



APPROVED MINUTES
Ridgefield Conservation Commission
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October 5, 2020

A meeting of the Ridgefield Conservation Commission was held via Zoom on Monday, October 5, 2020 at 7:00 p.m.

Present: Carroll Brewster Jim Coyle Jack Kace Erik Keller
 Jean Linville Matt Sharp Allan Welby Dave Cronin
 Kitsey Snow Dan Levine Eric Beckenstein

Guests: Lucas Kaye, Katie Bitner, Gabriella Rogers, Evan Abramson, Beth Peyser.

Mr. Coyle chaired the meeting. Ms. Campbell-Gibson took the minutes.

1. APPROVAL OF MINUTES

The minutes of the September 21, 2020 meeting were approved.

UPON motion duly made (Brewster), seconded (Kace), and carried (Snow, had not joined the meeting yet and did not vote, Abstained: Levine and Beckenstein who were absent from the September 21 meeting), it was RESOLVED that the minutes of the meeting of September 21, 2020 be approved and ordered filed in the Town Hall.

2. ANNUAL APPEAL

The letter for the annual appeal, written by Chairman Coyle, is ready to go out and a quote received for the printing of the letter and two envelopes per mailing, stuffing the envelope, delivery to the post office and mailing out to 10,750 households and businesses in Ridgefield.

UPON motion duly made (Brewster), seconded (Beckenstein), and carried, it was RESOLVED to approve funds of \$4,623.21 for the printing and mailing of the annual appeal and to have the appeal letters sent out within the next 10 days.

3. OPEN SPACE

Eagle Scout Project Final Presentation – Lucas Kaye

Life Scout, Lucas Kaye, presented his completed project to the commission. He designed and built a bridge on the new Goodwill Trail on the Schlumberger property and completed his project on 09/15/2020. The final cost of his project was \$804.38, which is \$304.38 higher than what was originally approved. The increased cost was due to a change in bridge design, approved by the Conservation Commission, as well as added cost of sourcing materials from a different supplier due to shortages at the original supplier. Mr. Sharp said he walked the trail and saw Lucas's bridge and remarked that it was a nice sturdy bridge and a good addition to the trail.

Life Scout New Project Bear Mountain Trail – Katie Bitner

Katie Bitner is from Troop 19. For her Eagle Scout project she is clearing and blazing a trail through the newly acquired open space property on Bear Mountain. She described the work to be done and the materials she would require and asked the Conservation Commission to approve \$100, in case there are incidental purchases over and above what is anticipated. The map of the trail needs to change slightly so that it does not cross private property on the north end of the trail. Ms. Bitner asked if there was anything

else she should be aware of before her project starts. Mr. Kace asked that she make her work party aware of bears in the area. Mr. Keller asked if there was a need for a bench or if there was space enough on the surrounding rocks for people to sit and relax. Ms. Bitner said that the rocks should suffice. Mr. Sharp added that a commissioner with training would do the chainsaw cutting for her project. Ms. Bitner aims to start her project on October 18th. Mr. Beckenstein asked how long the new trail would be. Mr. Coyle said that it was about a ½-mile long

UPON a motion duly made (Snow), seconded (Kace), and carried, it was RESOLVED to approve a maximum expenditure of \$100 for the new Bear Mountain Trail Eagle Scout project proposed by Katie Bitner.

Eagle Scout Project Final Presentation – Gabriella Rogers

Life Scout, Gabriella Rogers, presented her completed project to the commission. Her project rerouted the existing Yellow Trail in Levy Park to improve the aesthetics and experience for hikers. She completed this project on August 22. Ms. Rogers described the work undertaken with 20 volunteers over an eight-hour period and highlighted the benefits of this undertaking which included better views, easier terrain and well defined pathway.

Chairman, James Coyle thanked all the scouts for their hard work and the wonderful additions to the open space trails on which they worked.

McKeon Farm – Prairie Management and Pollinator Garden

Evan Abramson joined the meeting to discuss the work schedule for the pollinator garden being planted at McKeon and non-herbicide invasive management of a natural meadow where the prairie is proposed in the Lauzen Hayfield. First he announced how impressed he was with the collaboration the Conservation Commission has with the Scout troops in Ridgefield and the quality of the work they produce. Ms. Snow introduced Mr. Abramson and gave a rundown of his impressive credentials.

Ms. Snow discussed the work to be done for the pollinator garden. Phase 1 of the project begins this fall with the planting of small trees and shrubs, conducive to attracting native bees, along with planting of natural grasses and wild flowers in the meadow. Ms. Snow said that the plants for the pollinator garden have been chosen. The shrubs and trees would be paid for by the Conservation Commission with funds approved already but Ms. Snow said that the cost would be \$200 above the \$1000 previously approved. The Richardson Grant will pay for the perennials and money from the NRW and the Garden Club will pay for the grass seed. Mr. Keller asked if the cost of the plants included planting them. Ms. Snow said that volunteers were required to help with planting. Mr. Keller asked if fertilizer was needed. Mr. Abramson answered that the native species chosen prefer poor soil; no fertilizing is required as this would encourage the growth of invasive species. Mr. Keller asked how the plants would be protected from deer. Mr. Abramson recommends the use of plastic deer netting. Mr. Keller asked about the removal of invasives. Ms. Snow answered that a recent Eagle Scout project involved the removal of invasive plants.

UPON a motion duly made (Welby), seconded (Keller), and carried, it was RESOLVED to increase the previously approved funds of \$1000 to \$1200 for the plants required for the pollinator garden at McKeon.

Mr. Abramson discussed the *Bombus Fervidus* (Yellow Bumblebee), an endangered bee found to be living at McKeon farm, possibly in the Lauzen Hayfield, because the tall grasses there are the kind of habitat it likes. The queen of this bee species is fertilized in the fall and winters in burrows, emerging in spring to lay her eggs. This particular bee is a long tongue pollinator, particularly needed for the pollination of certain plants. More information on this species of bee can be found at IUCN.com.

Mr. Abramson proposed that the Lauzen field be left unmowed until next year to allow the population of this species to build up. To eradicate invasive plants, Mr. Abramson recommends spot burning using a blowtorch, or a whole field controlled burn run by the US Fish and Wildlife Service. The USFWS has proposed burn plans for other locations in the Northeast and Mr. Abramson recommends that the commission apply to be on this burn schedule because if done with other locations, most of the cost of a controlled burn is usually subsidized by them. Ms. Snow asked about the timing of a burn. Mr. Abramson said late March to early April, to prepare the land for seeding in the fall.

Mr. Coyle expressed concern for what the neighbors would think if the field is left unmowed. Ms. Snow asked if mowing to 10-inches would be ok. Mr. Abramson agreed that it was better than mowing to the ground but leaving the field unmowed is best and he described how a brush hog could be used to achieve a cut to 10-inches. Mr. Coyle also expressed concern for the neighbors if there was a burn. Mr. Abramson said that burn professionals from USFWS plan and work on the burn. There is little risk involved and they are insured. They assist with obtaining permission from the local Fire Department and have literature to assure the neighbors it will be done correctly and with care.

Mr. Kace commented that the idea at McKeon is to attract both birds and pollinators and asked how both can be achieved. Mr. Abramson said that sometimes a choice has to be made but that since the pollinator garden and meadow will contain plants attractive to native birds already, these areas could serve the birds while the Lauzen field is prepared.

Mr. Welby mentioned the commission's discussion with DEEP on the use of herbicide to eradicate invasive species and asked what Mr. Abramson felt about their recommendation. Mr. Abramson said the use of herbicide in the Lauzen field is not recommended because run off would introduce toxic chemicals into the brook down the slope. He added that using harmful chemicals is overkill because a controlled burn would eradicate invasives. Working within the USFWS's timing of proposed burns in the Northeast during next year, the RCC would be more likely to get government funding for this project. Mr. Coyle asked Mr. Welby how he felt about the new proposal to eradicate invasives. Mr. Welby feels positive.

Ms. Snow will research the town's rules about controlled burns. Mr. Abramson recommended inviting USFWS to visit the site in November. Mr. Beckenstein will speak to the Fire Department regarding controlled burning in Ridgefield. Someone will need to prepare a detailed write-up regarding the proposal for a controlled burn to present to the BOS to get their approval.

Pine Mountain Meditation Space

A series of letters supporting the structure at the site on Pine Mountain have been received, requesting that the structure be allowed to remain. At a special meeting held on June 8, 2020, the commissioners discussed and made a motion to require the structure to be removed by the fall of 2020 (Excerpt from those minutes: "Option B carries. The wooden structure will be removed with guidance from the RCC in the fall of 2020."). None of the commissioners had anything to add to this already decided ruling. The removal of the structure is upheld and the structure must be removed now that it is the fall of 2020.

Gay Road - access way feed back

Ms. Peyser joined the meeting to give feedback on the dumping found on the gravel section of Gay Road leading to Woodcock Nature Reserve. On visiting the site Ms. Peyser found recently cut tree branches across the trail. A tree has also fallen across the path which appears to have split from its base. A second pile of cut tree stumps and branches is located beyond the stone wall and entrance gate to the trail. The sign indicating that the gravel extension of Gay Road is a Conservation Easement is missing. The Conservation Commission will request the help of Parks and Recreation to cut the fallen tree after the brush is removed. Brush removal will be done during a work party to be organized by Mr. Sharp at the end of October. Ms. Peyser recommends replacing the missing sign.

Handicapped Trail Progress

Mr. Keller walked the trail at Lake Windwing to assess the ability to convert a section of it to a handicapped accessible trail. He recommends using compacted stone dust on the flat sections, building a boardwalk over the boggy section and lowering the slope of the steep section beyond the double orange marker to the regulation grade for handicapped access. Mr. Coyle asked how much Mr. Keller estimates it would cost. Mr. Keller estimated between \$70,000 and \$140,000 that could be requested as a capital budget item. Ms. Snow mentioned the NRVt project has handicapped access and cautioned that this and the boardwalk planned at Great Swamp may be competing projects when it comes to funding.

4. FEEDBACK FROM DESEGREGATE COMMITTEE

Mr. Beckenstein brought to the commissioners' attention the planned changes to statute 8-30G, which requires desegregation and land use reform that may impact open space. P&Z wrote a letter of concern addressed to the State. Mr. Beckenstein will research the reform proposed by this new statute and will keep the Commission informed as to its impact on open space.

5. ENFORCEMENT

John Soluri

Ms. Peyser visited the site and walked the Yellow trail from Fox Hill but found no evidence of the ramp or digging that was reported by a resident. Ms. Campbell-Gibson will reach out to the complainant for a more precise location of the violation she reported.

Ledges Dumping

The highway department have added the cleanup of the items dumped at the Ledges open space to their work planned for the next few months. Ms. Campbell-Gibson will report back in December on the status of this cleanup. Highways reported that they cannot find the pipes that were dumped. Ms. Campbell-Gibson will walk the site to hopefully locate the pipes and record an exact GPS location.

6. COMMUNITY OUTREACH

Website

Updated articles have been added to the "What's new" section of the web page. Mr. Coyle is redesigning the "Catalog of Open Spaces" with more maps and information.

Press: STEAM Backpack Update

Ms. Linville released an article in the Hamlet Hub about the backpacks with photographs.

Other Outreach Activities

Public Relations – Mr. Levine will continue to update social media and send out e-blasts to interested residents with articles and promotional pieces. He asked for ideas of content.

The list of suggested articles is:

- Eagle Scout projects highlighted
- Tree Cleanup
- New Trails
- Steam backpacks
- Mushrooms
- Birds and birdhouses installed at McKeon
- Levy Park
- Bumblebee find at McKeon
- Peterson Gorge Educational Trail project
- Pollinator garden at McKeon
- Fall garden cleanup for pollinators – NYT article
- Link to interesting articles sent by Ms. Snow

7. MEETING ATTENDANCE

P&Z

Oct 6 - Cronin
Oct 13 - Kace
Oct 27 - Keller

IWB

Oct 8 - Kace
Oct 22 - Keller

No issues were reported with any of the required meeting attendance.

8. CHAIRMAN'S REMARKS

Mr. Coyle reported that he, Mr. Kace and Mr. Keller met with Mr. Marconi regarding open space acquisitions. Mr. Marconi is very supportive of the goal of 30% open space in Ridgefield. Mr. Keller is working on a list of town properties. During this meeting there was discussion on carving out open space from recreational properties using deed restrictions. These properties include the golf course, school properties, and Parks and Recreation properties.

Mr. Coyle has reached out to attorney Linda Francois to address the commission about tax abatement and easements. Ms. Francois said she would need 1-1:30 hours for her presentation. While Mr. Coyle recommended a special meeting for this, Ms. Snow recommended using the next meeting for this with no other (or minimal) agenda items. We will proceed with Ms. Snow's recommendation. Mr. Brewster asked for reading material from Ms. Francois prior to her presentation.

Ms. Snow asked for the trail at McKeon Farm to be added to the Catalog of Open Spaces on our web site.

The next commission meeting will be held on Monday October 19, 2020 at 7:00 P.M.

ADJOURNMENT

UPON motion duly made (Brewster), seconded (Beckenstein), and carried, it was RESOLVED that the meeting adjourn at 9:25 P.M.