

City of Keene
New Hampshire

CONSERVATION COMMISSION
MEETING MINUTES

Monday, March 18, 2024

4:30 PM

**Room 22,
Recreation Center**

Members Present:

Alexander Von Plinsky, IV, Chair
Councilor Robert Williams
Art Walker
Ken Bergman (remote)
Steven Bill
Barbara Richter
Eloise Clark, Alternate
Thomas Haynes, Alternate
John Therriault, Alternate (voting)
Deborah LeBlanc, Alternate

Staff Present:

Corinne Marcou, Administrative Assistant
Andy Bohannon, Director of Parks,
Recreation, & Facilities

Members Not Present:

Councilor Andrew Madison, Vice Chair
Lee Stanish, Alternate

1) Call to Order

Chair Von Plinsky called the meeting to order at 4:30 PM.

2) Approval of Meeting Minutes – February 20, 2024

Revisions:

- Line 103, change “scoured” to “upland.”
- Line 125, change “100” to “10.”
- Line 198, delete “which do not produce much pollen.”
- Line 217, change “luster” to “cluster.”

A motion by Mr. Bill to adopt the February 20, 2024 minutes as amended was duly seconded by Mr. Therriault. The motion carried unanimously on a roll call vote.

3) Report-Outs:

- A) Greater Goose Pond Forest Stewardship Subcommittee**

Mr. Haynes reported that the Subcommittee met on March 5 and continued discussing signs and maps. On the Subcommittee's normal meeting date, April 12, there will be a walkabout at Goose Pond to assess trails for work needed this spring and summer. Then, on April 19, the Subcommittee will be meeting at the Recreation Center at 8:30 AM. On Saturday, April 20, the Subcommittee planned to participate in Green Up Keene; all Commissioners were welcome to participate. On April 27, the Subcommittee will be trying its first spring trails day. Volunteers are invited to help with spring maintenance along the hiking trails. The Subcommittee also tentatively scheduled a week-long volunteer event at the end of June, to be led by Lew Shelley of SnowHawk LLC. This work will primarily focus on the Lower Drummer Hill Trail, but there will be a spectrum of different projects. This is a great way for volunteers to learn about trail maintenance. The Subcommittee also still hopes to do trail maintenance on the Mattson Trail this summer. They also hope to make progress on the bridge just below the spillway, though this was unconfirmed. Regarding outreach, Mr. Haynes said Steve Lamonde would be leading another bird walk on May 18, likely beginning at the South Trail. In the past, Mr. Lamonde requested an honorarium, and the Commission approved \$150. Mr. Lamonde now works with Jeff Littleton and Moosewood Ecological, and he asked for the honorarium to be processed through that business.

A motion by Mr. Haynes to pay Moosewood Ecological \$150 for Steve Lamonde's May 18, 2024 bird walk at Goose Pond was duly seconded by Ms. Richter. Discussion continued on the Subcommittee's work before a vote on the motion.

Mr. Haynes reported that the Subcommittee was starting to review the Stewardship Plan beyond the trails work, which had been the primary focus to date.

Ms. Richter asked if the Subcommittee had used Nature Groupie to recruit volunteers and promote events. Mr. Haynes said the Subcommittee had not used Nature Groupie for volunteering at Goose Pond, as registration is usually through Parks and Recreation, which oversees Goose Pond. With this registration in the past, Mr. Haynes said there had been enough volunteers to make the events worthwhile. He was unsure whether many people from all over the region coming to help could be too much to handle. Councilor Williams recalled that he had some success with Nature Groupie for invasive species events, with two or three people volunteering as a result. The Commission agreed that Nature Groupie could be a good resource for advertising volunteer events. Ms. Richter added that Nature Groupie also has helpful resources, like guidebooks, for example. If Commissioners send Ms. Richter information about specific events, she can help to get those advertised on Nature Groupie; Councilor Williams could introduce Ms. Richter to another local volunteer who uses Nature Groupie a lot.

On a roll call vote, the Conservation Commission unanimously approved the motion to pay Moosewood Ecological a \$150 honorarium for Steven Lamonde's bird walk on May 18, 2024 at Goose Pond.

B) Invasive Species

Councilor Williams recalled that the schedule for 2024 invasive species pulls was yet to be confirmed and he hoped to present a schedule at the April meeting.

C) Land Conservation

Chair Von Plinsky reported that he and Mr. Bergman had a good meeting with Anne McBride of the Monadnock Conservancy. He said that the Conservancy did not express a lot of interest in the properties owned by Hull Forest Products, but they did provide the “scorecard” they use for assessing and comparing properties, which could help the Commission to make a case if there is a property they want to recommended purchasing for conservation.

Councilor Williams asked about the property above Beaver Brook Canyon, noting that several people had seen a well drilling rig on the property as recently as two days before this meeting. No Commissioners knew what the drilling was for, but they questioned if this indicated that the property would be developed. Ms. Marcou mentioned that it is impossible to develop that parcel because it does not have frontage on a City-maintained road. Mr. Bohannon said the property’s logging access road nearly meets the highway. He thought it could have been work for a cell tower. Chair Von Plinsky said he would look into it.

D) Neighborhood Pollinator Garden

Mr. Therriault reported that the Edgewood neighborhood applied for a grant from the Cheshire County Conservation District and there was a meeting scheduled on March 22 at 11:00 AM to continue this forward momentum.

4) Discussion Items:

A) Letter to City Council re: Recommendation to Purchase Land on Old Gilsum Rd.

Chair Von Plinsky welcomed feedback on the letter he drafted to submit to the City Council recommending purchase of a property on Old Gilsum Road.

Mr. Bohannon said that he received an email from Mr. Haynes and Mike Davern of the Greater Goose Pond Forest Stewardship Subcommittee while he was on vacation. The email outlined that the 31-acre property off Old Gilsum Road was for sale. Upon returning from vacation, Mr. Bohannon contacted the realtor to express interest, but they already had an offer. The prospective owner contacted Mr. Bohannon requesting access to the property, but Mr. Bohannon was unable to grant that access, which he thought might have discouraged the interested party, and they withdrew their offer. Mr. Bohannon remained in constant communication with the realtor, and he knew that one other bid had been submitted. So, the City Manager sent a letter of intent, stating that if the Conservation Commission gives a first round of approval at this meeting, the Council will consider it at their meeting on March 21. Until then, the City could not take any further

action on the property. Now, it was the Conservation Commission's decision whether to recommend that the City Council authorize the City Manager to make the offer.

The Commission reviewed the location of the property on a map. Mr. Bohannon mentioned the benefit for the City—it owns several parcels around this property, and this would be an important 31-acre addition to the 1,100-acre Greater Goose Pond Forest. There are some mountain biking trails on the property that are closed during hunting season. He also knew that a solar developer contacted the owner about interest in buying it. Overall, the property was attractive to the City.

Chair Von Plinsky recalled that this purchase would come from the Land Use Change Tax Fund, which had approximately \$150,000 available. This property would be a nice buffer to nearby neighborhoods and purchase would allow the City to be good stewards of that area and continue protecting the Goose Pond Forest, while also getting closer to connecting Drummer Hill and the Goose Pond Forest. If the Commission agreed, Chair Von Plinsky would write a letter to City Council recommending the purchase and attend the March 21 City Council meeting to make the recommendation. The Commission briefly discussed how the Council meeting cycle could slow this process down. Because this is a land matter, Councilor Williams thought this would be discussed during a non-public session of the City Council, which would not be delayed by the Standing Committee cycle.

Mr. Bill thought that—in the context of the 30x30 challenge—this parcel would be a good addition with minimal commercial applications. Mr. Haynes agreed, noting that the Greater Goose Pond Forest Stewardship Subcommittee fully supported this effort. Ms. Richter was also in support because of the enhanced forest connectivity and the wetlands on the property; she mentioned the quality wildlife corridors and wildlife value.

A motion by Mr. Bill for the Conservation Commission to recommend that the City Council approve purchasing the Old Gilsum Road property using the Land Use Change Tax Fund was duly seconded by Mr. Therriault.

When the property is transferred, Ms. Richter recommended having the deed restriction specify that the property is for conservation. Mr. Bohannon agreed, noting that the 31-acre parcel would be incorporated into the larger 1,100-acre conservation of the Greater Goose Pond Forest. There could be a deed restriction at the time of transfer. The Society for the Protection of NH Forests owns the easement and if the purchase is approved, Mr. Bohannon would contact the Society about a deed restriction. Ms. Richer said it might take time. Mr. Bohannon agreed but added that the property owner found it attractive that the City could close quickly.

On a unanimous roll call vote, the Conservation Commission approved recommending the purchase of the Old Gilsum Road property.

If Chair Von Plinsky is unable to attend the March 21 Council meeting, Councilor Williams agreed to speak on behalf of the Commission.

B) Update on the Downtown Infrastructure Trees

Ms. Marcou said she reached out to the City Engineer but had not received an update yet. She submitted the list of trees to the City Engineer. Chair Von Plinsky agreed to review the few on the list that there were questions about to confirm. Ms. Marcou would send the final list to the Commission.

C) Keene Meadow Solar Station Project Update

While unrelated to the Keene Meadow Solar Station, Ms. Marcou reported that there were two Zoning Board of Adjustment (ZBA) applications for 521 Park Avenue, the Mountain View Cemetery, which is owned by the City. The applicants will appear before the ZBA on April 1.

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

There were no updates on the properties owned by Hull Forest Products. The owner still sought a higher purchase price than the City was willing to pay. This might be removed from the Commission's agenda in the future.

E) Airport Proposed Wildlife Control Fence Update

No updates.

F) NH DOT Route 101 Project

Chair Von Plinsky recalled attending a good presentation on this project. He said it seemed like most in attendance supported one idea over others. Still, it will be a long time until further next steps. The project now appears on the NH Department of Transportation's website. This will remain on the agenda.

G) Outreach

Chair Von Plinsky reported on work of the City's Master Plan Steering Committee, of which he is a member. The Committee had its second meeting on March 12. The City is required by NH law to update its Master Plan every 10 years (last in 2010), but the latest update was delayed due to the pandemic. He said the Committee is comprised of a great group of stakeholders. The first part of this 18-month process is focused on community engagement.

The Chair asked his fellow Commissioners to sign-up to serve on the project "think tanks" at www.KeeneMasterPlan.com. Community members can also sign-up for emails to receive survey invitations and project updates. The think tanks will be gatherings of community leaders to discuss what they envision for Keene's next 10 years. He said it would be essential to have Commissioners representing conservation interests at these think tanks. At the first two Steering

Committee meetings, the Chair heard several loud voices focused on business and housing, so he wanted Conservation to also have a voice. Attendees do not have to be Keene residents. Chair Von Plinsky thought this would be an impactful opportunity for outreach. The 2010 Master Plan is available [here](#).

Ms. Clark advised bearing in mind that the Joint Planning Board-Planning, Licenses, and Development Committee or the City Council could choose to ignore the Master Plan. The Chair agreed, but those committees would have to explicitly acknowledge that they see the Master Plan and choose to ignore it. Chair Von Plinsky agreed that the Master Plan is not a binding document. Ms. Clark said she had consistently seen the Master Plan ignored, like during the Land Development Code update. While it was worth a try, and she encouraged the enthusiasm, Ms. Clark was not optimistic. The Chair agreed that not everything discussed by the Master Plan Steering Committee was optimistic, but he still encouraged the effort to advocate for conservation.

Chair Von Plinsky also mentioned receiving an email about Libraries Love Lakes, an event in July from the Global Lake Ecological Observatory Network. Ms. Stanish will likely take the lead and report more in April.

5) New or Other Business

A) Chronolog <https://www.chronolog.io/>

Mr. Bohannon was contacted by this program, and he thought it related well to the Commission's public engagement and education efforts. The program allows for the public to take and submit photos of the same location over time to visualize changes, creating a "time log." This is a different way the Greater Goose Pond Forest Stewardship Subcommittee, for example, could engage the public differently. It could be a way to track forestry work at Goose Pond over time. It could also be a great way to visualize the invasive species control efforts over time.

This will remain on the agenda for the April meeting after more effort is made to research costs. This was also on the Greater Goose Pond Forest Stewardship Subcommittee's upcoming agenda.

B) Bee City USA

Mr. Therriault noted that it was time for the Commission's annual membership to Bee City USA. The annual dues are \$200. In response to Ms. Clark, Mr. Therriault stated that for the annual membership, Keene is listed as a Bee City on the Bee City USA website and has access to their information and online seminars on invertebrate conservation.

A motion by Mr. Therriault to renew the City of Keene's Bee City USA membership for \$200 was duly seconded by Mr. Walker and the motion carried unanimously.

C) Street Trees

Councilor Williams provided an update on the effort toward a street tree replacement program. He recently had a meeting with Chair Von Plinsky, Councilor Bryan Lake, the City Manager, and representatives from the Public Works Department. To date, the response from City Staff has seemed optimistic. The proposed program would be similar to those in Nashua and Manchester. As proposed, the City would share the cost of a street tree with the property owner. Councilor Williams read some other details from the proposal:

“The City will share 50% of the costs of tree planting up to \$800.00 per property per year. Applicants can apply for up to two trees per property free per year. The city will share costs on up to 30 tree plantings per year. Application period will run from February 1st to February 28th each year for plantings to occur in the spring. The city will prioritize residential applications ahead of commercial applications. Trees must be planted within 20 feet of the edge of the street and must be visible from the street. The location on the property that the trees will be planted must be approved by the city prior to planting. The planting of the tree must not interfere with any existing above or below ground utilities. The applicant will choose from a list of city approved tree species. Property owners will be responsible for the ongoing maintenance and care of the trees. The lifespan of the tree cannot be guaranteed by the city and refunds or replacements of trees will not be provided by the city. The properties that qualify for this program must be in Keene.”

Next, City Staff would prepare cost estimates for the Operating Budget. He hoped that other City Councilors would see this as a good program.

If there are many applications, Mr. Bill asked how they would be prioritized. Councilor Williams said that was yet to be determined; it could be first come/first served, or high-density streets could be prioritized over rural areas. Mr. Bill also suggested excluding trees that grow near the ground, which could cause visibility issues in some locations. Chair Von Plinsky agreed, noting that the initial conversations with City Staff were about planting the right trees in the right places, like not planting under utility lines.

Ms. Richter asked how this program would be funded. Councilor Williams said it would come from general funds in the Operating Budget. Councilor Williams said he encouraged seeking complementary sources of funding; for example, when the City cuts all the red pines and sells the lumber, that income could be used for street trees. There is also the potential for grants.

A guest, Peter Hartz, suggested that this effort should be coupled with fulfilling the qualifications of Tree City USA, of which Keene is a member. He thought there were questions of whether the City was meeting those qualifications, in part because the City no longer employs an arborist. He also suggested that—instead of spreading the trees across the whole City—that they could be grouped in one much needed part of the City, like Roxbury Street. Still, he was excited about this proposal and hoped to help.

Mr. Bergman asked if the trees could be planted behind a fence if still within 20 feet of the roadway. Councilor Williams said yes, as long as it meets the requirement for the canopy to be visual from the street; a lower fence that does not block the tree entirely might be a stipulation.

Another guest, Felicia Roberts, asked if the property owner would be responsible for pruning and other maintenance once the tree is planted on their property. Councilor Williams said yes, it will be the property owner's tree, which is good because the City already pays a lot to take care of its trees.

D) Gunn Road Planning Board Application

Ms. Marcou reported that the property owners presented before the Planning Board in February and there were some concerns, so the hearing was continued with no decision yet. Councilor Williams said he watched the meeting, and it seemed the Planning Board wanted a clearer recommendation from the Conservation Commission. The letter written by Vice Chair Madison listed recommendations in the case that the Planning Board approved the application, but it made it seem like the Commission was okay with subdivision, which was not the case. So, Vice Chair Madison revised his letter to the Planning Board to be clearer that "extraordinary" efforts should be required to manage the wetlands, like the proposed spruce trees. Further, Chair Von Plinsky spoke with the Planning Board Chair to clarify the Commission's stance. Councilor Williams encouraged his fellow Commissioners to attend the next Planning Board hearing on March 25 to share their thoughts.

E) Letter from Society for the Protection of NH Forests

This annual communication regarding the City's conservation properties, including any Shifting Executory Interest Properties, was included in the meeting packet but the Commission did not discuss it.

6) Adjournment – Next Meeting Date: Monday, April 15, 2024

There being no further business, Chair Von Plinsky adjourned the meeting at 5:32 PM.

Respectfully submitted by,
Katie Kibler, Minute Taker
March 25, 2024

Reviewed and edited by,
Corinne Marcou, Administrative Assistant