

City of Keene
New Hampshire

CONSERVATION COMMISSION
MEETING MINUTES

Monday, November 20, 2023

4:30 PM

**Room 22,
Recreation Center**

Members Present:

Alexander Von Plinsky, IV, Chair
Eloise Clark
Councilor Robert Williams
Art Walker
Ken Bergman
Steven Bill
Brian Reilly, Alternate
Lee Stanish, Alternate (arrived at 4:37 PM)
Deborah LeBlanc, Alternate (Voting)

Staff Present:

Mari Brunner, Senior Planner
Andy Bohannon, Director of Parks,
Recreation, & Facilities

Members Not Present:

Councilor Andrew Madison, Vice Chair
Thomas Haynes, Alternate
John Therriault, Alternate

1) Call to Order

Chair Von Plinsky called the meeting to order at 4:32 PM.

2) Approval of Meeting Minutes – October 16, 2023

A motion by Mr. Bill to approve the October 16, 2023 minutes was duly seconded by Mr. Bergman and the motion carried unanimously.

3) Report-Outs

A) Greater Goose Pond Forest Stewardship Subcommittee

Mr. Walker reported that two groups worked at Goose Pond on November 10. One group completed a boardwalk across a wet spot and another boardwalk at the Wild Things/Right Trail intersection. The other group went around the Pond, working on water bar cleaning and cutting brush. Chair Von Plinsky recalled twice since the last meeting that he heard people in the community conversing about the good work at Goose Pond, including excitement and appreciation amongst trail riders. Mr. Bill also reported that he led a glacial geology walk at

Goose Pond on November 11, looking at different features than his last walk, with a good turnout of 15 participants. The Commission expressed appreciation to Mr. Bill for leading the walk.

B) Outreach

The Commission discussed the need for new leadership for the Outreach work group. Chair Von Plinsky suggested making Outreach more malleable, with individual Commissioners leading certain ideas (e.g., the water fair or invasive species), and removing Outreach from the regular monthly agenda items.

Ms. Stanish arrived.

Ms. Clark did not support removing Outreach from the regular monthly agenda, as it could lead to it falling from focus. The Chair said his suggestion was to remove it from the agenda but to have full Commission discussions on individual outreach ideas. He was open to leaving it on the agenda as a placeholder, which the Commission agreed was best.

Councilor Williams discussed his wish for a City-wide volunteer database, which would be helpful for soliciting volunteers for invasive species activities and others. Mr. Bill agreed that the Greater Goose Pond Forest Stewardship Subcommittee had struggled with there being no good mechanism to recruit and alert volunteers. Ms. Clark mentioned attending a Keene Rotary meeting in October, when Peter Hansel discussed organizing Rotary members to volunteer on natural resource projects. Ms. Clark helped guide the Rotary through some work at the Church Street Pocket Park. The Rotary would like to have a higher profile and they would be a good source of volunteers. Ms. LeBlanc mentioned many community groups that would be good volunteers, like the Scouts.

Ms. Brunner explained an option on the City website for individuals to subscribe to specific topic areas; she demonstrated how this works via Constant Contact. She explained how the City's Communication & Marketing Director, Rebecca Landry, could add topic areas like "volunteer opportunities," "natural resources," or "conservation," which allows for building a list of interested community members over time, with a built-in email list (as individuals subscribe to various topic areas). The Commission agreed that Ms. Brunner should liaise with Ms. Landry on expanding this option to target interested volunteers. Then, when there is an event that the Commission seeks volunteers for, the Commission could send those details to Ms. Landry, asking her to send a group email seeking volunteers who signed-up for those notifications. Ms. Brunner also agreed to contact IT to add a link for interested volunteers to subscribe from the Commission's webpage. The Commission agreed that it would be best to add a subscription category for "volunteer opportunities," to be more general than categories like "invasive species" or "outreach," creating the largest list of possible recipients. A weekly notification to all volunteers could list any opportunities for that week. Ms. Brunner would update the Commission once Ms. Landry has the time to work on this.

C) Invasive Species

Councilor Williams reported that there was an invasive species event prior to the October meeting. The group removed a lot of vines along Eastern Avenue. Councilor Williams mentioned a new invasive species he encountered, the empress tree, also known as the princess tree. He found one in his yard and said they can get very big. Ms. Clark thought the Councilor might be referring to the northern catalpa, which is often confused with the empress tree; the northern catalpa is native further south than Keene. Mr. Bergman agreed that the northern catalpa is widely planted, and Ms. Clark thought it was not a worry. Still, Councilor Williams said he wanted to keep an eye on it.

D) Land Management

The work group had not met.

4) NH Association of Conservation Commissions (NHACC) Annual Meeting & Conference Debrief

Ms. LeBlanc, Ms. Stanish, Mr. Bergman, and Mr. Bill attended the NH Association of Conservation Commissions (NHACC) Annual Meeting and Conference. Mr. Bergman found the sessions more interesting than the business meeting and keynote speaker. Geoff Jones talked about an approach to preserving the southeast shore of Highland Lake, which was paid for by the Stoddard Conservation Commission, several grants, and the Forest Service. Mr. Bergman thought it seemed like a proactive and ambitious project from a small town's Conservation Commission. The shore was undeveloped but surrounded by developed land. Ms. Clark mentioned how pivotal Mr. Jones had been in protecting land in Stoddard for 40 years.

Ms. Stanish attended sessions that were not her first choice but were good, including one on coexisting with beavers to mitigate flooding and road damage. She also attended an interesting session on large land conservation efforts from many organizations in the Androscoggin River watershed along the border with Maine, primarily on historically logged land. She also attended a session on the upcoming Climate Action Toolkit, which she thought would be valuable for the City to review.

Mr. Bill attended a session on LIDAR (light detection and ranging), which is a technique to study the ground in great detail; there was an example of being able to see all the stone walls throughout the countryside, and there are other applications for wetlands and determining forest types. He also learned about conservation efforts in the White Mountains, where various organizations are providing \$500,000 to preserve important properties in that area. The last session Mr. Bill attended was about dropping logs in small streams (10 feet wide) to slow the flow and increase water quality, which he thought might be useful in areas like Goose Pond. He also mentioned a lunchtime session on PFAS.

Ms. LeBlanc said she spoke with Barbara Richter—Executive Director of the NHACC—who allowed her to attend a session on fundamentals, from which Ms. LeBlanc acquired the new NHACC handbook that Commissioners could borrow to review. She also attended a session on trails and wildlife, and learned about a NH Forestry Service program to highlight wildlife corridors and trails. She attended a session on community solar, which was a great discussion, and Keene was mentioned. Geoff Jones approached her and recommended articles he thought would be helpful to further educate the Commission; she would forward them to Ms. Brunner to share. Mr. Bergman added that there are PDFs of some of the conference slideshows on the NHACC website, including one from Jeff Littleton on natural resource inventories.

5) **Discussion Items:**

A) **Discussion Re: Proposed Recommendations for Urban Forest Management**

Chair Von Plinsky said this discussion item was requested by Councilor Williams to continue the conversation on the City's street trees, areas like Ladies' Wildwood Park, and old stands of red pine. Councilor Williams recalled the Public Works Director, Kürt Blomquist, explaining that he only has a budget of \$3,000 per year to replace street trees throughout the City (there are additional funding sources for specific projects). There are many areas throughout the City (e.g., Water Street and east Keene in general) that could benefit from a few street trees to mitigate the urban heat effect. The Councilor's goal was to bring this conversation to the City Council to ensure it is a priority before the next budget is finalized; the budget would be worked on through June 2024. He suggested sending a letter to the Council outlining the Commission's concerns. He suggested communicating the following:

1. An inventory/assessment of street trees within the public right-of-way.
2. Allocate additional funding to the City's existing street tree replacement program.
3. Establish a program for cost sharing of new trees with residential property owners, using a model similar to programs in Manchester and Nashua.
4. Develop a plan to manage the succession of aging stands of white pine and red pine that were planted throughout the City after the 1938 hurricane.

Mr. Bohannon said that all Staff had submitted their Capital Improvement Plan (CIP) requests for the next budget and all departments were developing their operating budgets through February 2024. He thought this was a good time to have this conversation.

Chair Von Plinsky sought a motion from the Commission to approve him writing a letter to the City Council on the Commission's behalf with the aforementioned four topics. Councilor Williams thought the matter would then be referred to the Municipal Services, Facilities, & Infrastructure Committee, most likely in January 2024, when there would be a new Council. When the time arrives, he hoped Commissioners would attend to advocate for these changes.

Mr. Bohannon said he appreciated Councilor Williams bringing this forward as there are red pine canopies in Wheelock Park, Ladies' Wildwood Park, and Dinsmoor Woods; Robin Hood Park is

more diverse but there are sections of monocultures. He met Cheshire County Extension office members at Wheelock Park last year, and they were concerned about the red pine scale, which they are monitoring. After that conversation and in collaboration with Mr. Blomquist, Mr. Bohannon created a forestry assessment project in the CIP for \$35,000 (the bottom threshold for the CIP) for FY 2026. The consulting firm, Dubois & King, is working on the Robin Hood Park project. Mr. Bohannon asked them about future assessments, which led him to the \$35,000 figure that should cover the parks and downtown areas or cemeteries (e.g., Woodland, which has been a concern). In the City's next Master Plan, he also hoped to address the Monadnock View Cemetery to improve diversity. He thought this effort would move the City in the right direction. Thus, there were two separate ideas: 1) the parks and forest management, and 2) the urban streetscape. Mr. Bohannon thought it might be best for the Commission to work with Councilor Williams to advocate for the urban streetscape, some of which could be included in Mr. Bohannon's CIP project; if the two efforts merge in the future, it is fine. Councilor Williams said he wanted to bring the whole problem to the City Council, so all are aware that it needs to be a priority. There was agreement that this was a good proactive effort, versus being reactive. Mr. Bergman recalled that Antioch University New England students might be involved at some point.

Councilor Williams made a motion to authorize Chair Sparky Von Plinsky to write a letter to the City Council on the Conservation Commission's behalf, outlining the following: 1) an inventory/assessment of street trees within the public right-of-way, 2) allocate additional funding to the City's existing street tree replacement program, 3) establish a program for cost sharing of new trees with residential property owners, using a model similar to programs in Manchester and Nashua, and 4) develop a plan to manage the succession of aging stands of white pine and red pine that were planted throughout the City after the 1938 hurricane. Mr. Bill seconded the motion.

Discussion ensued regarding whether any of the four points for the letter needed to be altered. The conversation included the challenges with the limited scope and scale of street tree replacements. There is an existing tree inventory of the Arboretum at Ashuelot River Park from Bartlett Tree Experts, but no other parks have been inventoried. There was also an in-depth inventory downtown that might be out of date; if and when the downtown reconstruction project occurs, there would be a new set of trees there. There was an inventory on the Keene State College campus too that Mr. Bergman participated in; some large trees were recently removed on campus by KSC.

The discussion turned to whether the letter should focus on trees visible from the street, with a comment that the trees could provide good services a bit farther back from the roadway too. There was mention that if this moves forward, it would be prudent to form a committee to determine roles, explore various models, and determine the breadth of funding. Expenses could be lower if providing saplings for private properties versus older trees that can handle the harshness of the street (e.g., salt in the winter). The Commission discussed adding a category to the letter about conserving existing trees and moderating certain actions (e.g., Eversource tree

maintenance) so trees have a better chance of surviving and thriving. The following language was suggested: “*consider actions that can be taken to preserve our existing canopy.*”

The discussion continued whether the City has any formal plans for tree care and maintenance; does the City treat sick trees? Ms. Brunner said that downtown trees are maintained to some extent. Bartlett Tree Experts trim the downtown trees annually and had been talking to Public Works about treating the ash trees, though they are removed once too sick to prevent the insect (emerald ash borer) from spreading. The City also manages the trees at the Library and the Arboretum at Ashuelot River Park. There was mention of protecting trees with high financial values. For example, the trees in the Arboretum at Ashuelot River Park are worth \$392,000. Mr. Bohannon said that care and maintenance of trees is expensive. The Commission agreed to add the following language to the letter: “*prioritize protecting and maintaining all existing native trees.*”

The motion for Chair Von Plinsky to write a letter to the City Council with the aforementioned topics carried unanimously.

The Commission agreed that Chair Von Plinsky could send the letter before the December Commission meeting, which would be in time for the CIP public hearing in January.

A) Keene Meadow Solar Station Project Update

Ms. LeBlanc recalled meeting with Geoff Jones, who emailed her some interesting maps of the area and detailed the impact of that 240-acre parcel on the others around it, including Goose Pond and other forest fragments. Ms. LeBlanc would send those documents to Ms. Brunner to share with the Commission.

B) Potential Land Purchase Update (Rt-9/Washington St. Ext. Properties)

Chair Von Plinsky recalled the City bidding against and losing these two properties to Hull Forest Products, which bought the parcels and cleared all the valuable timber. Now, Hull Forest Products wants to resell the properties at a higher value than the assessed value and more than the City approved to spend on the properties. He was unsure whether Councilor Madison had received an update from the City Manager.

Mr. Bohannon shared some of the City’s perspective on this matter. He said Hull Forest Products took the value of the land, though the City could acquire the parcels to ensure nothing happens to them again in the future. The price they were asking was high based on what they did to the properties. The properties do not impact Beaver Brook Falls, but protect it and the slope runoff. Mr. Bohannon thought there was value in buying the parcels to protect them for greater recreation and conservation.

Chair Von Plinsky also recalled the Commission discussing how much the City could legally pay for these parcels; was it based on the assessed or appraised value? Ms. Brunner said she spoke with the City Assessor and City Attorney, who were unaware of any restriction. However, the City Council voted to approve paying no more than the assessed value for the two properties. The properties have no remaining market value because they were logged. Ms. Brunner was unaware of anything in the NH Statutes to prevent paying above the assessed value for conservation lands with City Council approval. Mr. Bergman recalled that was for the assessed values prior to the logging, and asked if the State has the capacity to reassess these parcels. Ms. Brunner thought that was a question for the City Assessor. She did not think they would be continuously reassessed, but at certain intervals based on the market and how land sells over time. Mr. Bergman thought the logging had depressed the property values from the Commission's perspective, but its value might be enhanced to a developer. Thus, he thought that if the Commission was prioritizing one parcel to purchase, it might consider the one with higher development value.

Ms. Brunner displayed a map and the Commission discussed which parcel might be most developable. The Chair thought there were good arguments for prioritizing either parcel. He recalled that there is no confirmation that Hull Forest Products would be willing to sell each parcel separately. There was agreement that the northern parcel might be most developable because it has frontage on a limited access highway, and because of the slopes and shape of the parcel. Ms. Brunner clarified that Connecticut was listed on the Assessing Map because that is where Hull Forest Products (the owner) is based. The Chair was curious to know whether they are willing to sell the properties individually. Since the City could not pay what Hull Forest Products wants for both properties, Ms. LeBlanc suggested something like a large-scale fundraiser, but the Chair was unsure there was time for such an effort. Ms. Brunner recalled that the Commission and Council voted to approve the initial purchase of the two properties using the Land Use Change Tax Fund (LUCTF), which has a formula that directs funds to conservation; even in a year with no projects paying into the fund, it is still supplemented by \$25,000 per year. The LUCTF currently has \$155,000 and Hull Forest Products was asking \$150,000 for both properties together. With permission from City Council, the Commission can accept gifts and donations that would go into the LUCTF. For example, the Monadnock Conservancy could donate to this purchase. If the \$150,000 was all used, it would take a long time for the LUCTF to replenish. If the Commission recommended this purchase to the City Council, there would be a public hearing.

Mr. Reilly asked if the City made a counteroffer. Ms. Brunner did not think so because the Commission recommended the purchase and the Council approved paying only up to the assessed value for both properties. Hull Forest Products is asking double that for the parcels. The Commission could make another recommendation to the Council to purchase one of the parcels. Chair Von Plinsky said he would reach out to the City Manager to better understand the negotiations and report back to the Commission in December.

Mr. Bergman recalled that in the past, the City had financially supported purchases by the Monadnock Conservancy. He wondered if the Conservancy was interested in these parcels or had assessed them. He said both parcels appear to have reasonably high values in the Wildlife Action Plan. Ms. Brunner was unsure if the City would directly support a Conservancy purchase, but the Conservancy could fundraise and donate to the City for a purchase. The Chair and Mr. Bergman agreed to request a meeting about these properties with Ryan Owens, Executive Director of the Monadnock Conservancy.

C) Airport Proposed Wildlife Control Fence

This placeholder would remain on the agenda until the Airport Director provides an update.

D) Neighborhood Pollination Garden Update

There was no new information about this pollination garden in the Edgewood Community.

E) Antioch University CSI Proposal

Ms. Brunner had no updates but expected to receive a decision by the December meeting as to whether students accepted this project for a forest survey of Ladies' Wildwood Park.

F) NHDOT Route 101 Project

Ms. Brunner had no new updates. The Chair thought the project was early in its process, as the project website had no specifics yet. With both roads around the Branch River, the Chair thought the Commission would officially review permits in the future. This would remain on the agenda to stay proactive.

G) Commission Membership

The Commission currently has seven regular members and five alternates. Terms are three years. Chair Von Plinsky's term would expire at the end of 2024, and he was willing to continue acting as Chair until then. In January, the Commission would vote to elect the Chair and Vice Chair. He suggested a Vice Chair for 2024 who could learn about being Chair and take over in 2025. Ms. Clark's term as a regular member would expire at the end of 2023, but she was willing to remain as an alternate. Mr. Bergman's membership would also expire at the end of 2024. Councilor Madison's, Mr. Bill's, and Mr. Walker's terms expire at the end of 2025. Ms. LeBlanc expressed interest in serving as a regular member. Chair Von Plinsky said that the Commission will need to elect a Vice Chair in January, and asked members to think about whether they would be willing to serve in that role to eventually take over as chair. Members can serve for two consecutive terms, but there are no term limits for alternates. Ms. Brunner would communicate with the City Clerk about members who want to change positions.

2) **New or Other Business**

Ms. LeBlanc reported that the Wantastiquet-Monadnock Coalition worked on the tent site on West Hill, near the Horatio Colony Nature Preserve. In the two days that Ms. LeBlanc volunteered, the site was cleared and a spur trail was made. The area should be ready in the spring and the Commission's donation would be used to construct the privy.

Ms. Clark mentioned the Ashuelot River Local Advisory Committee's Management Plan, which Ms. Brunner shared with the Commission. Some of the maps were still being adjusted.

3) **Adjournment – Next Meeting Date: Monday, December 18, 2023**

There being no further business, Chair Von Plinsky adjourned the meeting at approximately 6:00 PM.

Respectfully submitted by,
Katryna Kibler, Minute Taker
November 28, 2023

Reviewed and edited by,
Mari Brunner, Senior Planner