

TOWN OF AMHERST
Conservation Commission

October 14, 2020

APPROVED-Amended

1 In attendance via Zoom: Rob Clemens – Chair, Jared Hardner, John Harvey, Lee Gilman, Vick
2 Bennison, Frank Montesanto, Rich Hart, Peter Lyon – BOS Ex-Officio, Bill Widmer (Alternate),
3 and Bill Stoughton (Alternate).

4 Staff present: Natasha Kypfer – Town Planner, Kristan Patenaude – minute taker.

5
6 Chairman Rob Clemens called the online meeting to order at 7:00 pm, with the following
7 statement. As Chair of the Amherst Conservation Commission, I find that due to the State of
8 Emergency declared by the Governor as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and in
9 accordance with the Governor’s Emergency Order #12 pursuant to Executive Order 2020-04,
10 as extended by various Executive Orders, this public body is authorized to meet
11 electronically.

12 Please note that there is no physical location to observe and listen contemporaneously to this
13 meeting, which was authorized pursuant to the Governor’s Emergency Order.

14 However, in accordance with the Emergency Order, I am confirming that we are:
15 Providing public access to the meeting by telephone, with additional access possibilities by
16 video or other electronic means:

17 We are utilizing Zoom for this electronic meeting.

18
19 All members of the Board have the ability to communicate contemporaneously during this
20 meeting through this platform, and the public has access to contemporaneously listen and, if
21 necessary, participate in this meeting through dialing the following phone #312-626-6799
22 and password 841 5750 8514, or by clicking on the following website address:
23 <https://zoom.us/j/84157508514> that was included in the public notice of this meeting.

24
25 Providing public notice of the necessary information for accessing the meeting:
26 We previously gave notice to the public of the necessary information for accessing the
27 meeting, including how to access the meeting using Zoom or telephonically. Instructions
28 have also been provided on the website of the Planning Board at: www.amherstnh.gov.

29
30 Providing a mechanism for the public to alert the public body during the meeting if there are
31 problems with access: If anybody has a problem, please call 603-341-5290.

32
33 Adjourning the meeting if the public is unable to access the meeting:
34 In the event the public is unable to access the meeting, the meeting will be adjourned and
35 rescheduled.

36
37 Please note that all votes that are taken during this meeting shall be done by roll call vote.

38
39 Let’s start the meeting by taking a roll call attendance. When each member states their
40 presence, please also state whether there is anyone in the room with you during this meeting,
41 which is required under the Right-to- Know law.
42

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Rob Clemens, Jared Hardner, John Harvey, Lee Gilman, Frank Montesanto, Vick Bennison, Bill Stoughton, Rich Hart, Bill Widmer, and Peter Lyon – all present and alone.

ADMINISTRATIVE:

1. Chair Comments – none.

2. Minutes (9/9)

Vick Bennison moved to accept the minutes of September 9, 2020, as amended [Line 401 to read: Frank Montesanto suggested that he does not believe users should include their name, address, and phone number on their tree stands, but that the ACC could keep a registration number on file instead.] Frank Montesanto seconded.

Roll call: Vick Bennison – aye; Rob Clemens – aye; Lee Gilman – aye; John Harvey – aye; Rich Hart - aye; Jared Hardner – abstained; and Frank Montesanto – aye. 7-1-0; motion carried.

3. Treasurer's Report

Bill Widmer stated that the ACC's signage budget is essentially spent for the year. The Commission reviewed the rest of the budget numbers.

John Harvey moved to accept the Treasurer's Report. Rich Hart seconded.

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

4. Planning & Permitting

Bill Stoughton stated that the Planning Board recently approved the applications for Founder's Village, with the conditions that the proposed easements permit access for all three of the trails as filed. The Amherst Subaru dealership project was also approved, with all of the conditions sought by the ACC. He explained that the proposed revisions to the Town's stormwater regulations will be sent to the Town Engineer and Town Counsel for review. The proposed revisions will then come back to the ACC for a vote to recommend they be forwarded to the Planning Board and Board of Selectmen for formal adoption.

TOPICS

5. Master Plan Update and Input

Jared Hardner explained that there is a subcommittee for the Master Plan that has been working on a public survey to gather input that might be useful to the Master Plan process. He explained that this survey was developed based on another Town's model. He reviewed the survey with the group.

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87 In response to a question from Bill Widmer, Jared Hardner stated that this survey will probably
88 be distributed online and by hard copy.

89
90 The ACC discussed the possibility for a survey question regarding the distribution of
91 conservation land throughout Town. Jared Hardner stated that he would ask the subcommittee
92 about geographical interest throughout Town and how it applies to a variety of the survey
93 questions. Rich Hart also noted that a question is missing regarding vernal pools.

94
95 Peter Lyon stated that the survey is very comprehensive and detailed; he does worry that it might
96 lose some people if it is too long.

97
98 Bill Stoughton stated that he is concerned that there are a number of questions on the survey that
99 don't add value to the Master Plan; for example, how often people attend Board of Selectmen
100 meetings. He stated that many of the questions may not give the Planning Board or
101 subcommittee enough information to act on; for example, he believes that many may answer that
102 all of the conservation-related questions are "very important," making it difficult to distinguish
103 which items are of highest importance.

104
105 In response to a question from Rob Clemens, Jared Hardner stated that the group hasn't yet
106 considered putting in a survey question about if people are willing to pay more in taxes for the
107 items they find to be most important.

108
109 Rich Hart mentioned that he would like to see questions relating to climate change, building a
110 potential second Village in Town, and a possible recreation/assembly center.

111
112 John Harvey noted that he believes the feelings of some in Town, such as those who voted to get
113 rid of the IIHO and make the Planning Board elected, are missing from the survey.

114
115 Bill Stoughton stated that he thinks the survey could take a broader view of open space value.
116 There could be benefit in retaining open space of any size. There are many people who believe in
117 the importance of retaining the rural character of Amherst; this is driven by open space in many
118 ways.

119
120 Rich Hart noted that there could be a question regarding parks for human use versus preserved
121 for open space.

122
123 Bill Widmer mentioned that it might be worthwhile to point out that preserving open space can
124 have impacts on future tax revenues for the Town.

125
126 Natasha Kypfer stated that the subcommittee will meet on October 27, 2020, to finalize how the
127 document will be distributed. The survey will be live for about three weeks to allow for proper
128 feedback. The information gathered will be used to narrow down 5-6 themes for smaller groups
129 to work on.

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6. Open Space Acquisition Warrant Article

Bill Stoughton explained that the ACC has diminished the Conservation Fund amount through the Buck Meadow acquisition. This fund is slowly replenished through LUCT funds. The ACC's greatest interests are probably larger parcels in Town that might cost upwards of \$1 million. He suggested that the ACC could seek a bond at the next Town meeting to be used for specific properties. He explained that he, Jared Hardner, and Rob Clemens have been examining how other towns approach funding for large acquisitions. He noted that Pelham has twice over the past 15 years gone to its voters to request bonds to purchase conservation land. The Pelham Conservation Commission has thus used these funds to purchase five large properties that it would not otherwise have had the funds for.

Bill Stoughton stated that a Warrant Article for this purpose would need a 60% majority to pass. He suggested that any acquisitions sought from a bond should be considered from any areas in Town, and easements should allow public access to the land.

Bill Stoughton suggested that the ACC could then work with landowners to suggest keeping their frontage lots, subdividing the rest of the land, and allowing the ACC to purchase some of it. He explained that this would limit the degree of development in Town, as well as limit new roads, new impervious surfaces, while also allowing landowners to sell their highest value lots and preserving the remainders.

John Harvey noted that the Open Space Action Committee tried to do something similar years ago, but only found about two properties in Town that would meet all their criteria. He suggested that this effort have fairly high-level criteria.

Bill Stoughton explained that a 20-year bond, for a roughly \$1 million acquisition, would raise an individuals' taxes about \$20 for the first year.

Rob Clemens explained that Amherst's Conservation Fund is not as healthy as it needs to be in order to purchase large acquisitions. Bonds have worked for Pelham, while the town also uses its Conservation Fund as it can. Pelham's townspeople have also supported this plan.

Bill Stoughton noted that the Town's voters have this on their minds now, as the pressure to develop areas in Town is high. If this has to wait until the Master Plan is finalized, he is unsure if there will be the same level of interest, or the same lands available.

Vick Bennison mentioned some concern over the price of land rising, if sellers know the ACC has money set aside for this. Bill Stoughton explained that Pelham gets an appraisal from a trusted appraiser on each property. The name of this appraiser has been provided to the ACC, along with a spreadsheet showing the dollar per acre spent on Pelham's acquisitions for the last 15 years.

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Bill Stoughton stated that he believes a \$3 million bond would be sufficient for the ACC to look into competing to acquire large parcels in Town. He is going to broach this idea with the Planning Board next week.

Peter Lyon explained that the Board of Selectmen would probably like to hear some preliminary thoughts from the ACC on a bond number and cap per year. These broad concepts will be important.

The ACC discussed the idea of a \$5 million bond

In response to a question from Rich Hart, Bill Stoughton suggested that the bond could be “evergreen,” and not have a time to expire. This is how Pelham handles its bonds. He stated that it took Pelham about 10-12 years to use the initial \$3 million it was approved for. The idea was then taken back to the voters in 2018, seeking an additional \$1.5 million, which was also approved. Spreading out the bonding over a number of years also spreads out the tax base.

7. ACC Website Proposal

John Harvey explained that the ACC’s work requires transparency and good communication to the public. He stated that websites and social media are more technologically advanced, and it is his personal opinion that the Town is about 5-8 years behind the times, in this regard. He stated that the Town website does not match the elements that the ACC needs to reach its audiences.

John Harvey moved to accept the website development proposal from the ACC subcommittee, said plan to be developed according to the general specifications outlined and under the oversight of the subcommittee; cost not to exceed \$9,990, from the Gift Account. Vick Bennison seconded.

Discussion:

Frank Montesanto stated that there is a desperate need for better communication with the public, but he is concerned with the cost. He believes it might be high, given the expertise already available on the ACC.

John Harvey explained that this plan has a three-phase development. Each phase has a distinct end point with no overlap. Phase I is the standard website with modern techniques, Phase II includes GIS mapping features, and Phase III expands to a mobile app.

Jared Hardner questioned provisions for updating the mobile app into the future.

In response to a question from Vick Bennison, John Harvey stated that he would like to intend for Chris Buchanan to be the developer for this project but will work with the Board of Selectmen and Town Administrator to see what they will approve.

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Rob Clemens stated that he believes the project should be competitively bid on. If the group decides to use a sole source vendor, there will need to be justification given.

Peter Lyon stated that it is very important to complete an informed bidding process, even if the chosen vendor is not necessarily the least expensive bid. The transparency of the process is important.

In response to a question from Rob Clemens, John Harvey stated that the annual hosting and maintenance cost is about \$100.

Bill Stoughton questioned if this project is the most important one for the ACC to spend almost \$10,000 on.

Bill Widmer explained that Phase I would cost about \$3,200. The GIS mapping and mobile app are the Phases that cost the most money.

Vick Bennison stated that he would like the ACC to have a website that shows a whole map of Amherst, where a user could click on a certain trail/area and receive information on it. He is unsure if the current Town website has that capability.

Roll Call: Vick Bennison – aye; Rob Clemens – nay; Lee Gilman – abstain; Jared Hardner – abstain; John Harvey – aye; Rich Hart – aye; Frank Montesanto – nay. Motion carried, 3-2-2.

Rob Clemens stated that he would like to see an estimate of the hosting and maintenance costs.

8. Other Business

Frank Montesanto stated that a Boy Scout troop came to Lindabury Orchard to bench cut a majority of the rerouted Lindabury Trail.

Jared Hardner stated that he, Rob Clemens, John Harvey, and Frank Montesanto constructed and placed the Bruce Beckley memorial bench.

Jared Hardner moved to expend \$133.32 for a plaque for the Bruce Beckley memorial bench, from the Gift Account. Vick Bennison seconded.

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

Jared Hardner stated that he has an invoice from Charlie Koch for work on the Forest Management Plan. This project is still about \$4,000 under budget and will be completed within the next couple of days.

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Jared Hardner stated that he met with Rob Clemens, and Adam and Matt Felzani regarding a trail connection from the B&M Trail to Pond Parish. This will cut through the Felzani property, which was agreed to.

Bill Stoughton stated that he will be placing a couple of items into the DropBox.

John Harvey stated that some Girl Scouts placed a birdbox in Buck Meadow. He also explained that Mike Cohen and Kristan Patenaude have completed the educational posters for Buck Meadow.

Lee Gilman explained that he had contacted VCS to scale back some of their treatments, but the work on the Scott property was already done, per the April 24, 2019, agreement.

Jared Hardner moved to pay the VCS bill in its entirety, \$2,970. Vick Bennison seconded.

Discussion:

Bill Widmer noted that VCS should not engage in work without authorization from Lee Gilman.

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

Vick Bennison moved to adjourn the meeting at 9:21 PM. The meeting was adjourned.

*Respectfully submitted,
Kristan Patenaude*

Minutes approved as amended: November 16, 2020