

TOWN OF MIDDLEBURY CONSERVATION COMMISSION

Monday, October 19, 2020

12:00 – 1:30 PM

Join by Web <https://middlebury.zoom.us/j/91880153974>

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MINUTES

(Approved at November 16, 2020 meeting)

Attending: Jeff Howarth, Andrew L’Roe, Chris Brooks, Carol Harden, Judy Wiger-Grohs, Molly Anderson

12:00 Call to Order

12:05 Citizen Comments

12:10 Approval of minutes ([September 21, 2020](#))

C. Brooks motioned to approve, C. Harden seconded,- unanimous approval

12:15 Update on Arrowwood work- ON 9/22, J. Howarth and A. L’Roe met with two reps from Arrowwood (Michael Lew-Smith)

- questioned where the wetlands layer would “live”, especially whether it would replace the official “Advisory” layer on the ANR Atlas or merged with the 2001 (George Springston) layer. J. Howarth and A. L’Roe had some concerns that this would become the official layer without much fieldwork.
- On additional contract tasks, the corridor process is something they’re still working out- mostly modelling based, using existing landcover, but trying to look beyond just forest blocks.
- Clear that the field money is pretty limited (i.e. only 1 day each year), so J.Howarth and A.L’Roe asked whether it made sense to separate/eliminate the field work if it wouldn’t be very in-depth, and they could focus on the modelling- still want them to finish sooner if possible (may need to renegotiate the contract?)

- C. Harden: Whose decision is it for which wetlands map to use for the ANR atlas? J. Howarth: They made it sound like it's mostly up to our discretion, the CC can make a recommendation for ANR, but Arrowwood is recommending their layer.
- J. Howarth: Major questions: Are we locked into this 5-year contract or can it be modified/sped up? What is the town envisioning for the forest block section of the Town Plan (~2021/2022)? Can we move more into citizen science/student-involvement for additional components?

12:20 VTans clearing at Middlebury Airport

- J. Howarth tried to attend the Selectboard meeting, but was unable to log-in after the meeting had started- he will follow-up to make sure he (and we) can log-in to future meetings.
- The Selectboard wrote a letter that said the cutting didn't really fit with Town Plan, and recommended cutting only the tall trees rather than clearcutting.
- C. Harden did attend- the presence of the Conservation Commission was helpful and the letter J. Howarth put together was well received and helpful in guiding the SB decision.
- J. Howarth- got some pushback from a state representative, who said that the area hadn't recently been cut. J. H. recently visited and saw stumps and active management using an ATV.
- C. Harden- it has been actively managed in the last month. Maybe Ash Trees? (J. Wiger-Grohs questioned whether that was the case- thought the cutting had already started but was interrupted, by the neighboring landowner who has hired a lawyer.)
- J. Howarth- two realizations from the case: first, Act 250 review provided clear opportunities to address various points when compared to the CPG process of the College Solar Farm; second that there is a need and opportunity to strengthen the language in our Town Plan (to better respond to Act 250's criterion of consistency with local municipal plan). In next revision, we could try to add stronger language about priorities and conservation ethic for some Land Use Districts, especially for forest zones. C. Brooks strongly agreed.
- There is a field visit to the site at 3pm this Thursday. CC members urged to attend.

12:30 Commissioner updates

- J. Howarth has continued working on Conservation Tool (<https://jhowarth.users.earthengine.app/view/conservation-planning-tool>) - showed areas with protection of different levels- no interference (pretty limited), areas allowing some interference, some extraction (mostly agricultural easements), and some conversion (mostly Agriculture easements with VLT). Users can adjust transparency and show other layers (river corridors, etc). Can also display details to see ownership details, land use district, UVA, etc. for each parcel.

12:35 30 by 2030 Conservation Framework ([Convention on Biological Diversity](#))

- The U.N. Convention on Biological Diversity outlined a path for combating the biodiversity crisis that many scientists say is the start of Earth's sixth mass extinction- **The 2030 goals include safeguarding 30% of all land and sea, with at least 10% put under "strict protection"**
- J.Howarth showed calculations that in terms of protected land, the current percentages within the Town of Middlebury are:
 - < 1%: Gap 1- Permanent protection from conversion, no interference
 - 1.7% Gap 2- Permanent protection from conversion, some interference allowed
 - 19.4% Gap 3- Permanent protection from conversion, some extraction allowed
 - 6.3% Gap 4- No known protection from conversion to unnatural land cover
- J. Howarth suggests our goal should be to move more land into Gap 1 &2 level protection and not be complacent with the relatively high amount (~27%) that is already "protected"
- **Is the 30 by 2030 goal something we want to entertain as an organizing concept?**
- A. L'Roe and M. Anderson both voiced support for setting the goal, J. Wiger-Grohs suggested we could potentially even be more ambitious. M. Anderson voiced support for farmland restoration to combat climate change and biodiversity loss (See Recent [NYTimes article](#))
- J.Howarth has been using the Geography department drone to see how local areas and land use change over the course of the year.
- J. Howarth: There are some easements that haven't been updated in the state protected lands database. According to the [VT Protected Lands Geospatial Data Standard](#) (see page 20), updates can be submitted by a few agencies, including "any regional planning commission in VT." A. L'Roe will find out if the RPC can push updates through to the state. For recently protected lands (e.g. Ducks Unlimited wetlands, LedgeEnd Farm easement, etc.), J. Howarth can help format data according to published standards.

12:40 Protected Lands Gap Analysis for Middlebury

- J. Howarth - GAP analysis of VT protected lands database for Middlebury for protection level (see table above)

12:50 Conservation Plan overview

- J.Howarth has been identifying topics based on state and town level tools that could address them- here's a proposed list of topics that could be addressed in the Conservation Plan:
 - Flood and River Corridor Bylaws- J. Howarth,
 - Forest Blocks and Habitat Connectors- M. Anderson, C. Harden, J. Howarth
 - Agriculture and Forestry- M. Anderson (Ag.), A. L'Roe (For.)

- Recreation- C.Harden, (J. Wiger-Grohs?)
- Preferred Energy Siting- A. L'Roe, J. Howarth
- Is there any interest in working in sub-groups on these topics? Especially in regards to actions for:
 - Town Plan- Simple suggestions to strengthen language (forest blocks, agriculture, etc.) for conservation (and Act 250 reviews).
 - Zoning and development guidelines - identify opportunities to strengthen (for example, work with Jen to develop Flood and River Corridor bylaws and engage Planning Commission and RPC)
 - Conservation Easements- identify specific programs for Agriculture, River, Forest, etc. especially to increase matching fund power.
 - Improving public involvement and Cross-committee involvement- e.g. student involvement in water quality, active restoration programs, involving other commissions and town groups.
- J.Howarth: Can folks on the Commission each take one of these topics and start outlining the actions in regards to each one?
- M.Anderson suggested that she could work on (And go back and find previous work) on Agriculture, Forest Blocks
- C.Harden suggested she could do Recreation
- A.L'Roe volunteered to take a look at the Forestry piece, and Energy Siting
- M. Anderson was intrigued by the discussion of a Riverwalk that has been happening on FPF, though it seemed to be dismissed in the selectboard hearing.
- J.Wiger-Grohs- infrastructure committee may have a role in things like the Riverwalk proposal- she believes that is important to work on gaining support for proposals before they get to the Selectboard.

1:00 Flood and River Corridor Planning

- J.Howarth had a conversation with the Regional Floodplain Manager Kyle Medash and Shannon Pytlik, and got more specifics about how to confirm/update Corridor and Small Stream maps and boilerplate by-law language.
- There is a state River Corridor Conservation Easement program- the Town doesn't have to be enrolled in bylaws to get scoping funding for easements- might be something we could do in the short term to find and develop relationships with interested landowners for putting land into river corridor easements.

1:15 Conservation Easement Scoping

- We missed the last deadline for state river corridor easement scoping grants (2021 River Corridor Conservation Easement Round 1 closed 10/12/2020)- A. L'Roe will keep an eye out for the next round and make sure the Cons Comm. knows about it.

<https://dec.vermont.gov/water-investment/cwi/grants/opportunities>

1:25 Set Next Agenda & Meeting Date

Third Monday of November (Nov 16) at Noon

1:30 Adjourn

Motion to Adjourn- J. Wiger-Grohs, Seconded by C. Harden, Unanimous approval