

Middlebury Conservation Committee Meeting

MINUTES

NOVEMBER 20, 2017

4:05PM – 5:39PM

MIDDLEBURY TOWN OFFICES SMALL MEETING ROOM

MEETING CALLED BY	Jennifer Murray
TYPE OF MEETING	Monthly Meeting
FACILITATOR	Jennifer Murray
NOTE TAKER	Kemi Fuentes-George, Molly Anderson, (edited by J Murray)
TIMEKEEPER	Jennifer Murray
ATTENDEES	Jennifer Murray, Monica Przyperhart, Andrew L'Roe, Amy Sheldon, Kemi Fuentes-George, Jeff Howarth, Judy Wiger-Grohs, Terri Arnold, Molly Anderson

Agenda topics

4:05 – 4:20

MEMBER UPDATES

DISCUSSION	
<p>The meeting was called to order at 4:05pm. During the first part of the meeting, members provided updates about things they've been working on or involved in, related to the work of the conservation commission.</p> <p>Molly shared the results of a forum held at Middlebury College related to working lands, farmers and good environmental farming practices in Middlebury, given the susceptibility of local agriculture to climate change. Participants noted that, among other things, agriculture is vulnerable to increased runoff and soil erosion from worsening storms. Despite some possible benefits of climate change, such as a longer growing season, a changing environment is very likely to have serious negative net effects.</p> <p>We also discussed other possible changing agricultural practices that could have good environmental impacts. In particular, we noted that, despite the conventional wisdom, shifting from conventional to organic milk production – besides being good for consumers and helping maintain soil fertility and stability – was often more cost effective than not. However, one of the major challenges in increasing organic milk production, and moving away from conventional production, is a lack of capacity (in terms of knowledge and technical experience) among domestic agricultural producers.</p> <p>Amy provided an update on the Greater Middlebury Climate Economy Initiative, being led by VT Council on Rural Development. There were recently several public meetings on 9/18, 10/26, and 11/16, which resulted in several climate action goals being selected by our community in 4 primary subject areas:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Advance public transportation, facilitate more ridesharing, and make Middlebury and surrounding towns the best possible place for biking and walking • Increase staff capacity at the local and regional level to coordinate climate change and energy related actions • Help farmers transition to organic and regenerative practices • Advance Energy Efficiency and Renewable Energy Opportunities for Homes, Businesses and Other Buildings <p>On 11/16, subcommittees were formed for each of these subject areas. If any conservation commission members want to assist with these subcommittees they are encouraged to contact Steve Maier, Project Leader at sbmaier55@gmail.com</p> <p>You can read more detailed descriptions of the Task Forces by clicking here - http://www.vtrural.org/programs/model-communities/middlebury/rm-day</p> <p>Facebook - https://www.facebook.com/events/1999222713688026/</p>	
CONCLUSIONS	
<p>One of the most important future steps in addressing climate vulnerability and other environmental challenges in Middlebury is increasing awareness among producers about how, why, and when to adopt low-impact, sustainable practices. Stay tuned for updates on the Greater Middlebury Climate Initiative, and get involved if you are interested</p>	

4:20 – 4:35

POSSIBLE PARTICIPATION IN VERMONT TOWN FOREST RECREATION PLANNING GRANT

DISCUSSION	
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Jennifer Murray provided an overview of a grant recently awarded to the Addison County Bike Club and Town of Middlebury, for use in planning of the Town Forests. Jennifer distributed a document summarizing the Vermont Town Forest Recreation Planning Grant project. The grant relates to planning of Chipman Hill, Battell Woods, and Means Woods- conserved forested parcels with ownership and management shared by the Town and a variety of other organizations.

Jennifer noted that there is a project Steering Committee composed includes representatives from the Town, Middlebury Area Land Trust (MALT), Addison County Bike Club, Means Woods Trust, and Battell Trust. Jennifer would like to the Conservation Commission to be involved with the project as well, and asked if there was interest among members. The Conservation Commission is interested in participating.

The project is being led by a Drew Pollack, consultant from SE Group and Kate Forrer from the VT Urban and Community Forestry Program. Drew and Kate will be performing a "Community Visit" sometime in January to do a site walk and meet with members of the Conservation Commission and the Steering Committee to gather our input on how we see the town forests being used now and in the future. There will also be a general community evening held on that evening. The final deliverables for the project will include some inventory and mapping, as well as a final report prepared by the consultant. The final report will summarize community input, contain some technical recommendations, and outline future action items for managing the town forests.

Jennifer presented a map showing the proximity of the town forest lands to surrounding residential & rural areas. She suggested that the Conservation Committee supplement the Steering Committee by providing input in the planning process. Molly asked whether there would be implementation funding for any management proposals, and the answer was there was none at this stage.

Jeff asked a point of clarification – what would any set of Conservation Committee recommendations focus on? Trail management and activities? The answer was that recommendations could include a variety of actions, including appropriate trail management, hiking practices, foraging activities, and general recreation. Jennifer anticipates that one theme in the community conversation will be how to balance conserving the "wildness" of these spaces (e.g. sensitive wildlife habitat areas) with the desire/need to expand recreational opportunities within the town forests.

Jennifer also thinks the Conservation Commission can assist with public outreach, particularly publicizing the January community visit and public meeting; the group also felt they could have a role in outreach after the plan was complete. The group discussed publicizing the project at, ex. the Farmer's Market to get information out. The final report the consultant produces would not be an official Forestry Management Plan (FMP), but may include recommendations *to create* a FMP among other things. Terri Arnold pointed out that it's particularly important to get input from local communities. Amy Sheldon pointed out that any such plan should encompass sensitivity to a variety of uses and knowledge gaps, e.g., lack of awareness about importance of flowers, mushrooms, etc.

CONCLUSIONS

The Conservation Committee would be interested in working with the consultant and Steering Committee to participate in the public process for Recreation Planning of the town forests. Members agreed that the process should 1) include local participation and involvement, and 2) the final results should be publicized in appropriate locations to ensure maximum buy-in

4:35 – 4:50

DISCUSSION RELATED TO PLANNING AND MANAGEMENT OF THE TOWN FORESTS – (INPUT TO BE SHARED WITH THE CONSULTANT IN JANUARY, FOR CREATION OF A FINAL REPORT & RECOMMENDATIONS)

DISCUSSION

The Consultant for the Forest Recreation Planning Grant project will be making a community visit in January, at which time he will be looking for community input related to our town forests (what we value, what our challenges are, how we see them used now and in the future, etc.) The Consultant will be using our input to create a final report over the summer, containing technical information and recommendations, and ending with a list of future action items. As such, the Conservation Commission started discussing these issues in advance.

Molly Anderson noted that one of the possible outcomes of the project could be for the consultant to produce a map of ecologically/environmentally sensitive areas in forested zones. We noted that there were some concerns about whether such a map would inadvertently exploit areas of private interest – one of the primary concerns was that such a map would indicate areas of mushroom foraging, e.g., which foragers would not want exposed to the general public. One important tool would be hiring a consultant to help map forested areas- if this can't be done as part of the Forest Recreation Planning project, Jennifer suggests they could hire their own consultant as a follow-up to this project.

Amy Sheldon pointed out that endangered species population density and habitat has to be part of the project. This should be part of the services provided by the project consultant. Recreation trails, which do provide community value, can have a serious impact on habitat zones, e.g.. This indicates the balance of different community values in forestry and natural resource planning. What the community can actually absorb needs to be part of conversation on forest management. Jeff Howarth suggested that as part of this project there be outreach to bikers & other kinds of people engaged in the woods at all seasons – this would allow different kinds of values in understanding how woods are managed.

Jeff Howarth asked whether or not we have a geological map of areas in town. We do have various land use maps available produced by, among other actors, students at Middlebury College, but the proposed consultant would nevertheless be an important tool in ensuring information that was salient to town residents. Jeff noted that we should make sure the frame the consultant uses to

study the area would encompass the values/interests that we think are important. This is going to be a report based on what s/he observes within a few days. We also noted that even if s/he walks the trails, s/he'll see it in only one afternoon, which would only represent a small, time-sensitive understanding of local values, particularly if the visit took place in, e.g., January. The Conservation Commission agreed that it makes sense to spend some time preparing input in advance, to provide the consultant with the best information possible during the January visit.

CONCLUSIONS

Meet on this topic again in December, in order to provide good input for the consultant during the January community visit.

4:50 – 5:13

MODELS FOR LAND USE PLANNING / VIEWSHED MAPPING

DISCUSSION

One of the key ways of understanding community values of the local environment would be a viewshed map. While there are certainly tangible benefits to natural resource use (such as the aforementioned mushroom foraging, hunting, and trail use), there are some that are largely aesthetic, such as enjoyment of the scenery. With that in mind, we discussed the possibility of creating a viewshed map to overlay another set of values on land uses in Middlebury.

This project is different from the aforementioned project, because with the Forest Planning project- the Conservation Commission is a participant in a process scoped-out and run by others. With the viewshed mapping project, the Conservation Commission has to do more of the project development work: (1) figuring out what type of viewshed map we want, then (2) developing a methodology for creating the map, before (3) we begin working on a map.

To get a broad overview, the group looked over the manual *Conserving Vermont's Natural Heritage*, which explains some of the principles of conservation planning. The group looked at a chapter on developing community values mapping which comprised: Step 1) study; Step 2) identifying areas; 3) developing conservation program – as per the report, this includes primary, secondary, and tertiary areas of conservation. Subsequently the Planning Commission would create regulations that implement those maps. And so the Conservation Committee can engage in conservation planning, including non-regulatory activities (like land acquisition) to implement conservation goals.

Next, Jennifer provided some context for how viewshed maps are commonly used in planning & zoning. This will help the group figure out what kind of viewshed map we want. Jennifer introduced vnrc.org as site for reviewing the process for creating viewshed maps. This was presented as resource in understanding how to do visual analysis with useful examples, such as a case study on "Views to the Mountains" for Essex and Jericho. Jennifer demonstrated how the Planning Commissions in Essex and Williston has taken slightly different approaches in creating viewshed/scenic resources maps. She also showed the group how land use regulations were created that utilize those maps, and briefly explained how the maps are used in the review of a development application. Some of the important considerations for development occurring in scenic resource areas included height restrictions and dimensional requirements. Jennifer explained that these are part of the zoning ordinance, not just use restrictions. Middlebury's fluvial zoning districts are an example of how a zoning overlay might function. Within those overlays, certain kinds of construction are prevented, even in areas that are zoned for that kind of construction.

In the example from Williston, scenic resource mapping shows directional views, foreground & background impacts. These can then be used to determine/inform conservation areas. And then activities in these areas would be subject to review by Conservation Committee. Jeff agrees that it is important to distinguish foreground, middle ground, and background views as well as the point from which the view is made. In Williston, Jennifer described how the Conservation Commission was engaged in influencing appropriate land uses via tools such as viewshed mapping, recommendations for environmental restrictions on development, and so on. Molly Anderson asked the question: how has this been addressed in Williston? Amy Sheldon indicated that there may be greater receptiveness in Williston to environmentally-oriented restrictions, due in part to the visible sprawl in South Burlington area, and creation of a commercial growth center in Williston. This sprawl and this high-impact commercial area may have 1) provided a visible contrast between large-scale development and desired low-impact environmental uses, and 2) created a space in which development could be shunted, so as to leave sensitive environmental resources alone. This could also be used in energy planning – we might be taken a little more seriously by planning about why & how & where to develop energy construction/upgrades of e.g., solar.

CONCLUSIONS

Viewshed mapping is an important goal that the Conservation Committee should pursue. The models of viewshed mapping in Essex, Jericho, and Williston are useful in creating a possible viewshed map. The committee should think more about what kind of map we want, how it would be used, and methodology for creating a map. These examples and the work performed by Amy's class and others at the college can provide useful models.

5:13 – 5:39

VIEWSHED MAPPING IN MIDDLEBURY: EXAMPLES FROM THE CONSERVATION PLAN FOR MIDDLEBURY (AMY SHELDON)

DISCUSSION

The Conservation Commission reviewed the methodology that a winter term course at Middlebury led by Amy Sheldon used. One of the issues we focused on was: what makes a scenic view? Mountain peaks, forests. Then look at compatible land uses – looked at trees & blocking views.

Jeff Howarth noted that the examples provided by the towns of Jericho and Essex, as well as the student created plan are all good as first cuts. There is a student at Middlebury that might be able to start work on it, but it's not something that one Middlebury student should tackle alone – there are both practical & ethical concerns in placing such a weighty task on one person. With a proper group of participants in the process, we might get the “first tier” done in a few months, but you do want to involve more people in sharing their opinions on what views matter to the community than a student & professor. The Conservation Commission agreed that we should continue this conversation, and that we will want to gather a wide range of public input on what scenic resources are valuable to the community.

CONCLUSIONS	
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	We decided to focus on the forestry management practices recommendations and viewshed mapping for our December meeting. Other possible items, including community values mapping, will be taken up in the new year.
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OBSERVERS	No members of the public were present
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ADJOURNMENT	The meeting was adjourned at 5:39pm
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