Wolcott Community Forest Committee

General Meeting Notes
Thursday, January 11, 2024
6 pm – 8 pm

Attendance: Gordon, Dave, Gilly, Kelly, DJ, Joe C., Gabe, Emily Potter,
Online: Hayden, Sheila, Maxfield, Linda, Kate W., Jens Hilke

1. Call to order (6 pm)
2. Organizational actions
    a. Amendments to agenda
        - none
    b. Approve minutes from last meeting
        - Motion to approve, Gilly; Second, Dave
            - **Approved unanimously**
3. Public comment
        - none
4. Land purchase updates (6:10 pm)
    a. Status report from TPL
        - [Hayden] Interim Stewardship Plan
            - All amendments approved in December by the Select Board
        - Survey update
            - There will be new surveys for both properties; once these plans have been completed, they will be shared for due diligence reviews
            - Blazing; on track for both properties
        - Phase 2 assessment on Bedell property
            - Still waiting on Phase 2 report
                - Was delayed in December due to the weather and conditions; should resume by end of January

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- Affordable housing
    - Approved subdivision permit from the town DRB
- Vermont Housing and Conservation Board review
    - Waiting on response re: due diligence review; maybe tomorrow, if not, then next week
- US Forest Service review
    - Started in mid-December
    - Require at least 60 days
        - Hoping that they can finish it sooner
    - Working directly with the town re: community forest funding grant
        - [Gordon] has there been any feedback/dialogue regarding these reviews?
        - [Hayden] not yet
- Closing
    - Hopeful to close by the end of February
    - Depends heavily on partner review from various agencies, final Phase 2 report, and no government shutdown
- [Kate] Applied last month to an anonymous funder for education programs in the town forest and to increase stewardship funding for the town
    - Review has been delayed until March
    - At a minimum there will be $32,500 given to the town form long-term management endowment, $20,000 of which will come from Trust for Public Lands, and $12,500 will come from the Bourne family

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- [Hayden] One more thing…
    - Follow up with Sinuosity re: trail design
        - More detailed conceptual design at the next meeting
        - Section of trail with pedestrian footpath has been removed (previously discussed); reverted closer to original design that crosses the road to lead people to the field
        - [Gordon] posted in Google Drive for tonight's meeting
            - **Could possibly reorganize the Drive to make it easier to use (topic for later)**

b. Westover property, Selectboard update

- [Linda] It has been approved for the FEMA buyout; sent Gordon a map today to show how it connects to the Bourne property; also sent a copy of what the state says we can do with the property since it is a floodplain management property; can't have gravel or paving, but can have trails, picnic areas, pavilions, anything without sides (to allow water to flow through); allows for public restrooms
    - In the process of obtaining bids for appraisal; property owner can agree/disagree base on the assessment
    - 40 acres of land
        - [Gordon] currently it's covered in blue tubes (sugaring operation); would like the town to

combine the management of this property with the town forest

- [Linda] first, we need to be sure that we own it; camping could also be allowed
- [Gordon] right; I'll post that document to the Google Drive, as it details what uses are allowed
- [Joe] can we make it a trailhead?
- [Gordon] I believe so; let's go light on the planning until we know
- [Linda] looking at mid-February for the appraised value, and the owner can decide if they accept; Vermont Emergency Management, said we can save the slab under the current garage and build a compliant shelter over it
- [Gilly] What is the potential funding source for that?
- [Linda] It's being funded through ARPA - the Flood Resilient Communities Fund; 2 other properties have been approved, too, but they do not really connect to the forest property
- [Gabe] What would happen to the buildings?
- [Linda] They have to be demolished
- [Gordon] It would be a great spot for parking an access to the site, and the rail trail as well
- [Linda] That land is mostly wet

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- [Gordon] the potential for playground/park area is fantastic
- [Linda] a lot of townspeople would like to see that

5. New business (6:40 pm)
    a. "Town Forests, Local Community Experience", presentation by Jens Hilke from Vermont Fish and Wildlife
        - [Gordon] As mentioned before, we are surrounded by a number of conserved parcels, it would behoove us to figure out how to align our management practices and with them. So, I reached out, and Jens from Vermont Fish & Wildlife responded, and agreed to come and talk to us; areas of interest:
            - Aligning with the forestry and recreation of the Worchester Range
            - Experiences working with towns to develop community ownership
        - [Jens, presentation]
            - Focus on keeping this region forested as much as possible since it is a critical migratory path for wildlife
            - Proper zoning and planning. Regulations at the town level matter a great deal in checking sprawl
            - Infrastructure improvements should allow for wildlife movement as well as resiliency such as flood control
            - The forest as a place for community, where the ecological backdrop can enhance community engagement

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    - Town forests can also tear a town apart (for example, Richmond) – recreational v. conservation interests are happening in other towns; focus on process as you make decisions
- [Gilly] Thank you for sharing the larger context
- [Joe] When you talk about interconnectivity, what wildlife are you particularly referring to? Are there migratory routes, seasonal routes? What is targeted?
    - [Jens] All species. For example, mammals with large home range (mountain lions, moose, etc.). Connection to climate change, means that smaller species are adjusting their range; this includes both plants and animals. Full spectrum of life
- [Joe] Could we be encouraging some species that we don't want to move north, like ticks?
    - [Jens] Ticks are less common is deep forests versus at the edge of forests. Can't effectively filter species based on our desires. However, the vast majority of species will benefit from connectivity
- [Gordon] Can you share a copy of the course schedule?
    - [Jens] I'll share the whole presentation via email
- [Gordon] I get the impression that you are watching the situation in Richmond very closely, would like to hear more about it at some point. Maybe a follow up conversation
- [Maxfield] Any research on the impact of human recreation activity has on wildlife connectivity? Such as cycling, walking, Nordic skiing

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- [Jens] There is some research available online – search Stowe Land Trust webinar, Meredith Naughton (Green Mountain National Forest), recreation and wildlife; no easy lines between motorized and non-motorized, to say one is worse than another; any heavy use can impact wildlife movement, but this has to be balanced with getting people excited and about being outdoors establishing access; would direct you to your county forester to discuss that balance

b. Forestry management objectives and planning, discussion with County Forester Emily Potter
    - [passes out copies of circulated questions for discussion]
    - [Gordon] How do we balance conservation with getting people on to the land so that they can fall in love with it? Also, regarding forest roads and previous talks about focusing recreational activities along the slope facing Route 15, we should revisit that conversation:
        - Existing forest roads are eroding down to bedrock;
        - Regarding connectivity, should we avoid blanketing the whole slope? should we create channels down to the river?
        - [Emily] re: forest roads, these can re-vegetate and stabilize; but water quality concerns need to be addressed, such as old trails to slow erosion; concentrated recreation is a good idea; more input regarding that coming soon, but this should be kept

apart from sensitive use areas. Also, keep large blocks of forest, as many species require this

- [Gordon] Would walking paths prevent certain bird species from nesting?
- [Emily] Hard to know for sure; but chances are better in larger blocks
- [Gilly] Have you noticed any old logging roads that should be repaired?
- [Emily] Should revisit when the snow melts, but have taken some pictures for purposes of preparing my report; existing roads should be identified and monitored for erosion
- [Dave] re: trails near the school on the Bedell property, should we build habitat cuts to create food for animals?
- [Emily] definitely opportunities for forest management and declining canopies, essentially a wildlife desert; we could do much to help regenerate this; I can make recommendations
    - [Gordon] We have public survey results regarding this; since the landscape has been impacted so significantly over the years, what is the optimal state for our forest, and how do we help it move there? Hands-off approach may not be the best path forward; but what is? How do we determine this optimal state? How do

we get there and stay there? We need expert advice in addition to town input

- [DJ] It's clear that there is little interest in maintaining a commercial forest, but there seems to be opportunities for active management.
- [Emily] Not looking for a consistent state, forests are dynamic. Looking to build species diversity, keep invasive species out (they follow disturbed areas). There are opportunities to diversify habitats across the forest. Will bring copies of my document for everyone ("Restoring Old Growth Characteristics"). Selective cuts can encourage healthy characteristics. Also, lots of beautiful ash trees; town could take steps to protect them, i.e. targeted pesticides to protect against the emerald ash borer. This will protect against an anticipated wave, until they die back from lack of food.
- [Joe] Who does these pesticide applications?
- [Emily] There are several companies that do this. I'll send an email of the list.

- [Joe] Can you talk about forest management, removing trees to open canopy? What is the step-by-step process?

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- [Gordon] So you want to know who decides when and what to cut? The short answer, any maintenance activity would come to the stewardship committee, and any significant cutting would have to be done in accordance to the current forestry plan as if we were in current use.
- [Emliy] Could be a committee activity – selecting crop trees to be released. Can be done to enhance the habitat, reduce competition. Can be marked ahead of time and become an educational opportunity. Then leave cuttings on the forest floor to enrich the habitat. Larger logs are more valuable, as it provides so much habitat as they decay; will germinate seeds in the large logs; help abate drought impacts, absorb a lot of water

- [Gabe] Were looking at snags when you were out there? Is there a good number for a healthy forest?
  - [Emily] Yes, there are recommendations. Snags are not evenly distributed. Can take actions, such as girdling, to create snags. But these decay differently than natural snags.
- [Gordon] Are there any noteworthy observations that you'd like to share? Does anything jump out to you as something we should consider?

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        - [Emily] There is a high density of stems, which is not necessarily optimal for growth. I'm more of a writer, so I'll get them to you. One observation, the forest is homogenous, even-aged. Could benefit from having some openings and vertical diversity. Can mark legacy trees that are never cut, as well
    - [Gilly] Re: invasives, what about Japanese knot weed? It's permeated the town. Have you noticed any in the forest?
        - [Emily] Not observed, but it's not common for it to penetrate the forest, maybe because it's so shaded.
    - [Gordon] My default is to do less, and observe. How will we know when we should do something, and what is important? From a perspective of forest health
        - [Emily] The forest is overstocked, some are sick. Removing them would create opportunities for healthy regeneration. Need to maintain species diversity; the white pine stand is not diverse, and could be an opportunity to thin it out
        - [Gabe] You could just leave it, and it will eventually become old growth. But this can take a couple hundred years. Things are happening quickly with climate change; may need to act sooner than later

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    - [Emily] Important to think of us as part of the forest. If we don't allow harvest, that harvest will happen elsewhere.
    - [Gordon] Our plan is not anti-growth. If we have timber that can be used to build our community, we should consider this. No reason why it shouldn't be on the table; may make more sense for it to be sourced local to build local. We, as a committee, should be looking at it as part of a bigger picture to make these decisions.
- [Gordon] Beech trees: there are lots of healthy stands in the town. Should we encourage more of these?
    - [Emily] Retain the ones that are healthy, and remove the ones that are diseased. If you remove them, make preparations to fill that void, since they can out-compete most other species (highly shade tolerant). Beech leaf disease is also in peripheral areas, but not here yet
- [Gordon] Re: slopes facing Route 15; these have potential for backcountry skiing, and are already noisy. Would like to enable recreation on these slopes. The noise abates as you reach the top of the ridge; great for more peaceful quiet recreation.
    - [DJ] Over time, we have come to a consensus that the main recreation area would be

adjacent to the school (Bedell side), with the rest of the forest (Bourne side) preserved for more quiet contemplation or not developed at all. Would like to hear from Sinuosity as we approach closing, so that we can move quickly to complete the work.

- [Gordon] This will be a decision for the committee. Personally, I have different ideas every time I go walking, but I'm just one person.
- [Dave] Best access to the Bourne property is through Westover's right-of-way
- [DJ] Should dedicate resources we have to shift focus, or further down the road?
- [Dave] Further down the road. Let them build the trails as proposed so far, but this would be a great place to enter the Bourne property in the near future. But let's not encourage a lot of traffic up there. It's really nice up there.
- [Emily] If we are going to reserve an area as a never cut area, we can do this, but how much? How big of an area?

- [Gordon] Are there any areas that seem to be commercially viable to explore timber harvesting?
  - [Emily] There are financially mature stems out there. I don't have the report yet, but it will be

shared with you. There is certainly potential for a commercial harvest

- [Gordon] We will need to establish a rationale for our decision-making, as there are so many things that we could do.
- [Gabe] It can get tricky whenever money is involved. But it's an easier sell if it satisfies multiple goals.
- [Emily] There is potential there. Just know that I'd never make a recommendation if it was not good for the health of the forest.
- [Dave] Often cutting can be regenerative, better for the animals. Can be done in areas where people don't walk. Let's limit these activities to areas where people don't go. Kids could go and learn about it, participate in some of these projects
    - [Gordon] You are echoing Emily's statement that people are part of the forest. Having management activities is healthy. The forest is not a museum.

6. Ongoing (7:50 pm)
    a. Subcommittee for speakers and education
        - [Gordon] Who wants to join me in starting a speaker subcommittee? It takes some energy to make these things happen, to generate interest, and get the word out.
            - [Kelly] I nominate Roger
            - [DJ] Are you thinking presentations or walking the property?

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- [Gordon] Both. We need to be educated as stewards, to inform our decision making. Who can help us understand what does healthy look like? There is no easy answer. It can be a delight to learn more about it and to bring these people here with a variety of perspectives to enrich our knowledge
- [Gabe] It does interest me. I've done this before, in the beginning.
- [DJ] Seems that it is just getting going; much of this work can be done virtually, but can't commit to a monthly meeting
- [Gordon] what about one more meeting per month?
- [DJ] Could do that
- [Kelly] Are we just brainstorming? I can think of 10 speakers off the top of my head.
    - [Gordon] We need to decide who to invite and work through the logistics
    - [Kelly] What about meeting 30 minutes before the regular meeting? We don't want to schedule another meeting night
    - [Gordon] Can we meet before our next main meeting?
    - [Kelly] Will we have a budget?

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- [Gordon] Requested from the town, but waiting to see if the budget passes (March); might be possible through the potential endowments?
- [Kate] These are intended for forest improvements and management activities
- [Gordon] Let's find out what these fees might be

- [Gabe] Craftsbury has a volunteer group that processes firewood to distribute to people in town. If we do cuts, maybe we can do this too

7. Adjourn (8 pm)