

Acton
Land Stewardship Committee (LSC) Virtual Meeting Minutes
Tuesday, August 25, 2020, Virtual Meeting, 7 P.M.

Attendees (in bold)

Regular (voting) members: **Dale Chayes**, Bob Farra, **Zanna Gruber** (Chair), **Joe Holmes**, Bruce Rachman, Laurie Ullmann, **John Watlington** (Vice-Chair), **Joe Will** (Minutes)

Associate (nonvoting) members: **Jon Campbell**, Andy Gatesman, Josh Haines, Philip Keyes, Gary Kilpatrick, Aaron Moore, Jim Salem, Sherman Smith, Jason Temple, Todd Tsakiris

Others:

Bettina Abe (Acton Natural Resources Assistant), **Dean Charter** (Acton Board of Selectmen LSC liaison), **Mel Lima**, (Acton Citizen), **Clare Siska** (Acton Dog Park Committee)

Opening

Zanna opened the meeting at 7:03 p.m., with a quorum of 5 voting members present — Dale, Zanna, Joe H, John, and Joe W.

Zanna read the script provided by the Town for remotely-conducted open meetings.

Regular Business

Review and approval of July 21 minutes

Approval of the minutes was moved, seconded, and voted unanimously by roll call.

Citizens' concerns

Clare updated the LSC on the Acton Dog Park Committee (ADPC) activity. The ADPC has been focused on the 348 and 352 Main Street municipal properties, abutting the 364 Main Street site where the Acton Housing Authority will develop some housing for seniors and folks with disabilities. The Isaac Davis Way bisects the 348-364 properties and the residents along Isaac Davis Way are outspoken against a dog park on the 348-352 site. The Board of Selectmen (BoS) has “Secure a site for a dog park” as a short-term goal.

BoS Chair Jon Benson has been trying to move this along. He is concerned about the contentiousness around the Main Street site and has asked the ADPC to revisit some sites. The BoS narrowed the list down to four sites and has put the dog park on its 10/19 agenda. The ADPC believes the dog park site will come to a vote at that meeting. In addition to continuing consideration of the Main Street site, the BoS listed two sites for re-consideration, 70 Quarry Road and Morrison Farm. The fourth site suggested by the BoS is the land — commonly called the School Street playing fields — that is east of School Street and south of Route 2.

The 70 Quarry Road site is also being considered for a pump track. The LSC had previously sent a letter to the BoS re its thinking about that site. Bettina can provide a copy of that letter.

The ADPC revisited Morrison Farm recently with Tom Tidman and Matthew Selby to view and discuss a couple possible sites there.

The ADPC has never considered the School Street site (leased from the state) because the funding grant that the ADPC expects to obtain requires that a town site be municipal property. The Town Manager will be looking into the possibilities for that site.

Clare explained that the reason for this update is to allow the LSC to discuss this and decide whether it would want to take a position on any of the sites, as now seems to be the time to weigh in to the BoS.

LSC discussion points:

- It is surprising that the BoS suggested non-municipal land. There is a form of conservation restriction on the agricultural lands west of the Concord Rotary (including the School Street playing fields) in order to maintain the agricultural vistas that they provide.
- Given that the BoS has suggested re-considering sites, what's wrong with Great Hill?
- Re Morrison Farm, there are two lower meadows next to Ice House Pond. Eventually, each of those will be accessible by an ADA-compliant trail. Which of those are being considered? Previously, the ADPC looked at the northern lower meadow. It was deemed too wet and a long way from parking. In its recent visit, the ADPC looked at the southern lower meadow. It may be even “more wet.” Also, the Conservation Commission would likely have serious concerns about a dog park in the south meadow.
- What about locating the dog park where the red trail from the cemetery meets the yellow trail (referencing the Morrison Farm map, and citing some advantages to such a location)? Such a site was considered previously, and a site further out along the yellow trail was discussed during the recent visit. There had been strong objection to such a site from various folks at a public meeting, with the general feeling being that that part of Morrison Farm should be left undisturbed. Some additional comments from Committee members supported this view.
- With the number of de facto dog parks that exist around town and with the likelihood of not being able to find a spot that makes every person happy, perhaps the “least worst” option is the one to support.
- The letter previously sent by the LSC to the BoS related only to 70 Quarry Road and expressed disapproval of that site for a dog park because of the number of trees that would be removed.
- What about Little Great Hill playing field for several reasons? The ADPC did look at this site. Accessibility is a problem. Also, the BoS narrowed the choice down to four sites. Adding another site is a step backward.
- Is the decision up to the BoS, or would it go to Town Meeting (TM)? Per Dean, the BoS is pretty much split, and there's been changeover to the Board. Former Selectman Peter Berry had a strong opinion that it should go to TM. Others felt otherwise, but there has not been any position taken. There is interest on the Board to get this to resolution and not have to wait until April TM. The Board is “split all over the place” on the whole thing.
- Is the decision in question one of site selection, the approval of a site once selected, or of the whole project? The question of what's being decided by whom is not a “legal question”. It's more a question of intestinal fortitude. The easiest thing for the BoS to do is wait until the ADPC came up with a site proposal and went to the CPC for funding, which then would have to go to TM, and the BoS would be forced into making a decision. It seems that the BoS wants to make a decision on this, but it's not clear what it will be. It seems that, legally, the BoS could make a decision for a particular site, but if people are upset about it, TM might decide to not approve any funding request for that site.
- Clare's understanding is that legally the BoS has the right to make a decision about municipal land, in particular the Main Street site. The ADPC is hoping to submit a CPA proposal this fall. Having to go to TM in April would delay things to a fourth year. Two years ago, the BoS did not allow the ADPC to apply for CPA funds because a site had not been approved. That left the ADPC with the understanding that the BoS had to approve a recommended site before the ADPC could apply for CPA funds.
- Two of the sites under consideration are related to LSC work. Is there something the LSC would like to do about this? (Brief discussion.) Or, given that this will be on the October 19 BoS agenda, would it make sense for the Committee to mull this over? There will be another LSC meeting before October 19. The Committee could circulate its Quarry Road letter again for members to decide whether they agree with it. And the Committee could decide at its next meeting whether there should be a letter for both parcels.

It was moved, seconded, and voted unanimously by roll call that the Chair recirculate the Quarry Road letter for the Committee to review, and include the possibility of a letter as an agenda item for the September LSC meeting.

- Welcome to Mel, who will be Pratts Brook steward, replacing Sherman Smith, who is moving out of town, and who introduced Mel to the Morrison Farm tool shed. Mel has a couple more trainings to become an Associate Member and get listed on the LSC email shell
- There is a family living on Whittier Drive that has two teenage boys in Boy Scout Troop 32. The boys have volunteered to be temporary stewards of Stoneymeade. Their parents will back them up. Bettina has walked the boys through the parcel, which the Town has mowed recently. The boys will keep an eye on things and report to the LSC — but the LSC still needs a “real grown-up” for Stoneymeade.

New/Special Business

Invasives management

Per John, this month’s invasive would be bittersweet, although he prefers to work on it more in January and February when everything else is hidden and you can’t get to it. John has sent out links by which folks could become familiar with bittersweet. Advice: Cut low and cut high. We want to stop bittersweet from killing trees. Once it gets the trees down, it takes over. Bittersweet is on all of our Conservation Lands. You need big loppers — occasionally a chainsaw — to deal with bittersweet.

Eagle Projects

Bettina has no real updates on this. A bunch of scouts are planning things in Guggins Brook. Nathan Wolf just finished some lovely bog bridges in Nashoba Brook near the Native American kiosk. He did a wonderful job. Bettina suggests to check it out. Nathan did all the funding himself, something other scouts have to be more mindful of now that the Town has a spending freeze. Bettina does have some Town funds to use for supplies, possibly for repair purposes. John recommends that Bettina buy some ten-foot 4-by-6’s (that form the staple of most of our bridges) “ahead of time” so that they can lose a few pounds of “water” before you have to lug them to a site. The chemicals they are impregnated with will dry out even in the rain. The LSC should keep a few on hand, so they can be included on any purchase order. Bettina will pick up four of them and leave them at the Morrison Farm shed. Two of the four will be used soon at Pratts Brook.

Additional Regular Business

Covid19-related issues

For the Committee’s information, there are a number of scout troops in town that cannot meet at their usual sites, or even their back-up sites, because of Covid-19 concerns. Some are looking to getting into the Conservation Lands, potentially shifting their meeting times to afternoons. In doing this, they might automatically ask, “Hey, what can we do to help?” The LSC could take advantage of some of this organized personpower, with the scout leaders taking care of virus protocols. Do the Land Stewards have any concerns about this?

Thoughts/suggestions (Jon will relay the latter to the scouts):

- There’s the NARA pavilion. Not a good idea as the Recreation Department charges for its use.
- They could use Camp Acton. They could spread out to the different camp sites there. You could run this by Bruce Rachman. The Rec Dept does not charge for Camp Acton use, except for overnights.
- There is a tent frame at Morrison Farm. It used to have a tarpaulin cover. That would be at least a shaded and covered place. Also, there are picnic tables. Check with the Rec Dept for what happened to the cover.
- There is a grassy spot, with picnic tables, at Pratts Brook that should be big enough for a group to meet.
- Wherever they meet, they’ll need a big enough parking area too.
- Thought should be given for a mechanism for posting schedules for these alternative sites so there aren’t two groups (scouts or other groups displaced by the virus) in the same spot at the same time.
- Sharing with the LSC the idea of back-up sites for displaced groups is a first step. Bettina will run ideas by Tom Tidman so that he can speak on behalf of the Cons Comm or put it on a Cons Comm agenda. We should also share these with the Rec Dept, including any schedule that may be developed.
- The Committee owes the scouts a debt of gratitude for all they do.

Tree and Sawyer Issues (Pine Thicket Policy redux)

Bettina sent John a “nice” document on forest health that he probably should forward to all land stewards. But it doesn’t answer the question about what to do with pine thickets. At the last meeting, Bob Farra was one of the objectors to what John was proposing, and he is absent from this meeting.

Dean is an arborist. John reviewed information from the last meeting and Dean shared his views:

Years ago, Dean’s Town department built a lot of trails through Town parcels and dealt with lots of pine thickets. He would favor thinning them out per some industry standards. A problem is that too much of a pine thicket is impenetrable and can interfere with forest activities. A bigger problem is that most of the young pine trees will die. There should be concern, especially with drought situations, that this standing dead white pine could be potential for brush fires. So, it would be better off — if there are enough personnel — to space out the pines so they are 6 to 8 to 10 ft apart and allow for low-growth plant material. Long ago, the Tree Department cleared fire lanes in the two town forests. One focus then was to keep the fire lanes clear as you didn’t want a potential for brush fires along the lanes.

Unrelated to pine thickets, John wondered if Dean could share any maps of fire lanes in Town parcels. Dean will see if he can find any, and offered to walk, with anyone interested, some of the fire lanes that existed in the late 1940’s and early 1950’s.

Volunteer workdays

How they are scheduled: You pick the date, time, and rain date, and decide what the exact activities are. You post it on the Acton Trails website via a website administrator (Peg Sestrich, Joe H). To set up a volunteer day, Joe uses a crib sheet that he will share with the stewards. He starts about two or three weeks ahead of his planned workday, providing information on it to the likes of the town paper, and the Acton Conservation Trust and LSC Facebook and web pages. Who runs the LSC Facebook page? Bettina will look into that. Where is this LSC volunteer list? Not sure, but Bettina can provide anyone with a list of all the people who have volunteered in, say, the last year. Joe also has an email list of 40 or more people who have signed up to volunteer. Joe can provide it in a spreadsheet that he keeps up to date and from which one can cut and paste for emailing. Re volunteering via the website, does the automatic add function work now that we’ve moved our website? Not sure. The Committee should run a link checker regularly. A recent report of a downed tree that was intended for the sawyers went instead to a dead email address. The link to the sawyers was then “fixed” by sending sawyer messages to the LSC email. Peg Sestrich is our website person, but Bettina may have to coordinate such fixes with the Town IT Dept.

Field mower

Dale sent an email asking where the field mower is, and no one responded. It’s in the Morrison Farm shed. The wheel is still on it. We should try to bend back the wheel. The last time it was checked, the mower worked. It’s usable, but it can’t be taken in the trailer until there are adequate tie-downs. Dale will look at it tomorrow morning. Do we have to buy tie-downs? John will see what we can find. Bettina can get John reimbursed. If purchased at Ace Hardware, Bettina can provide an open purchase order that will avoid the reimbursement complication, but she needs to be told what to buy.

Parcel issues

• Canoe Launch

Per Joe H, there is still an abandoned boat at the site. He thinks it’s a sailboat and the remains of the keel have rotted away. Joe put a note on it a month ago asking that he be called, but no one called. At some point this boat will have to be towed away. What to do with the boat should be on next month’s agenda.

Website issues

Joe H is trying to get an update to the maps website. Go to one of our online maps, click a parcel, and it will throw you to our website. The links are not working because they are the old links. Joe can't fix this because the code is controlled by Town IT. Joe has called Mark Hald many, many times, has gotten through once, and Mark confirmed that only he can do the fix. Mark is not responding otherwise. Joe reached out to Dean asking for liaison pressure. Dean forwarded Joe's message to the Town Manager, asking what to do to speed things along. Mark has been very tied up recently. Per Joe, we need to do multiple updates; there is more than one thing that needs fixing. Bettina asked Joe for an itemized list of all things wrong so that she can possibly expedite communication with the IT Dept. Dean will circle around and Bettina should check in as well. This will be on next month's agenda.

Maps update

Joe H shared the map for Morrison Farm that eventually will be in the map box on the Farm's kiosk, and also on the website. It includes all of Woodlawn Cemetery because of the "contiguous" cemetery trails. Joe has about 10 things yet to change on this map, and asked for Committee input. Discussion points:

- Show property line demarcations so people don't assume the farm and cemetery are one.
- Show the Pam Resor Orchard. This would be helpful for other discussions.
- Show the driveways to both parking lots (behind farmhouse and at Ice House Pond).
- In general, we want to show jurisdictional boundaries (e.g., water property boundaries) using different colors on the maps.
- The contour lines don't add much as the properties are so flat. There's only about one contour line on the whole map. It's quite visible on the white background (meadow) and hard to see in the woods.
- Put a P on the soccer field parking, or not? This does not fit our map guidelines, but it is a good place for an exception.
- It would be better to mark the parking next to the soccer field than the parking next to the Community Gardens.
- Connectivity is important to a lot of people, so Joe will include the roads around the chapel, and indicate a link from the chapel roads across Concord Road to the Billings Trail that goes to the Arboretum. This could be an arrow with "To Arboretum".
- It would be nice to show connection to the Bruce Freeman Rail Trail, or the East Acton Village Green, but doing either would increase the size of the map too much. A "zoom out" could lose some of the trails.
- On the various renderings of our maps in general, use a different color or bolder lines, or something, to better show bridges and boardwalks.
- The maps are beautiful, lovely — a great job.

Two other things to show about maps:

1. Joe H blazed a new trail at the Anderson addition to Bulette. It goes into the parcel from the Church of the Good Shepherd. However, it's not yet red on the map because of technical problems with the maps.
2. On the Wills Hole/TF map someone had added in an unofficial trail that goes north from Nagog Park Drive and out of our parcel. We had agreed to remove this because it's on private property. However, it's on business private property, not homeowner's private property so Joe is inclined to keep it.

Next month's (September 15) agenda

Dog park letter. If anyone has anything else, just email Zanna, Bettina, and Joe W.

Evaluate meeting

- A procedure issue: It was totally inappropriate to "hijack" 45 minutes of the meeting for the dog park when it was not on the agenda. It was on "Citizens' Concerns" for which citizens have been allowed 5 minutes, or so, in the past. If they raise an appropriate concern, then we put it on the agenda for next month.

In coming meetings, if a citizen has a concern, first ask them for a sense of what they want to talk about and how long it will likely take. If too long and there is time at the end of the meeting, it can be discussed then.
– Madam Chair did a fantastic job.

– The LSC has new members and the scouts at Stoneymeade (recruited by Dale). Joe W will update and circulate the roster. Do we have contact with parents of the scouts? Yes, but not on the email shell.

Adjournment

At 8:27 p.m., the meeting adjourned.

The next meeting is tentatively scheduled for Tuesday, September 15, at a time to be announced.

Documents and Exhibits Used During this Meeting

- Draft Meeting Minutes of July 21, 2020