

Acton
Land Stewardship Committee (LSC) Virtual Meeting Minutes
Tuesday, July 21, 2020, Virtual Meeting, 7:30 P.M.

Attendees (in bold)

Regular (voting) members: **Dale Chayes, Bob Farra, Zanna Gruber** ('20-'21 Chair), **Joe Holmes, Bruce Rachman** ('19-'20 Chair), **Laurie Ullmann, John Watlington** ('20-'21 Vice-Chair), **Joe Will** (Minutes)

(Note: Dale and Laurie seemed to have difficulty being “participants” due to zoom technical difficulties.)

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)

1. Opening

Bruce opened the meeting at “7:30ish” p.m., with a quorum of 7 voting members present — Dale, Bob, Zanna, Joe H, Bruce, Laurie, and Joe W.

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

2. Regular Business

Review and approval of June 16 minutes

In the “Covid-19 issues” section of the minutes, John pointed out the incorrect use of “masks” in place of “maps”. The paragraph has been revised to read:

John has noticed that Massachusetts state parks have stopped providing paper maps because of Covid-19. He’s not noticed that Acton ever did, but is Acton back to normal on this?

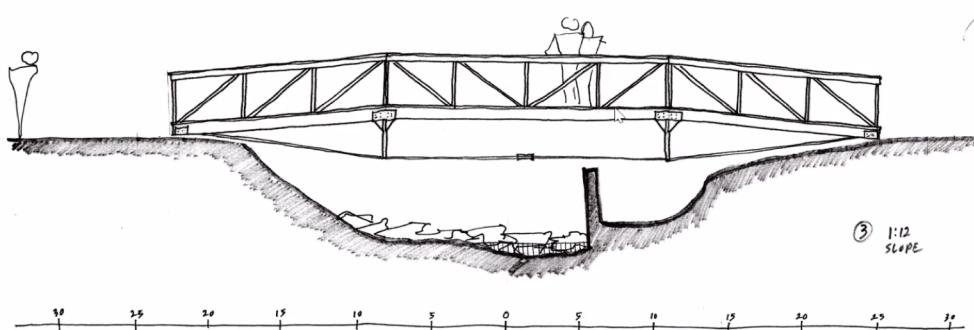
Bettina: The Acton Board of Health has never made any requirements regarding our paper maps.

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

Pencil Factory bridge: initial plans

The floor was given to Bill Dickinson, Chair of the Acton Historical Commission (AHC), for a presentation of a plan for a bridge over Nashoba Brook at the Pencil Factory site. Bill’s is a preliminary plan and he is hoping to get some LSC feedback on the plan, the next best steps, and hopefully a sense that the LSC and the AHC can work together on the project.

Bill shared three drawings of possible spans of the brook and, following discussion, the LSC members indicated their preference for this design:



Discussion points:

- At each end, the bridge will rest on a concrete pad to help stabilize and tie it down. The bridge would be accessible with a ramp at each end.
- There will be a complete force analysis and a documented design from an engineering drawing perspective.
- This design (re all three drawings) is an aesthetic choice by Bill, more than anything else.
- The bridge does not need to be a permitted (by the Town) structure, but the Town might change its mind after Bill shows the final plan.
- Bill will provide documents going forward and before the final start of the project so that all information re the bridge will be available for review.
- An issue with no immediate answer but worth talking about going forward is “What to do with ‘historic remains’ at the site?” Historically, the LSC has recovered some, but then finds them to be strewn around (e.g., thrown back into the brook) over time. With bridge access, more vandalism will visit the site. Bill has no answers at this time but shared some ideas about this from historical and personal perspectives.
- Possible funding sources include the Community Preservation Act (CPA), the Rails-to-Trails Conservancy, and the Friends of the Bruce Freeman Rail Trail. More suggestions would be welcome. Joe W offered to work with Bill and the AHC on a CPA proposal.
- The project is more likely to receive funding if the bridge is accessible. It should allow folks with disabilities to cross the bridge and get to the Pencil Factory kiosk. If not accessible, there should be good reason why.
- The bridge will be about 150 ft from the rail trail. There can be a stone-dust connecting path from the rail trail, so it will be easy to make this accessible, and it’s the right thing to do.
- The bridge ramps up at each end with an accessible slope. Bill outlined structural complications that would occur if the bridge were to be level in order to provide for easier crossing.
- Land stewards could help clear the area, including one huge tree down across the old abutment.
- Construction of the bridge would be too technical for, and afford too much responsibility on, a volunteer group. Construction would have to be done by a contractor. There would be crane access to the site from the rail trail.
- Bill is an architect and as such will be getting a lot of good, knowledgeable feedback as the project goes forward.
- The bridge shouldn’t be too high above the water so as to minimize danger to whatever might fall from the bridge into the brook. It has 42-inch hand rails.

The Committee consensus for the project (that Bill could report to the AHC):



LSC Officers for 2020-2021

By unanimous roll-call vote, LSC officers for 2020-2021 are Zanna as Chair, John as Vice-Chair, and Joe W as Clerk. John volunteered to go into training to be Chair in the future.

actontrails.org (—> trails.actonma.gov) expired 07/16

If anyone googles “acton trails”, they will be taken to trails.actonma.gov, so it shouldn’t be necessary to continue paying for access to actontrails.org. No one objected. Joe H had some related issues:

- 1) The online maps have old links. The Town is not cooperating in getting this fixed. Joe H will try to get this resolved.
- 2) The QR codes displayed on kiosks should be updated and images currently on kiosks should be replaced. Bettina will e-ask stewards to take down what is currently posted. She can make customized new codes that will take users to the website pages for the respective parcels. She can also laminate the codes. The laminated codes can be placed on kiosk map boxes (except at the Canoe Launch where the code could go on the back of the sign). Bettina will do a QR code for Morrison Farm as well but needs a page to which she can send the user; also needs a Morrison Farm map on the website. Bettina will show a Morrison Farm description to Joe W before giving it to Peggy Sestrich for inclusion on the website.

Eagle Scout boardwalks

Bettina shared a spreadsheet showing eight Eagle Scout boardwalk projects, five at Guggins Brook, two at Nashoba Brook, and one at the Assabet River Blue and Green Trail. As there is a current Town-wide spending freeze, Scout Nathan Wolf used a GoFundMe website page and quickly received funds to complete his project. This method of funding was suggested to other scouts, and if they have trouble reaching their goals, Bettina can ask Matthew Selby at Town Hall for help to complete the funding. Also, there is a major shortage of pressure-treated lumber that could interfere with project completion, but the Scout Council will allow scouts extra time for projects because of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Phase out map-box trail maps

Bettina wants to know if the LSC would like to go paperless with trail maps because of Smartphone technology and environment issues. Paper maps do seem like a good public service. People seem to use the paper maps and there has been no problem with discarded maps. For now, the Committee will see what happens with maps in the boxes and QR codes on the boxes. Paper maps could be phased out any time.

Establishing meadow boundaries

John points out that there are meadow maintenance guidelines in the 2014-2021 Town of Acton Open Space and Recreation Plan (OSRP):

<http://doc.acton-ma.gov/dsweb/Get/Document-50377/2015%20Acton%20OpenSpace.pdf>

Beyond meadow management/maintenance plans for one year or for five years, John is concerned about long-term meadow maintenance, say, for every 10-20 years, particularly with respect to encroachment by a meadow’s bounding vegetation. What do we do? Current mowing practices are not a solution. The Town needs some way to establish meadow boundaries so that every decade or so, a meadow could be cleared back to its boundaries. John has no answer for this and is hoping that the Committee would be able to share some thoughts about long-term maintenance. In any case, it would take a lot of work involving a lot of people. Perhaps one meadow could be targeted each year. John will try to make a list of Town meadows detailing natural meadow boundaries, particular concerns, and possible actions re long-term maintenance (not near-term meadow management). Thoughts on this from other Committee members would be welcomed.

Pine Thicket Policy (possibly only near trails or along edges of meadows)

When eastern white pine grows in thickets where trees are, say, one foot apart, no tree dominates. They all are weak and eventually result in 20- to 30-ft tall dead trees. John would like to know how the LSC feels about thinning these out to improve the health of the thicket. Discussion points:

- There is no way that white pine trees 1 ft. apart grow healthy. One tree every 400 ft² is best, but we're not talking that kind of spacing here.
- We can't manage forests for the entire town.
- This would occur close to trails; to give visitors more to look at than dead pine trees.
- This would need a specialist or arborist who understands how to keep a forest healthy. Not sure that something like this would be our responsibility. It might make more sense if we have John or someone else who could become active in managing this.
- We don't know what the Conservation Commission would have for policy on this.
- Pine trees don't last long. Their demise opens space for diversity of growth. Other trees move in where pine trees have disappeared, and vice versa. We should just leave the forest alone and let it do its thing.
- The closer together trees are, the harder it is for them to get bigger. Example: A wide swath was cleared for the Main Street sidewalk from Brook Street to Route 2A. Right now there are 50 gazillion waist-high or armpit-high white pines coming in a couple inches apart from each other. It's an interesting example of what John is describing.
- None of us is trained as an arborist. This was brought up in the OSRP, and we're supposed to get some training in what constitutes a healthy forest and what we can do to move a forest toward it. John would like to push toward some sort of education plan per the OSRP.
- There is a forest management plan, but only for Wetherbee. The plan recommends cutting and thinning out a lot.
- The plan for Wetherbee never got implemented because, to some, the concern over forest sequestration of carbon superseded the cutting-and-thinning plan every step of the way.
- In the OSRP there is a recommendation that land stewards would organize road trips, educational seminars, and the like re forest management. Bettina tried this when first hired, but see previous bullet.
- Is there any chance of getting Natural Resources (NR) interested in acting on this recommendation (an education plan) in the coming year? Bettina: Absolutely!
- Ask Dean Charter for his take on thinning white pine thickets. He's an arborist.
- Also, the Town has a new arborist. It would be great to hear from him.

The plan is for Bettina to send something out and for the committee to resume discussion, maybe with some actionable items, next month.

Weeding pine trees near a trail

John is concerned about the young pine trees — pretty much “weeds” — that grow right outside a trail's 4-ft boundaries, e.g., 2½ ft from the center of the trail. That these trees along trails are always growing horizontally is a trail maintenance issue. It forces a continuous cutting operation year after year. John would like to remove them. (If these were hardwoods, he would move the trail.) These are native trees so they can't be removed as invasives or cut willy-nilly. Should the LSC get an exemption that would allow cutting of these small trees, say within 3 ft of the trail center? Does the LSC approve of their removal? Discussion points:

- We should run any action plan by the Conservation Commission. However, we should start with Tom Tidman.
- But do stewards agree with the activity?
- A skier would agree with this as these trees easily interfere with skiing when they are bent over by snow.
- John is not talking about pruning branches to solve the problem. He is talking about clearing these trees out by an extra foot or so on either side of a trail. John would want this in the Trail Maintenance Guidelines, unless the LSC response would be officially “no”.

- Bob is opposed to pulling trees outside the 4-ft width of a trail. Where would this stop? It would be white pine today, but what next? It is natural for forests to evolve over time and change their characteristics.
- With LSC approval, John would talk with Tom Tidman first, get his input, and, if Tom's in favor, take it to the Conservation Commission.

John moved that the LSC talk to the relevant authorities about amending the Trail Maintenance Guidelines to include a clause that allows stewards to cut softwood trees that are within 3 ft of a trail's center line.

Joe H seconded the motion.

In a roll-call vote: Joe H yes, Bob no, Joe W yes, Bruce yes, Zanna yes, John yes — the motion is approved 5-1.

Invasives management

This topic was skipped in the interest of time. John noted that glossy buckthorn is fruiting out right now. If you see the berries, just trim the tree. The goal is to eliminate the seeds before the birds get them.

Parcel concerns

- Nashoba Brook

Bettina doesn't know if "racy" graffiti on Bob Guba's new bridge has been removed yet, and this meeting is unable to hear from Laurie, likely due to zoom problems.

- Heath Hen Meadow (HHM)

In the round "bowl" off the southwest corner of Mt. Hope cemetery, some folks had put up synthetic-fabric prayer flags, strings of paper cranes, and made a little shrine. Zanna took down the objects and left an explanatory note that something like this is not allowed. More recently, Zanna found the same setup, and a note that was unreadable due to rain. Zanna took things down again per the rule that personal property left on Conservation Land for three days can be removed by the Town (which includes Town Land Stewards).

- Canoe Launch

Someone left a canoe at the Canoe Launch and it is being overgrown by Japanese knotweed. What should be done? Some discussion points:

- Is it chained up? No. Then it's there for people to share.
- Could put a note on it, "Private property left on Conservation Land is considered abandoned after three days and will be removed." But then, to whom/where should the canoe be taken?
- Check and see if it floats. If not, it can be junked.
- It's neatly put to the edge of the woods. It's not hurting anybody. It could be left there.
- It makes sense to leave a note: This is the official thing. If you want to leave this canoe here, get in touch with me (Joe H). Then they can get in touch with you and hopefully it can be worked out.
- It's okay to leave it there for the season if it looks functional.

- General

Bob wonders whether the sawyers' email address that he has — lsc.sawyers@actontrails.org — is still the same or has it changed? Yes, it is still functioning. It's like a google group. Bettina had shared the above address successfully with an Acton citizen shortly before this meeting. Is this address going to stop working in few days? Not sure. Bettina may have to make a new sawyers' address since actontrails.org will not exist. Bettina will make a new subgroup for the sawyers and will ask the Town IT about it. It should have the suffix, acton-ma.gov.

HHM: Mass Recreational Trails grant for new bridge

Bettina checked with Amanda Lewis of the Massachusetts Recreational Trails Program. The deadline for applications is in February. Bettina will put together a price quote for replacing the HHM bridge and run it by Zanna in plenty of time to decide if we want Bettina to apply for a grant.

Morrison Farm when the Ice House Pond walk is completed

The Ice House Pond parking lot and boat launch are not part of Morrison Farm. When the walkway is completed, do we consider the parking and launch as part of Morrison Farm? Or should the parking and launch join the developing East Acton Village Green as a separate parcel? These questions were suggested when John was cleaning out invasives along the boat launch. Right now, NR maintains both but NR is strapped because of the Town's spending and hiring freeze. Essentially, there is no ongoing maintenance at the parking lot and launch. There is no steward. Trash is gathering at the sites. Also, when the pond-side trail is done, at least to the point where dogs regularly enjoy the pond, Joe H will come to the Committee to change the Morrison Farm yellow loop to include that new trail. Note: NR has abandoned the plan for a pond-side trail to the causeway, but does aim to complete the shorter pond-side trail this summer.

Online maps new feature(s)

- The Morrison Farm trails are all on the map now.
- The Wright Hill map is nearing completion. The blue trails and yellow loop are blazed. The red trails are not yet blazed, nor are they marked as red on the map. The blue trail now passes through the stone wall and the other blue trail is no longer necessary, so it was not blazed.
- Nagog Hill now shows a trail going through state land to Main Street, but some of this trail passes through private land. Should we remove this trail from the map? Also, on the north side of Nagog Hill, there is a trail beside the pond on land that belongs to the Concord Water Department. Should we remove that trail from the map? The answer to both questions is "Yes!" We should remove all trails from where they appear on private property. We can keep the trails that appear dotted on public lands, including the U.S. Fish and Wildlife property abutting Main Street, the state properties along Route 2, and Acton Water District land. Where the dotted line is on private property, it should be deleted. There is a similar issue with a trail at Wills Hole that goes onto private land. Bettina could ask Matt Mosteller of the Acton Water District (AWD) whether the AWD would want the trails on AWD land eliminated. AWD land has "No Trespassing" signs all over it, but the AWD does not enforce the message. We can't stop people from adding trails to the maps but Joe H could mark them as being non-Town-maintained. Joe has sent an inquiry to a party who has been marking trails on the maps, trying to establish some communication, but with no response so far. Summarizing, it behooves anybody who goes on a trail to determine whether the trail is on public or private land. We can show trails on public land, including State and AWD lands. We shouldn't show trails on private land, including on the Fochtman (next to Wright Hill) and Conant (next to Nagog Hill) properties — even the Isaac Davis Trail.

Updated LSC roster

No comments nor questions.

Next month's (August 18) agenda

Send agenda items to Joe W and copy Zanna.

Evaluate meeting

Loved it, and a big thanks to Bruce for his year as Chair.

5. Adjournment

At 9:27 p.m., the meeting adjourned.

The next meeting is tentatively scheduled for Tuesday, August 18, at a time to be announced.

Documents and Exhibits Used During this Meeting

- Draft Meeting Minutes of June 16, 2020