

N-S-N Rivers Wild & Scenic Stewardship Council

MINUTES OF FEBRUARY 18, 2021 MEETING

By Zoom Video Conference

Voting Member Entities Present:

Towns: Ayer: Beth Suedmeyer; Groton: Stacey Chilcoat; Harvard: Michele Girard and Lucy Wallace;

Pepperell: Paula Terrasi; Shirley: Heidi Ricci; Townsend: Joan Wotkowicz

NRWA: Elizabeth Ainsley Campbell, Al Futterman, Martha Morgan

NPS: Emma Lord

MA F&W: Anne Gagnon

Advisory Committee Member:

Linh Phu (USFWS)

Guests:

Warren Kimball (NRWA Director and former MA DEP)

The meeting was called to order at 7:00 PM by the Chair, Lucy Wallace. Due to the Coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic the meeting was held virtually by Zoom.

Administrative

The minutes of the January 21, 2021 meeting were approved as presented.

NPS Updates

Budget: Emma Lord reported that the current FY budget had been approved by Congress which included an increase in funding for Partnership Wild & Scenic Rivers (*PWSR*). The Budget Office has confirmed that we will receive \$165,000 in federal FY21 funds. The schedule for receipt of our annual budget and work plan, therefore, should proceed with the goal of submitting it to the NPS in March.

PW&SR: Emma reported that the 2021 issue of the NPS publication, *River Currents*, which has coverage on Partnership Wild & Scenic Rivers, is featuring an article on our Shoreline Surveys. Emma will send a link to *River Currents* after the meeting.

Budget and Workplan

Lucy led a review of the draft work plan budget for the next year (July 1, 2021 – June 30, 2022) which had been prepared by the Executive Committee, Emma, Jim MacCartney (NPS Agency Technical Representative) and Elizabeth Ainsley Campbell. She explained that the draft work plan was essentially the same as the current year plan with minor adjustments given current projects which are expected to continue well into the next year. The Council then reviewed the work plan section by section.

Background: There was no change to this text as reviewers may change year to year so providing this information has been found to facilitate work plan and budget review.

Outreach and Project Coordinator: There was no change to this section.

Outreach and Education: There were several modifications in this section. First, Lucy noted that a river festival, which is in the current work plan, had been deleted. The drafting group felt that such an event, especially the first time, would be most successful if held in person. Given the state of the pandemic and

ability to gather, it was felt it would be best to postpone it at least another year. Beth Suedmeyer, who had suggested the festival, agreed. She suggested, as an alternative, we consider offering one or two river-oriented family programs similar to the programs offered by the NRWA last summer. The programs included a morning zoom session and an afternoon, socially-distanced, field activity with parents and children. Stacey Chilcoat, who is also the NRWA Environmental Education Director, noted that she is in the process of planning for similar programs for the coming summer and thought this would be an excellent way to promote the Wild & Scenic Rivers designation. Lucy suggested that the Council could contract with NRWA for one or two programs. The Council members agreed this would be a good project to undertake in the coming year. Linh Phu reported that the Refuge was also looking into educational opportunities, and offered the Council the use of the Bill Ashe Visitor Facility. Elizabeth will work with Stacey in drafting appropriate language to include in this section.

With respect to signage identifying a river as a Wild and Scenic River, Al suggested removing “municipal” in reference to road-river crossings as some crossings are by state routes. Approval to install the signs will need to be obtained from the towns or MA Department of Transportation, depending on which entity owns and is responsible for the road.

Elizabeth wondered about the feasibility of installing interpretive kiosks; specifically, what would this entail? Would the Council construct kiosks, supply materials for volunteers to construct, and/or develop materials to install at the kiosks? She felt our efforts would be more successful if we focused on the road signage and the proposed educational programs and, therefore, suggested funds allocated for kiosks (\$5,500) be split between those two projects.

Projects and Stewardship Implementation: The Forest Legacy Program (FLP) is the major activity being undertaken by the Council at this time. If this is accepted as a MA FLP application, the Council may still be engaged to some degree next year, although the lion’s share of the work will be done by July. Al’s time is currently being charged under NRWA Personnel at roughly \$5,000/month. Lucy asked if the Council should contract with NRWA for Al’s time specifically for this project. Elizabeth felt it was best to continue to charge Al’s time against NRWA Personnel, knowing it could always be changed to a contracted position at a later time. Michele Girard noted that Janet Morrison is contributing her time and considerable expertise on FLP projects to the current FLP pro bono.

Lucy noted that we have the ability to shift funds between budgeted categories if the need changes over the course of the year and that we can carry unspent funds forward to the next year. Elizabeth asked Emma if there was a limit in funds to shift between categories and to carry forward. Emma responded that, in general, we could carry forward up to 20% allocated funds and can shift up to 10% of funds, without NPS approval, between categories.

Community Grants: There was no change to this section and funding for this program next year will remain at \$20,000.

Program Support; Fiduciary & Indirect: The only change in these sections was made to reflect a change in the hourly rates charged by staff and allowable mileage rate.

On motion made and seconded, the draft work plan and budget were approved.

Financial Updates

Adjustment in Staff Hourly Rates: Elizabeth reported that the NRWA Board had approved at its January meeting a 3% increase in COLA, retroactive to July 1st. Therefore, going forward the rate charged on the Form 425 would be based on this increase. She also distributed a spreadsheet reflecting NRWA NPS expenses for January 2021 which reflected the COLA increase. Given the Form 425 for July 1 – September 30 had been submitted to NPS, she did not believe it was worth resubmitting the form to reflect this change. However, as the Form 425 for the period October 1 – December 31 still needs to be filed, she was seeking direction on whether or not to use rates that include the 3% COLA increase, an additional cost of \$398. The Council unanimously agreed to apply the 3% COLA retroactively to the period October 1 – December 31.

FLP Contractor: As noted previously, Janet Morrison has been providing her assistance pro bono. Given the time she is devoting to assisting in this undertaking, she has submitted a proposal to Lucy to provide her services beginning March 1st at a rate of \$75/hour. Elizabeth suggested this should be taken to the FLP Steering Committee at its next meeting (February 25th). The Council agreed and authorized Lucy to sign a contract with Janet if the Steering Committee concurs.

Update on Council and Land Stewardship Committee Projects

Conservation Agents Networking Breakfasts: Al reported that Sarah Widing of InterFluve will be speaking at the February 23rd breakfast on the importance of headwater streams. He suggested that Council members might be interested in attending and, if so, to contact Emma in order to receive a Zoom invitation. The program will be recorded for future viewing and available for those who cannot attend.

Shoreline Survey: Al reported that he has not made significant progress on this project as his time has been taken up with the FLP. He has been working on a simpler version of his spreadsheet, dividing it into three major columns. The first would identify each segment surveyed, the second the problems/concerns associated with that segment, and the third the respective highlights/opportunities. As reported previously, he would like to undertake a project on each river. And, as suggested before, he proposed the clean-up of a tire dump on the Nissitissit, stabilizing the shore at the Bertozzi conservation land on the Squannacook (on both the Groton and Shirley sides of the river), and either continuing annual hand pulls of invasive Water Chestnut in Pepperell Pond on the Nashua or identifying the agriculture uses adjacent to the river and ways to mitigate their impact on the river.

Forest Legacy Program (FLP): Al reported that the FLP Steering Committee is making great progress in reaching out to landowners and that approximately 3,000 acres have been identified for potential inclusion in an application. Al shared a map showing the properties, color-coded to indicate level of certainty. He also shared a map showing the FLP parcels and existing conserved lands (federal, state and local), which illustrated improved connectivity of protected lands if FLP goes forward.

The next step, once a landowner has expressed interest in enrolling, will be determining an estimated value for a CR on the property. Janet Morrison has applied to the Fields Pond Foundation for \$15,000 for preliminary appraisals. Lindsay Nystrom (MA DCR Forest Legacy Program) had reported to the Steering Committee that she had approximately \$20,000 to \$30,000 in funding that could be used for this purpose. Both Al and Janet thought the combined funds would be sufficient to cover preliminary appraisals of 25 ± properties.

Al reminded Council members that the FLP Steering Committee meets weekly (Thursday mornings from 10 AM to 11:30 AM) and that Council members are welcome to attend.

Elizabeth asked Emma if FLP was the best use of NPS Wild & Scenic Rivers funding, as this is currently being considered a major Council project. Emma replied that protecting lands along and within the designated rivers watershed would be the most effective way to protect the rivers' resources.

Community Grants Program

Lucy reported to date she has received only two or three inquiries about this grant program, but no applications. Elizabeth offered outreach by NRWA by sending a targeted email to NRWA members in the river towns, and press releases to local newspapers. It was also suggested that Council members use local social media (such as list serves) to publicize this grant program.

Joan Wotkowicz raised a question regarding Council members participating in grant application review and approval. Lucy suggested that members could review and vote on applications from entities in their towns, except for those entities or grant project in which the member is actively involved. Linh reported that SuAsCo has adopted the policy of allowing Council members to participate in discussions pertaining to grant applications from their town. She noted that in some instances the representative's knowledge of the project and/or applicant can be very useful to the Council in evaluating an application. However, the representative is not allowed to vote on the application. Joan asked if this applied in the case of a representative assisting in drafting the application. Linh felt the most important factor was for the representative to be transparent in their relationship, if any, with a given applicant. Lucy noted that Council members had all signed Conflict of Interest statements, which could be amended or updated if needed.

There being no additional business, the meeting was adjourned.

Next Meeting: March 18, 2021 at 7 PM - by Zoom