

**CONSERVATION COMMISSION
MINUTES
June 21, 2017**

MEMBERS PRESENT: Byron Quinn, Bo Gibbs, Lea Kachadorian, Al Alessi, Lynn Peterson
MEMBERS ABSENT: Bethany Powers, Cyndy Kozara
OTHERS PRESENT: Matt Stout, Jordana Jusidman, Nick Mahood, Gavin Vaughans, Jill Davies, William Copeland, Michele Arald, Nancy Peterson, Mary Riley, James Kachadorian, Dick Schultz, Michael Brands

I. OPENING OF MEETING

Chair Quinn opened the meeting at 7:00 pm.

II. MINUTES

The March 15, 2017 minutes were approved as submitted.

III. NEW BUSINESS

A. T-4747-17 Woodstock Aqueduct Company (WAC) / Woodstock Area Mountain Bike Association (WAMBA)

Application is for Conditional Use & Conservation District Overlay Approval to create a multi-use, non-motorized trail system within the Conservation Overlay District. The property is located on Grassy Lane and is zoned Residential 5 Acres / Conservation District.

Mr. Stout, vice-president of WAMBA, presented the application. WAMBA board members, Ms. Jusidman and Mr. Mahood were also present.

The CC received the 52-page digital application via email. WAMBA's intent is to enhance the existing trail system, connect existing trails, and to create new trails on the Woodstock Aqueduct Company's 350-acre property.

Mr. Stout, also a Cox District road resident, gave a brief description of WAMBA. The one year old non-profit group with 50+ members is dedicated to area mountain biking and introducing the sport to locals, especially young people. WAMBA was involved in the recent permit granted to the Woodstock Resort Corporation for an extended trail network in the Mt. Peg area.

Many of the WAC trails have been in existence for over 25 years. WAMBA hopes to make the trails more open to the public. WAMBA polices the use of trails. For example, when trails are too muddy, an alert is sent around. These have been very effective in preventing abuse of the trail system.

This spring, the Select Board approved a \$5000 Economic Development Committee grant to be used mainly for materials to improve existing trails. The group also wishes to place signs throughout the trail system to help people navigate the area. Boardwalks and wooden bridges would be added where necessary. Boardwalks are generally a 24" wide support system built on 2" x 6" beams with boards across to traverse especially wet areas. In the near future, the group would like to add three miles of single track trails.

The portion of Grassy Lane Road located within the WAC property is a Class IV road and is closed to traffic in the mud season. VAST has snowmobile trails running along the road. Numerous country skiers also use the trails and road in the winter months. Hikers and dog walkers are common at all times of the year. GHMA uses the road for their 100- mile trails rides and other events.

On May 17, 2017 Eric Wegner, President of the Woodstock Aqueduct Company (WAC), spoke to the Conservation Commission at their May monthly meeting. Mr. Wegner noted strong support for the proposed work. He has a good working relationship with WAMBA as they have been great stewards of the property.

The WAC site would be one of the few public areas where anyone can bike. Most mountain bike sites are private and charge a fee for their use.

WAMBA has signed a 10-year trail agreement with WAC. There is no lease involved.

The Conservation Commission reviews impacts to the various elements on the Conservation overlay map. In this case, vernal pools/ wetlands/riparian buffers and amphibian corridors are being reviewed.

The application contains an excellent map which overlays the existing and proposed trail system over the elements of the Conservation District overlay map.

All trails are built as a single track with minimum width, generally no more than 18" wide. All trails are built to the International Mountain Bike Association's standards. The trails follow contour lines and do not exceed a 15% grade. Elevation is gained via switchbacks. Where necessary due to stream crossings or wet areas, structures (bridges or boardwalks) are built. The structures are built of pressure treated lumber.

Three stream crossing bridges are proposed. Three new trails are proposed, this would double the amount of trail length to 4 miles. The trail sites were reviewed by a Vermont State Stream Engineer, who noted that the impacts were too low to require State permitting.

WAMBA also desires approval of future trails and stream crossings that lay outside of the Conservation District overlay elements.

Chair Quinn asked the Conservation Commission members for comment.

Ms. Gibbs complimented the group on a well produced application packet that addressed most of her chief concerns. The map was especially impressive.

Ms. Kachadorian asked about impacts with horse events. GHMA holds 100-mile trail rides which go right through Grassy Lane Road.

Mr. Stout noted this section of Grassy Lane Road is a Class IV road which allows a large variety of users. The intent is to minimize use of the Class IV road by bikers. Trails are designed to stay off the road as much as possible. Bike riders are educated by WAMBA to respect other users including horses. During the GHMA 100-mile events, members could be informed not to use the area for the day or two of the event. Bike trails are not meant or designed for horses. They are intended for hiking, snow shoeing, skiing, and of course, mountain biking.

Ms. Kachadorian asked about impacts to the black bear population.

Mr. Stout stated he has seen black bear, but does not have a sense of the numbers. Mr. Wegner, as property owner, would have a better understanding of this.

Mr. Peterson asked other members for their impression of the June 20th site visit.

Four members of the CC (Chair Quinn, Mr. Alessi, Ms. Gibbs and Ms. Kachadorian) attended the hour and a half site visit. Additionally, the Town Planner, Mr. Wegner and six WAMBA members were present.

The Town Planner sent a brief summary of the site visit via email to all CC members.

Ms. Gibbs was impressed with the care of trail placement and maintenance. A stream crossing bridge was viewed.

Mr. Alessi noted Mr. Wegner appeared to be very happy with the WAMBA partnership.

Ms. Gibbs echoed Mr. Alessi's comments as she had the opportunity to discuss this with Mr. Wegner on the ride down from the site. Mr. Wegner stated it was the best group of people that he has ever worked with on this property.

Mr. Stout, Vice President of WAMBA, noted communications are very good with WAC. All trails were walked together with Mr. Wegner. To remove any tree over 4" in diameter requires WAC approval.

Mr. Alessi asked about proposed signage.

Mr. Stout noted that signage is not needed once on the trail. Small signs on a post would be placed at the intersections. A kiosk is proposed for the parking lot.

During the site visit, signs stating "trails closed" due to muddy conditions were noted.

Ms. Kachadorian asked about the old abandoned cellar holes. Apparently there are five of them from the 1800s. Marking these would be a great history lesson for trail users.

Mr. Alessi asked if everyone is welcome to use the trails.

The Town Planner asked about promotional activity on the part of WAMBA.

Mr. Stout stated WAMBA has a Facebook site, which is linked to the Vermont Mountain Bike Association and Vermont Sports. There is no plan to do mass marketing of the site.

Mr. Alessi noted that there are 10 parking spaces (4 east of Cox District Road and 6 at the WAC yard). An increase in use may require additional parking.

Mr. Stout stated that currently the parking areas are rarely full. The high school parking lot serves as an overflow area.

Chair Quinn stated the WAC property is enrolled in the State's Current Use program which has a number of restrictions, including a tightly managed forest plan. This offers a certain level of protection from overuse.

Mr. Stout noted trees are logged only in the winter months. Trails are built outside of logging areas.

Ms. Kachadorian asked about liability issues.

Mr. Stout referred to a State law protecting property owners if there is no use fee.

Chair Quinn opened questions to the general public.

Mr. Kachadorian shares a long boundary line on the east with WAC. People accessing the site from the east are parking and blocking access to his property. Who will enforce this?

Ms. Jusidman stated the parking issue on the east end is not created by WAMBA. Numerous users, such as hunters and dog walkers have been known to park here. Signage may be necessary to address the issue.

Mr. Kachadorian felt the parking problem would increase with additional trail use. He has had to chain off one field. He has placed no trespassing signs which he hates to do but feels he has no choice.

Mr. Stout agreed no parking signs may be necessary. WAMBA's maps and website info do not show an entrance on the east.

The Town Planner suggested highlighting the no parking on the east entrance in the website may help to address the issue.

Ms. Arald, Green Mountain Horse Association (GHMA), asked numerous questions: how many miles of trails, what type of trails, speed at intersections, and sight line considerations.

Mr. Stout stated that there are 4 miles of single track trail, meant for mountain bikes only. There is no intent of allowing riders to intersect the Class IV road at speed, trails can be redesigned to assure slow speeds at intersections. Trails are designed to respect sight lines of all users. Logging roads are not meant to be used by horses or snowmobiles.

Mr. Stout added he has never seen horses off of the Class IV road. WAC is very careful with the property as it is heavily managed for water control. They supply the Town's water.

Ms. Arald offered to furnish the red "no circle" signs to keep horses off of bike trails. She also asked to trade information on various area events between the two organizations.

Mr. Copeland, abutter to the north, addressed numerous concerns. His property shares two streams with the WAC property. He is most concerned with the Outer Loop trail which runs close to his property. The area is very steep and the lower sections are very wet. Another concern is the number of riders using the system. Mountain biking is a growth sport. The application did not contain any capacity regulators. Maintenance costs over time were addressed. He has experience with trails mainly x-country ski trails and felt the proposal did not realistically deal with costs estimates.

Mr. Copeland is not against the project, but questioned the design and felt more study was required especially with the Outer Loop trail.

Mr. Stout addressed some of the comments: steep grades, muddy trails co-existence, and maintenance. Steep grades are not an issue, trails are limited to a 10-15% slope. They follow contours, and use switch backs to gain elevation. The trails stay out of continuously wet areas, if needed a board walk is constructed to avoid contact with the wet. WAMBA does have a biologist, Kent McFarland, who has reviewed all trails with the exception of the Outer Loop trail. This trail is to be built no sooner than 2018. All other trails have been GPS'd.

Mr. Mahood asked Mr. Copeland to go look at Mt. Ascutney and other Upper Valley sites for successful deep wood and steep trails systems.

Chair Quinn stated he has hunted the area in question since he was ten years old and noted that hunters do not go straight up or straight down steep slopes but cross with the contours.

Mr. Copeland restated his concern with trail overuse if hundreds of riders per day use the system.

Mr. Stout stated the current use is sustainable and does not envision major use as the system is much too small.

Mr. Kachadorian suggested a supervision component and noted that a phone number would be very helpful to call when issues arise.

The Town Planner noted numerous questions have been stated. The TDRB will review the project on Tuesday, June 27th and noted that WAMBA has a week before the next meeting to prepare additional answers.

Questions were closed.

After discussion, Mr. Peterson motioned with a second by Ms. Kachadorian to recommend approval as presented.

During discussion of the motion, Mr. Alessi asked for an amendment to the motion that the Outer Loop trail be reviewed by the CC before construction begins.

After additional discussion, Ms. Kachadorian motioned with a second by Ms. Gibbs, to add the Alessi amendment. Motion passed with a 5-0 vote.

After further discussion, the original motion and the Alessi amendment were approved with a 5-0 vote.

B. Riparian Buffer Violations

The Town Planner showed the CC maps and photographs of two areas where the Riparian Buffer along the Ottauquechee River has been violated.

The first instance is the Farmhouse Pottery property in West Woodstock. Approximately 3/4 of an acre of the riparian buffer vegetation was completely removed. Additionally, soil was added to the floodplain and floodway, which is a violation of the FEMA Flood Hazard area. The land owner is willing to remove all additional materials, return the bank to the original contours and to replant the riparian buffer. A February 7, 2017 contour map was given to the Town Planner. This will help assure proper restoration of the bank. A landscape plan will be presented at the July 19th CC meeting.

The second site is the old Kannestine property on River Road. The new landowner desired a view to the river. Numerous river bank trees were removed. Most of the trees were bass wood. Fortunately, the tree roots remain and will not be pulled. No excavation took place. A landscape plan will be drawn up and presented at the CC's July 19th meeting.

The landowner also desired to remove street trees. Although River Road is a designated Scenic Road, the governing ordinance did not seem to cover the removal and replacement of street trees. This may be a topic for a future CC discussion.

A letter and the Riparian Buffer Regulations will be sent to educate realtors, excavators, loggers, property maintenance personnel and others about the importance of not disturbing vegetation in the riparian buffer areas.

C. Town Plan Energy Enhancement Chapter

Woodstock has been added to a select group of three other towns to create a model energy chapter of the Town Plan. An enhanced energy chapter approved by the Public Service Board (PSB) is required before a town is allowed to participate in an Act 248 >15k alternative energy project review. TRORC is creating the model that would eventually be adopted by the town. The chapter needs to be highly detailed concerning a community's current and proposed energy use. The model would be used State-wide once enacted.

D. Ecosystem Grant

TRORC has asked the Town if they wish to participate in a grant request to be used for riparian buffer remediation. The specific case is the riparian area along the Ottauquechee River adjacent to the high school's softball field. A \$3000-\$5000 grant would enable replanting of the river bank with appropriate vegetation.

IV. NEXT MEETING

The next meeting is scheduled for July 19, 2017.

VI. ADJOURNMENT

The meeting was adjourned at 8:45 pm.

Submitted by,

Michael Brands, AICP
Town Planner