

## **N-S-N Rivers Wild & Scenic Stewardship Council**

### **MINUTES OF JANUARY 20, 2022 MEETING**

By Zoom Video Conference

#### Voting Member Entities Present:

*Towns:* Ayer: Beth Suedmeyer; Bolton: Rebecca Longvall; Brookline: Drew Kellner; Dunstable: Marijan Andacic and Leah Basbanes; Groton: Stacey Chilcoat; Harvard: Michele Girard and Lucy Wallace; Hollis: Bernadette McQuilkin; Pepperell: Ken Hartlage and Paula Terrasi; Townsend: Joan Wotkowicz

*NRWA*: Elizabeth Ainsley Campbell, Al Futterman

*NPS*: Emma Lord

*MA F&W*: Anne Gagnon

#### Guests:

*USFWS*: Linh Phu

Diane Carson, owner of Nashoba Paddler, nominee to be Groton Alternate

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.

#### Introductions

Lucy introduced Diane Carson whom she has been advised will be appointed Groton's Alternate next week by the Groton Select Board. The Council members were then asked to introduce themselves to Diane, after which Diane introduced herself to the Council.

#### Administrative

The minutes of the December 16, 2021 meeting were approved as presented.

#### NPS Update

Emma Lord reported that January to March is the time for developing and submitting our FY23 Budget and Work Plan to the NPS Financial Team. While the FY23 NPS Budget has not yet been finalized, she expects it to be the same as last year with respect to funding we will receive. Therefore, we should plan on \$165,000 for FY23.

#### Finances

Elizabeth Ainsley Campbell had several updates to share with the Council. First, she has completed and filed the annual financial report to the NPS for the federal fiscal year ending September 30, 2021. She reminded the Council that our fiscal year runs from July 1 – June 30 which is the basis for our budget planning. In finalizing the annual financial report to the NPS, a 1-cent rounding discrepancy was found and corrected before the report was submitted to the NPS.

Second, minor corrections had been made to the NRWA's invoices to the Council for October and November 2021 services. First, the October invoice. As Janet Morrison's final invoice had not been processed at the time of NRWA's invoice, NRWA's Fiduciary Fee needed to be adjusted accordingly. This resulted in an additional charge of \$1,588.12. Second, the November invoice. Due to a change in Al Futterman's staff hourly rate, the underlying formula for calculating Personnel/Fringe and the Fiduciary Fee, which should have been amended, had not been. The revised formula resulted in an additional \$224.41 owed to the NRWA. Services provided by the NRWA in December came to \$1,642.30; with the above corrections added, the total amount invoiced the Council in January was \$3,454.83.

Third, Elizabeth gave a brief overview of our finances with respect to the NPS Cooperative Agreement. Referring to charts she screen shared, she reminded the Council that at the close of FY21 we were allowed to carry over to FY22 \$20,056, roughly half of which was for the 2021 Community Grants. Taking into account currently obligated funds (\$8,000 for balance due on 2021 Community Grants and \$20,000 set aside for the anticipated 2022 Community Grants), we have \$53,8645.25 remaining in the FY22 budget's Contractual category to use before June 30<sup>th</sup>. In addition, there is \$39,735.88 remaining in the NRWA Program Support category (personnel, travel, and supplies) and \$12,59.71 in Fiduciary Fees. Combining the funds these categories (obligated and unobligated), as of December 3, 2021 the Council's NPS account balance was \$133,760.84. She offered this information to inform upcoming discussions on possible projects for FY22 and FY23.

Anne Gagnon asked if we would have the same flexibility as last year or would we be limited to 10% or less in carry over to FY23. Emma replied that she did not know if the NPS would allow the same flexibility as last year (which allowed us to carry over more than 10% of our NPS funds). That said, she reminded the Council that the Cooperative Agreement is a 5-year agreement and that all funds need to be expended by June 30, 2025.

Ken Hartlage asked if funds had to have been spent or if they were encumbered for an on-going project would they be exempt from the 10% cap. For example, some of the projects to be proposed for this year may not be completed by June 30<sup>th</sup>. Emma again repeated there may be some leeway, but that often depends on the Finance Team reviewing the proposed budget, adding that the teams change frequently and so may respond differently to requests concerning the budget and carry over of funds.

Drew recalled learning from Jamie Fosburgh, NPS Partnership Wild & Scenic Rivers, NE Region, that it would be possible to create a fund for land acquisition, which is an expensive activity. Having such a fund that could grow several years, would allow the Council to assist partners in land acquisition projects. Emma said such funds are still allowed. Drew suggested we establish such a fund, which was supported by other members. Elizabeth asked if moneys set aside in a land acquisition fund could be used for due diligence work associated with acquisition. Emma believed that they could but will check to make sure. Michele Girard suggested we consider a similar fund for ecological restoration projects, which can also be costly and take several years to complete.

## Land Stewardship Committee Update

Ken reported that the Land Stewardship Committee has four projects to suggest to the Council which would be presented by the project's lead.

*Invasives:* Michele noted that several communities have created committees to address invasives and educate residents on invasives' management. This project would offer training to local conservation commissions and land trusts, as well as residents, on invasives. A goal of this training would be for the towns to establish their own invasives management committee, as have Groton and Pepperell. She explained it would be a two-part program, the first being a virtual presentation such as one developed by Joan Deely of Land Stewardship, Inc., "Strategic Planning for Invasive Plant Management." The second would be an in-person field workshop, to "learn by doing." She estimated costs of the virtual program to be \$400 and a 4-hour field workshop to be \$750 for a total of roughly \$1,200. While the virtual program could have any number of attendees, the field workshop would probably be limited to no more than 20 participants. Lucy asked if we should consider offering several field workshops so that those attending the virtual presentation could get some hands-on experience. Lucy also asked if this would be offered this spring. Michele replied that was the intent but agreed a fall course could also be offered.

Beth Suedmeyer asked if the training could be recorded. Michele offered to look into that. Ken added that the Q&A following the presentation is often helpful and would be missed by those watching it later.

*Canoe Launch:* Paula Terrasi reminded the Council that there has been discussion at previous meetings on the possibility of installing an EZ Dock at canoe launch sites that due to any number of factors may be difficult to easily enter the river. This project would involve purchasing and installing an EZ Dock at the launch site at the Marion Stoddart Conservation Area (previously known as the Kemp Conservation Area) off River Road in Pepperell. The town has improved that parking area and access road, making the site popular for walkers and boaters. However, the bank at the launch site is steep so getting into a canoe or kayak can be difficult. The estimate for a 10' long EZ Dock with crib to hold a canoe or kayak is \$5,433, including delivery and installation. Paula felt there could be a savings by having the town's Department of Public Works install the dock.

Diane Carson reported that her business, Nashoba Paddler, has an EZ Dock, but one without the crib to hold a boat. They pull it out of the river over the winter to keep it from being damaged. She added that they were required to obtain permits for the dock from both the Groton Conservation Commission and the Harbor Master.

Linh Phu added that there is a similar dock, with a crib and ramp down to the dock, at the Bill Ashe Visitor Center at Oxbow National Wildlife Refuge in Devens. She suggested that if the bank is steep at the Marion Stoddart launch site, we should consider getting a ramp as well. The FWS does not pull the dock in the winter but anchors it mid-river; on occasion, it has broken free of its mooring and traveled downstream.

*Interactive Website:* Al and Ken presented their proposal to develop an interactive, public-facing website tied to specific recreational, ecological, historical, cultural, and scenic areas associated with the designated rivers and watershed. They reminded the Council that these are cited as “Outstandingly, Remarkable Resource Values” (ORRV) in our *Stewardship Plan* and felt such a website would be a way to introduce both residents and visitors to our rivers. Emma shared the interactive website developed by the White Clay Creek Wild and Scenic Watershed. The website uses bookmarks, similar to a story map, which are tied to specific locations on a map of the watershed. When the bookmark is clicked, information is provided on the site, as well as directions to reach it.

Rebecca Longvall thought an interactive website was a great idea and suggested adding QR codes to signage at each site which would tie back to the website. That would also be a way to direct visitors to other locations to visit. Linh agreed with Rebecca that this would be a great project, adding that she believes there exist templates which are fairly easy to use for developing story maps. She also liked the suggestion to include QR codes.

Lucy asked about the cost of and timing for developing this website. Ken was not sure but estimated it to be between \$3,000 and \$5,000. Linh offered to check with members of her staff for an estimate as well. Ken added that this project could be started this spring, but most likely would go into the next fiscal year. He suggested we might find a college or graduate student willing to develop the website. Linh wondered if the NPS and Hispanic Access Foundation 11-month “Projects and Communications Fellow” position currently being advertised could also include website development.

Beth noted that this would be an excellent way to capture the various stories associated with our rivers, particularly their ORRVs, the Marion Stoddart story and the history of the NRWA and watershed. Elizabeth agreed, adding that the *Stewardship Plan* has lots of good information and photographs.

*CR/CE Circuit Rider:* Al reported that in the course of reaching out to various partners when developing the Forest Legacy Program (FLP) application, a repeated concern of the town conservation commissions, which would be asked to hold the conservation restrictions (CRs)/conservation easements (CEs), was their ability to monitor them, let alone develop a baseline assessment. He shared the results of a survey he had done of the 11 Wild & Scenic towns which showed that only 3 of the towns felt they could sufficiently manage monitoring CRs/CEs. Lucy added that local land trusts may hold CRs and they might benefit from this program as well. Al described his idea of providing training for volunteers in monitoring CRs/CEs, perhaps along the line of the proposal for training on invasives management. We would pay for a consultant to conduct a training and, perhaps, as Rebecca suggested, do baseline reports as well. She suggested Nick Rossi, Land Protection Specialist at MassAudubon, as someone to conduct a training.

Lucy suggested we conduct a pilot project, offering training to 2 or 3 communities. Anne Gagnon felt that providing consultants or training on developing a baseline report might be the most beneficial service to provide our towns.

*Other Possible Projects:* Elizabeth reminded the Council that should we be awarded an FLP grant, contractual time and NRWA staff time may be substantially devoted to the necessary due diligence and

related work. She also noted one of our early project ideas was the design and installation of signage at the approximately 30 road crossings of the designated rivers. In the FY22 Budget and Work Plan approximately \$8,000 had been set aside for this or similar outreach activities, such as development of a NPS-style unigridbrochure. Lastly, the Council had considered having the NRWA Environmental Education team develop materials for us to use for public outreach and education about these rivers.

Drew Kellner noted that an earlier project proposal had been to pay for the removal of tires from the Nissitissit River in Brookline. Al reported that if they are difficult to remove or have been in place for a long time they might be advised to leave them so as to avoid disturbing sedimentation that had built up around them. Similarly, if they are a great many to be removed, it may be done over a period of time, again to avoid stirring up the sediment and/or damaging the riverbank.

Beth reported that Ayer has been working with Devens and the USFWS to develop a trail from McPherson Road north along the Nashua River. As more information becomes available, she will share it with us.

Lucy closed by acknowledging that this review of possible projects would be very helpful for development of the FY23 Budget and Work Plan. She announced that the Executive Committee would be meeting next Thursday (January 27<sup>th</sup>) to begin its development, with the hope of bringing a draft to the February Council meeting.

### Projects of Interest Update

*Stratton Hill, Ayer:* Al reported that as the developer/landowner has continued to ask for postponement of hearings, the Ayer Planning Board has asked that he submit a letter seeking the Board's approval of his "withdrawing the project without prejudice." This would allow him to submit this application again in the future, should he so wish. If he does not submit a letter by the next meeting, the Board will deem the project withdrawn and prevented from future consideration.

*Area Trucking Facilities, Lancaster & Lunenburg:* Al keeps in contact with Betsy Colburn who is monitoring these projects. No update to report.

*Capital Group Proposal, Lancaster:* There was nothing to report. Both the Lancaster Conservation Agent and Town Administrator have recently resigned.

*Squannacook River WMA:* This project has been renamed from a "Barrens Restoration" to an "Oak Woodland Restoration." Al feels we need to remain engaged and share information, acknowledging he could go on for more time than remains tonight. He screen-shared a map of the WMA that showed that some of the area to be restored abutted lands in Shirley owned by Groton or Townsend. He then shared a larger overview of the site and surrounding, relatively dense residential neighborhoods. He reported on a 3-hour site walk he had taken with Diane, Stacey Chilcoatt, and Martha Morgan. Diane commented on the extent of proposed tree removal near the river and was concerned about the impact to the river. Al added that the Squannacook River is as a state-listed cold water fishery resource (CFR) in

this stretch. Stacey commented that she noticed sizable stands of hemlock which were not marked to be saved, which troubled her. Leah was concerned about the impact on wildlife with this project.

Lucy asked if Al knew when the plan for this restoration project was due to be released. Al has not heard, but Anne reported that her office is about to file Notice of Intent with both the Shirley and Townsend Conservation Commissions.

Lucy suggested doing a similar walk with members of the Council. If we do a walk Al offered to see if Chalis Bird, Wildlife Biologist, MA F&W NE District Office, could lead us. Lucy and Al will select a date and let the Council know.

### Council Projects

Al reported that the next *Conservation Networking Breakfast* will be held virtually on Tuesday, February 8<sup>th</sup>, from 9 – 10:30 AM. The featured speaker will be Al Averill, a soils scientist with the US Department of Agriculture and American Farmland Trust. The topic of his talk will be “Farmland of Local Importance.” Anyone interested in attending should email Al or Emma for a Zoom invitation.

### 2022 Community Grants:

Lucy reported another round of press releases had been sent to local newspapers and a notice is on both the NRWA website and our website. She asked Council members to let organizations in their towns know about this program. To date she has had only 2 or 3 inquiries but expects a couple of last year’s grantees will apply again.

### Other

Lucy reported that the annual Hill Week would be held virtually the week of March 3<sup>rd</sup>. It is an opportunity for representatives of Wild & Scenic Councils to meet with their legislators to explain the value of this program. Last year she and Elizabeth attended one session, Elizabeth attended another. Alison Field Juma, Executive Director of OARS, organized the meetings.

Lucy also reported that the Harvard Climate Initiative Committee (HCIC) is submitting 2 “Expressions of Interest” (EOI) for MVP grants. The first is to redesign 2 culverts in an area subject to frequent flooding between the culverts near Bowers Brook outflow from Bare Hill Pond. Bowers Brook eventually joins Nonacoicus Brook which feeds into the Nashua River in Ayer. The second is for a review of the zoning and other town bylaws with respect to the impacts of climate change and possible need for revision. The HCIC is looking for the Council’s support on one or both of these EOIs. Should the HCIC be asked to submit an application, it would ask the Council for a letter of support. Both Rebecca and Paula felt it was good to support this, adding we should view efforts such as these on a regional level, and not just town. Paula cited the grant Pepperell received for dam removal and culvert replacement on Sucker Brook. Ken also agreed it is good to support our towns and that this is not showing a preference for one over another.

The Council approved signing onto the 2 EOIs, with the understanding it would be able to review the actual grant application before providing a letter of support.

There being no further business, the meeting was adjourned at 8:55 PM.

Next meeting: Thursday, February 17<sup>th</sup>, at 7 PM by Zoom