

Open Space Committee minutes for June 21, 2022

Present: Rick Gardner, Susan Downing, Deb Cary, Laura Reynolds (remotely), Annie Charrette, Karen Rossow and guests Gerry Pellegrini, Tom Sullivan, (president of the Princeton Land Trust) and Anna Wilkins (executive director of the North County Land Trust for North Central Massachusetts).

Meeting began at 7:05.

- 1.) **Minutes** from the May 17, 2022 meeting were unanimously **approved**.
- 2.) **The primary purpose of inviting Tom Sullivan (PLT) and Anna Wilkins (North County Land Trust) was to hear their approaches to setting priorities for land preservation and advice on how best to proceed on this front.** In Princeton, the NCLT owns Zinns sanctuary. Deb Cary privated a brief history of land preservation in town guided by the first Open Space and Recreation Plan. In addition to the NCLT and PLT we can partner with Fitchburg water supply, Worcester water supply and various DCR departments. Janice Morrison, a private land conservation consultant, has asked the OSC to look over the lands she has identified in town that have high agricultural values and asked both PLT and OSC to consider ways to preserve and protect those farmlands. There is federal and state funding programs aimed at working with prime farmland owners. The goal is to make it possible for new, young farmers to be able purchase or lease to grow crops or raise livestock on. (Apparently there is a recent increase in this occupation.)

Anna mentioned that there is a large amount of ARPA funding available for land conservation now, and that there isn't much time before the deadline for allocating this money. NCLT doesn't have the capacity to work on all the possible projects in their area but if a town is willing to do the work they will help us navigate things at the state level. Recently the NCLT has been overwhelmed with work for two reasons: they deliberately increased their visibility about three years ago and then the real estate market went into overdrive with activity.

There is a private non-profit called *The Conservation Fund* which functions in a similar way for preservation of agricultural land. The NCLT has a greater scope of land habitats. Anna reported that in general the state is not interested in holding conservation restrictions because they cannot manage them. They want to purchase land, increasing their land holdings, particularly land which abuts what they already own and/or very large parcels. Mass Fish and Wildlife is the same, except they manage the land more actively and permit hunting and fishing on their properties. The Municipal Vulnerability Preparedness (MVP) funding wants to see towns purchase land appropriate to its mission and has plenty of funds to distribute. The Nature Conservancy has an evaluation program for reviewing land which is vulnerable and in most need of protection for providing climate change impact mitigation and this evaluation process helps to attract funds for resilient land purchases/protection. **Karen will look at the town document on MVP that was recently completed.**

When Anna and NCLT gave a presentation recently in Westminster it was in conjunction with their town planner and the Fitchburg Water Supply and was open to the general public but invited specific, appropriate landowners as well. That will be the OSC approach to our next Land Preservation Options workshop we hold.

Gerry noted that a common misconception is that when a landowner agrees to conserve their parcel they will donate it or sell it for considerably less than the market rate. Tom pointed out that this is a myth, that the Land Trust and other interested parties purchase the land at, or sometimes above, the market value. This is another point to present at our upcoming workshop.

Tom explained that preserving land can become very complicated. It is easy to double-count a parcel if there are several organizations involved; there can be a patchwork of methods to secure a given parcel; and the responsibilities can change based on changing state mandates or change of ownership. The good news is that 48% of Princeton is protected. PLT uses the OS&R Plan as a guide, the most recent of which was done in 2020. This is also what guides the OSC in its mission. There are 22 properties in town with over 50 acres. The OSC will work in conjunction with the PLT and NCLT (and others as appropriate); it is a group effort in most instances and involves some creativity. As an example, the PLT purchased 192 acres from the Cusinellos and

sold it two hours later to DCR watershed. In that case the neighbors also collaborated in the effort and bought abutting sections that DCR did not need to acquire for water quality protection, but PLT will hold conservation restrictions on so the land will never be able to be further developed.

A new approach to farm land conservation that we are all just learning about is “covenants” whereby a landowner agrees not to develop a parcel for, as an example, ten years and receives a tax break for that. This works well for the aforementioned young, new farmer just starting out.

Laura asked Anna and Tom their thoughts on carbon market involvement. Neither found it beneficial. Tom noted that of fifty states, only California does this and it works out to about \$4 per acre. Only 10-20% of that state's emissions can be offset by paying to keep forests intact.

Other business:

Mini-map signs are up at Russell Corner trails and Gregory-Alexander. Two new benches will be installed, one near the beaver pond and one to be determined at Bullock/McElroy, purchased by the PLT and constructed by Phil O'Brien and Joe DiFranza.

Annie is working on Ten Best Hikes with Kids with pictures and links to maps, descriptions and further directions. She'll prepare a draft for the next meeting and hopes to have PDFs available for Wachusett Meadow's Hey Day event.

Susan and Laura will work on a list of natural attractions (such as glacial erratic boulders and waterfalls) for our website.

Rick will talk with Bud Brooks about doing something similar with historical attractions. Rick is doing his 20 mile walk around town on Tuesday June 28th.

Deb will invite Jamie Greenland, the new P&R director, to our next meeting. The topics to include Goodnow Park and the Gleason Road connector to Main Street. Deb will also work on exploring the trail connections between Calamint Hill North and Brook Station Road- Rick will be walking through that area on Tuesday, June 28th so can compare notes again.

Princeton Hikes! going well. Marie Auger is leading more hikes for us.

Representatives of the OSC are invited to the next Sterling Open Space Committee to discuss where we can make trail connections between the two towns. **July 20th at 7:00** location to be determined (probably the Butterick building in Sterling Center).

Our next scheduled meeting is on **Tuesday, July 12th at 7:00 p.m.** in the town hall annex and remotely.

Respectfully submitted,

Karen Rossow