project in the works to repave Christian Hill Road. There is a slight issue as the road passes Lindabury Orchard, due to the slope in this section. Instead of installing a guardrail here, they hope to widen the road in order to help with the slope and offer some additional roadside parking.

The group discussed a number of trees on Christian Hill Road that are set to be cut down during this roadwork. John Harvey suggested that the lumber from these trees could be offered up by the Town Welfare Officer to those in need. This would be a good public relations outreach effort, even if it isn't publicized.

TOWN OF AMHERST
Conservation Commission

May 13, 2020

APPROVED - Amended

305 The group discussed invasives work at Caesar's Brook and Buck Meadow.

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307 Bill Stoughton noted that he would be putting some documents into the Drop Box.

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309 **Jared Hardner moved to adjourn the meeting at 9:37pm. Lee Gilman seconded.**

310 **Motion carried unanimously.**

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318 *Respectfully submitted,*

319 *Kristan Patenaude*

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321 Minutes approved as amended: June 10, 2020