

Town of Monkton
Town Forest Committee
DRAFT MEETING MINUTES
Tuesday, June 6th, 2023, 7:00pm
Monkton Town Hall & via Zoom

Members present: Callie Brynn (Chair), Jaime Schulte (Vice-Chair), John McNerney, Molly Parren, CJ Buzzy (Alternate)

Members absent: Peter Dufault

Guests: Bob Heiser (Vermont Land Trust); Monkton residents: Debbie Houghton, John Howard, Tom Kenyon, Kielee Pelland, Cale Pelland, Anne Layn, Mark Driscoll, Megan Browning, Peter Huber, Peter Close; Michael Rochon (Vergennes resident)

Call To Order - Callie called the meeting to order at 7:00pm.

1. Public Comment (up to 1 hour)

- a. **Note:** the conversation was fast-moving at times and some questions/discussion may not have been captured here. This is more of a compilation of notes rather than a transcript of the conversation.
- b. Kielee Pelland started the conversation by noting that she is not necessarily opposed to the project and isn't a hunter or ATV user, but wants the project to be for all of the community (all uses). The committee clarified that while motorized recreation **is** mostly restricted by the conservation easement, the easement **does** allow and protect hunting. Hunting could be limited in some aspects, since it may not be compatible with most other uses, such as hiking, birdwatching, or a school field trip, and in general uses should be balanced, but any restrictions on hunting would need to be approved by the Vermont Land Trust. Cale Pelland asked about seasons. There was general agreement in the room with the concept of having specific times/hunting seasons when the town forest (or substantial areas of it) would be closed to uses other than hunting (such as the main deer season in November) and vice versa.
- c. Kielee asked how developable the parcel actually is. Jaime stated that there appears to be room for 10-20 houses on developable land currently, primarily along Airport Rd. Mark Driscoll asked who did the appraisal and thinks it is too high. Mark also said he doesn't believe the property is developable. Kielee asked Jaime (a member of the Development Review Board) to comment on getting solid information on what is actually buildable. Jaime said to determine that an engineer would need to be engaged. There would be a significant cost involved if we wanted a full assessment. We haven't done so because of cost and the purpose of the committee being to establish a Town Forest rather than to consider development potential. He also noted that if Ridgeline zoning were to change in the future an additional 100 acres or so on the parcel (also off of Airport Rd) could become developable. The exact amount of development potential will be debatable without an engineering assessment, but it would only take one or a few houses to potentially result in the property becoming posted.

- d. Tom Kenyon, an adjacent landowner, stated that he is fully in support of the project, is very familiar with the land, that it is developable, and that he believes it will be sold.
- e. Mark said he heard that half a million of ARPA money would be used for the project. Committee: the actual figure is a request for \$150k from the overall \$624k of ARPA funds. The advantage of using some ARPA funds in the project budget is that it doesn't change our taxes and yet shows a substantial contribution from Monkton funds, which helps us get the big federal and state grants that will cover most of the project. Approximately \$380k of ARPA would be left unallocated to any project after the amounts already spent on various items and this Town Forest request.
- f. Anne Layn, and possibly a second person, asked about whether a vote would be held on the project or if the Selectboard would decide. The committee said that an Australian ballot can be used only for certain items in Monkton, including elections, school budgets, bond votes, updates to the Town Plan or zoning rules. The use of ARPA funds and ANAC funds have been approved by the Selectboard in the past and that would be the direction for this project as well, unless a special town meeting were held. Regular annual Town Meetings see up to 125 attendees (7% of voters). We have all talked about wanting a lot more than that and have so far seen engagement from at least 13% of voters with this project. It is likely that a special meeting in the summer would see a lower attendance than the 13% we already have. If the goal is to have the most input we should continue to gather it and provide it to the Selectboard for their consideration. In the last Selectboard meeting Kielee suggested a mailing to reach more voters, even if it had some cost involved. That idea has been on the committee's list for a long time, but was on hold due to cost. Following the feedback at the Selectboard meeting Callie and Jaime discussed options for a mailing with Bob Heiser. Bob was able to cover the cost of a mailing from a fund the Vermont Land Trust holds, so there will be no cost to the town. The mailing will go out in the coming days to all registered voters and include a summary of the project and a brief survey on a postcard (prepaid) to return to the town offices.
- g. There was a question on Current Use - wouldn't a buyer need to remove the entire parcel to develop it? No, just the minimum 2 acres per house site (although lots would need to be 27 acres in size or greater to remain in Current Use).
- h. There was a question: how many town forests are there in VT? The response was that most surrounding towns have one. Hinesburg has three. They see a lot of use by their communities and are valued by residents.
- i. What is the cost to the town for insurance? No change to insurance cost. Covered by the same insurance as Morse Park, Rec Field, etc. It is claims-based, so insurance could increase if there are claims.
- j. Kielee asked if it is necessary to conserve this particular parcel. The committee responded that it is less about conservation of these acres for their own sake and more about conserving them as part of the funding process. \$771,000 in grants are available if the property is conserved in order to protect it for this use long-term.
- k. Cale asked if other parcels were considered. Did we look at posted land in town to consider as a town forest, since this property is not posted? One other parcel was

considered, but was smaller and didn't have good access. The committee looked at other forests in Monkton and concluded that this one offers the best combination of size, suitability for a town forest, a willing landowner, and accessibility.

- l. Kielee asked about a note in the minutes from Aug 2019 about Monkton being in better ecological condition than other towns. What does that refer to? The reference could not be located immediately in those minutes. Jaime said this would seem to be in reference to Monkton's relative abundance of forest and wetlands.
- m. Kielee noted that the minutes of July 2022 refer to a project spreadsheet, which wasn't attached. The committee thought this might be the spreadsheet of ARPA projects on the town website.
- n. Kielee asked about what needs to be included in the management plan? Bob Heiser discussed that it covers uses, plans for any recreational structures, parking, timber management, trail network, etc.
- o. Kielee asked if we had talked with A. Johnson about a right of first refusal for a potential purchase in the future instead of moving toward a purchase now. We did not, because the funding situation is unprecedented currently with the opportunity to acquire the parcel without going to the taxpayers for new funds. The Town Plan has included a goal of establishing a town forest for 10 years, the funding situation is good, so the timing seems best to move forward now.
- p. Kielee asked if the Selectboard could approve the project with certain management plan conditions? Potentially, if those conditions are supported by the community and the easement holder.
- q. Kielee would like the committee to make more of an effort to be transparent on the restrictions that would be in place as a Town Forest vs. the current informal use of this property (which has fewer limits). Particularly regarding restriction on most motorized recreation (ATVs) and the potential to limit certain uses, such as hunting. She said that actual or potential restrictions on uses are not apparent when you go to the Town Forest Committee webpage on the Monkton website. Jaime showed that there is a link on the page to a summary of the conservation easement and these restrictions are discussed on the first page. It does take a couple of clicks to get there, so we will work on making information on uses more visible. The page of Frequently Asked Questions also could use updates to include more of the questions asked recently and in this meeting, which the committee will work on.
- r. Kielee asked if the committee would be responsible for the management plan. The committee responded that it may create the draft, but that must occur with substantial community input on uses. That input would be gathered and the draft management plan shared with the community, Selectboard, and easement holder for feedback as part of the process.
- s. Kielee commented that it is difficult to trust the process/system of how all of this will happen. Not personally referring to the individuals involved, but rather to trust that the overall outcomes would be a fair representation of the community. (or words to that effect)

- t. John Howard - asked about the project timeline. The committee expects to hear about the federal grant this summer. It would look to the Selectboard for a decision on the ARPA funds and ANAC funds requested this summer as well. By later in the year we would begin working on the management plan, if the project moves forward. The management plan would take some months to develop from community input, a draft, feedback, etc.
 - u. Peter Huber expressed strong support for the project. He is appreciative of the committee's work and really enjoyed the recent site walk he participated in. He also appreciates the good condition of the forest roads on the parcel, which will save the town considerable cost and make the parcel immediately usable.
 - v. Anne Layn - supports conservation generally and understands that the purchase itself wouldn't impact taxpayers, but is concerned about on-going cost. When on the Selectboard she supported the wildlife/salamander crossing project as long as it didn't have an on-going cost to the taxpayer. She acknowledged that on-going costs for this project are difficult to fully know at this stage of things. Anne noted the \$30k management fund in the project budget, but questions how far that will go. The committee mentioned that the parcel brings in only \$1,500/year in municipal tax revenue now (because it is in Current Use), which would work out to \$1.43 per average household per year (for a \$240k property) when we lose that revenue as a town property, unless the \$1,500 is offset in some other way. The intention would be to leverage the \$30k management fund to bring in small grants for things like trails and parking. We are also working on what would be agreeable to all involved regarding the town's portion of the shared maintenance of Airport Rd., which is a mile of private gravel road, but that is not expected to be a large on-going amount for the town. There may also be ways the Town Forest could generate enough revenue to cover on-going costs, such as some timber harvests.
 - w. **Note:** approximately an hour and twenty minutes was used for Public Comment and discussion. There were no further questions by the end.
- 2. Review minutes 5/16/23**
- a. **John moved to approve the minutes of May 16th, 2023 as written.** Jaime seconded. There was no additional discussion. **All were in favor (5-0-0).**
- 3. Community input/outreach updates/other activity**
- a. On May 21st the committee held a site walk at the property, attended by 13 residents.
 - b. Callie, Molly, and Bob visited the site with Walt Poleman of UVM on May 22nd regarding the potential for UVM graduate students to do research on the property in the future. This research could benefit the town by providing insight to resources on the property, which may inform the upcoming (or more likely a future) management plan, at no cost to the town.
 - c. Jaime and John visited the site on May 24th with Bob Heiser (of Vermont Land Trust), Rob Fields (A. Johnson's forester), and Caitlin Cusack (Vermont Land Trust's forester) to consider whether salvage of trees blown down in recent winter storms would make sense. All agreed (relying particularly on Rob and Caitlin) that the scale, species, and

scattered nature of the blowdowns made the likely financial benefit very limited and not worth the effort, cost, and collateral damage (to tree regeneration) that would be necessary to get to the logs and get them out. No further action to be taken.

- d. The committee had an information table at the Recycling Center on May 27th and spoke with more than 25 residents.
- e. Another site walk was held on May 31st.
- f. Mailing/postcard survey - a mailing is expected to go out this week to all registered voters with a summary of the project and a brief postcard survey (prepaid) to return to the Town Administrator. The cost of the mailing was graciously covered through a fund held by the Vermont Land Trust.
- g. Upcoming events: strawberry festival, etc. - will have an info table.

4. Grant/funding updates

- a. We anticipate hearing about the federal grant in the next month or two.
- b. The Agricultural & Natural Areas Committee application will likely be considered by that committee in June and then potentially sent on to the Selectboard.

5. Set next meeting date(s)

- a. Community Site Walk on Saturday, June 17th, 9:00am.
- b. Community Informational Session on Wednesday, June 21st, 7:00pm at Town Hall and on Zoom.
- c. Info table at the Strawberry Festival on Sunday, June 25th, 10:00am-2:00pm.
- d. Regular meeting: Thursday, July 6th, 7:00pm

Adjournment - Jaime moved to adjourn. All were in favor (5-0-0). Adjourned at 9:46pm.

Minutes taken by Jaime Schulte.