

City of Keene
New Hampshire

CONSERVATION COMMISSION
MEETING MINUTES

Monday, March 21, 2022

4:30 PM

**Council Chambers,
City Hall**

Members Present:

Alexander Von Plinsky, IV, Chair
Councilor Andrew Madison, Vice Chair
(Arrived at 4:36 PM)
Councilor Robert Williams
Eloise Clark
Art Walker
Ken Bergman (via Zoom; non-voting)
Steven Bill, Alternate (via Zoom; non-voting;
arrived at 4:35 PM)
John Therriault, Alternate

Staff Present:

Corinne Marcou, Administrative Assistant

Members Not Present:

Thomas Haynes, Alternate
Brian Reilly, Alternate

SITE VISIT: At 3:30 PM before the meeting, the Conservation Commission conducted a site visit to Beaver Brook via Woodland Cemetery.

1) Call to Order

Chair Von Plinsky called the meeting to order at 4:30 PM.

2) Approval of Meeting Minutes – February 22, 2022

A motion by Mr. Therriault to adopt the February 22, 2022 minutes was duly seconded by Mr. Walker and the motion carried unanimously. Vice Chair Madison arrived after this vote.

3) Guest Speaker: Amanda Littleton, District Manager, Cheshire County Conservation District

The Chairman introduced Amanda Littleton, District Manager of the Cheshire County Conservation District (CCCD).

Ms. Littleton thanked the Commission for the opportunity to participate. She began working with the CCCD in 2007 and said it had been a joy. The CCCD was set-up by State Statute in 1945 in response to the Dust Bowl, when the USDA realized a concern with farm soil management nationwide. Now, each county in NH has a Conservation District for natural resources conservation, to be local conduits bringing resources from the Federal government for technical assistance. Since then, the CCCD has expanded beyond soil erosion to broader natural resources conservation. What Ms. Littleton appreciates about Conservation Districts that has not changed since 1945 is that they are focused on local needs and are very responsive to challenges that communities are facing at the local level. The CCCD is run much like a non-profit (despite being set-up per State Statute), with a Board of Supervisors of participants throughout the region, which helps provide strategic direction and fiscal management; Ms. Clark is a past Board of Supervisors member and her husband is the current Treasurer. The CCCD has relied heavily on grants and donations to carry-out their programs since 2010 and they have acquired approximately \$2.3 million in grants and agreement dollars to help meet natural resources stewardship goals. Those funds are in addition to Farm Bill dollars—the CCCD works with the Federal Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) to help bring-in Farm Bill dollars and do a lot of outreach to farmers. For example, in 2021, there were practices on approximately 2,000 acres of Cheshire County and the Federal investment in that was approximately \$655,000. Each year, the NRCS works with a lot of voluntary landowners who are interested.

Ms. Littleton centered the rest of her presentation on the CCCD's Strategic Plan's four focus areas: soil, water, wildlife, and farm viability. She began by discussing soil health, which was why the conservation districts were first developed. Today the focus is not just on soil erosion but health—physical, chemical, and biological properties. She explained the basic soil health principles that the CCCD follows, which are about minimizing disturbance on farmlands (e.g., tilling less) and maximizing living roots, soil cover, and biodiversity. The CCCD achieves these goals through equipment rental programs, which she said was driven by farmers indicating that they wanted to try transitioning to these different management practices that build soil health and protect water quality; but equipment is expensive, and farmers only use it a few times yearly. Thus, the CCCD receives request from the agricultural community for new equipment that helps farmers with their management, while meeting the CCCDs soil health goals. They have acquired equipment such as no-till drills to help plant cover crops, aerators to help with surface compaction, no-till corn planters, no-till vegetable transplanters, and more. Ms. Littleton said the CCCD had received a lot of feedback from vegetable producers needing more equipment available. Thus, the CCCD is trying to support farms of all scales. They started a program with the Keene Public Library a few years ago to support the smallest scale producers with a tool library; she recently added a weed wrench that can help with invasives control. There are also adaptive tools for those with physical challenges. At larger scales to support homesteaders, they have a BCS two-wheel tractor, with an effort to have all the largest equipment in miniature forms for farms less than two acres. Then there is medium-large scale tractor equipment.

Next, Ms. Littleton discussed the CCCD's water quality focus. She said that other ways the CCCD works with farmers is through the use of cover crops. She said soil health can sound

boring to non-farmers, but that it is all about protecting water quality and wildlife habitat of surface waters. CCCD helps farmers transition to owning equipment, like no-till corn equipment. They also do projects with farms on manure management, barnyard runoff, and more; how to treat the nutrients properly before they enter surface waters. There was an inaudible question, to which Ms. Littleton replied in the affirmative and that it was not something the CCCD did specifically, but they were able to write a NH moose plate license plate and to write a grant to bring in extra state dollars to that project to help overcome hurdles to completion. She said the CCCD likes to find the gaps in funding and seek creative approaches to help people meet their conservation needs. Continuing on forest water quality, Ms. Littleton said there had been skidder bridge rental programs. The CCCD encourages skidder bridges as a management tool to allow people to access different tracts of timber ground when they want to harvest, without disturbing surface water habitats and by preventing erosion. Next on water quality, Ms. Littleton discussed the CT River Conservancy's Source to Sea Cleanup, which is a partnership program with many groups to clean thousands of pounds of trash out of the local rivers annually by great partners and community volunteers.

Ms. Littleton transitioned to the CCCD's third focus area, which is wildlife habitat. Typically, there is a lot of work with pollinators and aquatic organism passages. She discussed the Conservation Opportunity Fund, which began a few years ago in response to the Farm Bill shifting some programs and eliminating the Wildlife Habitat Improvement program. There was no way to get funding to small landowners for pollinators and habitat improvement. Thus, the Conservation Opportunity Fund is for landowners of 25 acres or less to apply for \$1,500 grants. It is great for the small-medium scale landowners in Keene the CCCD has been working with; they hope to work with more landowners on pollinator habitats and rain gardens. Ms. Littleton would love to partner with the Conservation Commission on implementing this more in Keene.

Further on wildlife habitat, Ms. Littleton discussed the CCCD's work with farmers on integrated pest management. For example, work with a blueberry producer who wants to be spraying less. New pest pressures with climate change challenging farmers, so farmers will apply for netting to reduce spraying, for example. There was an inaudible question from the Chairman. Ms. Littleton said it was a great question and beginning in 2021, the CCCD began a more formal partnership with Soak Up the Rain, which is part of the NH Department of Environmental Services (DES). The CCCD has invited landowners to schedule a site visit with CCCD and DES to hear the landowners interests and goals, and provide feedback on siting, considerations of soil types, sizes based on drainage areas, and to encourage them to apply for the grant for funding. She said there are a lot of great resources that already exist that they try to point people toward. There was an inaudible question from Councilor Williams, to which Ms. Littleton said it was a good point. She continued saying that the CCCD worked with Keene 10–12 years ago to install rain gardens at Public Works, the Recreation Center, and many schools in Keene. She said maintenance is critical and requires someone to steward it like any garden; collaborating with motivated private landowners could be a good solution.

Ms. Littleton shared that the CCCD would be working with the Friends of the Arboretum at Ashuelot Park, who applied for Conservation Opportunity Funds this year. They just completed a contract to install a rain garden, which she thinks will be a great educational tool, with signage and workshops. There are seven master gardeners on the Friends of the Arboretum and so Ms. Littleton hopes for more education partnerships with the City.

Ms. Littleton concluded on wildlife habitat with culvert removals and replacements in the regions, like in Surry and Swanzey in the Ashuelot River watershed. They have been looking for priority sites to remove culverts that are otherwise blocking passage upstream for brook trout and other aquatic species trying to access necessary habitat. They are interested in more of this work that can open additional miles of habitat for many species of concern in NH. The CCCD often partners with municipalities for these culvert removals and is always happy to work with Keene on such efforts.

The final focus of the CCCD is farm viability, for which there are many programs. The CCCD focuses on helping farms be successful businesses, so they do not end up developed and cans steward farm resources into the future. First, they like to help build connections to agriculture and natural lands so there is a program through the Monadnock Localvores, which the CCCD staffs to send youth (44 in 2021) to a week of farm camp at Stonewall Farm, Orchard Hill, or the University of MA 4-H program. The CCCD is excited to help build a connection to agriculture from an early age. Beyond this, the CCCD is focused on ensuring food access and security through their programs, and therefore they want more markets for farmers and to ensure all have access. The Granite State Market Match program allows those with food stamps/EBT to shop at local farmer markets, farms stands, and Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) to double their dollars on produce. It is a win for farmers and those lower-income families of our region.

Beyond that program, there are those limited income residents who cannot afford to shop at CSAs and so the Monadnock Farm Share Program offers 50% off CSA shares for limited income residents of the region; 25% is covered by farm fundraising/discounts and the other 25% is covered by the Fund. Last year, 44 households participated in the program. Similarly last year, the CCCD—in an effort to work with multiple groups—started a Veterans program in the month of September. Any Veteran can go to the farmers markets in Keene, Hinsdale, and Jaffrey and get a \$20 voucher for each weekday the market runs. This is in partnership with the Healthy Monadnock Alliance.

Next, Ms. Littleton described the Monadnock Food Co-Op Farm Fund to invest in farms. They have provided \$120,000 in grants to 17 farmers since 2017 to for on-farm infrastructure and different needs to grow and strengthen their businesses. They also have a partnership with Hannah Grimes and NCAT to help farms work on business planning or classes at the Hannah Grimes center, after which they get a \$2,000 voucher, to help them invest in something strategic to improve their business. The first cohort of six farms just finished and they hope for two cohorts of 12 farms next year.

Ms. Littleton discussed how to ensure farm businesses are strong by reducing energy input costs. The CCCD started a program and installed a 100kw solar array at a farm, making it a community project with investors that many farmers can buy into. The CCCD is selling shares that farms can buy to support this without their own installation. Like a previously mentioned program, through this there will be \$2,000 stipends on an application basis to invest in renewables and energy efficiency on farms over the next few years.

Lastly, Ms. Littleton concluded her presentation discussing climate, and work on a grant program for farmers to adapt to and mitigate climate changes. They hope it will be a direct program like the Co-Op program. Another program is the Land Trust, which is a statewide partnership on succession planning for the next generation of farmers.

Mr. Therriault asked for more details about CCCD work with pollinators. Ms. Littleton replied that through the Conservation Opportunity Fund people can apply for dollars to install pollinator habitat on their land. The CCCD also tried to provide technical assistance through a site visit, discussing plant selection and more resources to make it possible on their properties. In previous years, the CCCD has received larger funds for pollinator habitats on private or public land. Still, the focus is smaller scale and fostering peer-to-peer learning and sharing between neighbors.

The Chairman asked more about the culvert process. Ms. Littleton replied that it is a big job to understand and assess where the priority culvert and getting the work done; it requires multiple partners. She continued that a study was done for the Ashuelot River watershed with volunteers by the Ashuelot Valley Environmental Observatory, which is now a part of the Harris Center. It got volunteers out doing survey assessments. The project went dormant from some time until contact from NH DES, who cannot do this municipal work. The NH DES helped to bring partners together with the CCCD, and they went back to the original resource and the top priority in Swanzey, with over 10 miles of habitat. The CCCD's role was to bring partners together and apply for grants, like the Aquatic Resources Mitigation (ARM) Fund through DES and the State Conservation Committee grant through Fish & Game and other federal dollars. She does not have technical knowledge on culvert replacement, so the right contractors must be engaged. They typically partner with Trout Unlimited because they have the experience. The Chairman expressed his gratitude for this presentation

Mr. Bill asked about manure, its disposal in Cheshire County, and programs to ensure composting or methane generation. Ms. Littleton said it was a great question, but she was unaware of any farms in this county capturing methane for electricity generation, but it is happening in other parts of the region. She said manure is a valuable nutrient in fertilizer for most farms and so most farms are utilizing it on their fields instead of purchasing inputs. Many dairy farms have composting programs that sell back to the public too.

Mr. Bergman appreciated the presentation and called the Swanzey culvert replacement brilliant, noting how crucial the Trout Unlimited contribution was—they have both biologists, wetland specialists, and engineers to design the project, who persuade communities to help them leverage

the funds by pointing out that they can combine wildlife habitat with road and flood protection. Mr. Bergman said they gave a presentation at Keene State a few years ago and he can try to find it to share. He said it is a phenomenal project to visit. Ms. Littleton said it is on Hale Hill Road.

The Chairman thanked Ms. Littleton for her presentation. Ms. Littleton always welcomes follow-up conversations or partnerships in Keene.

4) **Informational**

A) **Subcommittee Reports**

i) ***Outreach Subcommittee***

Ms. Clark reported that the Goose Pond Through the Seasons program would continue on May 21 with a bird identification walk led by Steven Lamonde. Ms. Clark noted a goal to provide Mr. Lamonde a \$150 honorarium.

A motion by Vice Chair Madison to approve a \$150 honorarium for Steven Lamonde for the Goose Pond Through the Seasons walk in May 2022 was duly seconded by Mr. Walker.

The Chairman did not believe the Commission had yet used its annual \$1,500 budget, but he knew there was an impending annual bill from the NH Association of Conservation Commissions. Councilor Williams also suggested a small budget for trash bags to collect invasive species and the Chairman agreed.

Hearing no objections, the motion carried unanimously.

Ms. Clark also reported that on Saturdays June 4 and 9, there would be trails maintenance workshops led by Lew Shelley of SnowHawk, LLC. Ms. Clark said that Mr. Haynes was very excited to have this lined-up and to be working toward volunteer trail maintenance that cuts down money needed from the City and would train a cadre of people to help with future trail improvement projects. Ms. Clark noted that the Director of Parks, Recreation, & Facilities, Andy Bohannon, offered to pay for Mr. Shelley's honorarium so it does not come from Commission funds. Ms. Clark thought this was a great opportunity for a new crew of people to learn these skills and get more involved at Goose Pond.

ii) ***ARM Fund Subcommittee***

Chair Von Plinsky reported that Whole Forestry Products from CT outbid the City for the parcels it tried to purchase at auction. While he said this was not ideal, he did not want to dive deeply into the matter on the record. He said a quick glance at Whole Forestry Products' website indicated that the owner earned a Conservation & Forestry Award from the NE Forestry Association. Mr. Therriault asked if it would be a problem for the Commission to reach out to the company and invite them to talk to the Commission about their plans for the parcels. The

Chair thought it was a great idea to build a relationship but he would reach out to the City first to ensure it was okay.

iii) *Greater Goose Pond Forest Stewardship*

Mr. Walker reported that he and Mr. Bill walked the Goose Pond loop trail around the pond doing a signage inventory. The Chairman said he hikes that area a lot and the north end of the pond is a problem area, with some bridges crossing streams. He asked whether that had come up. Mr. Walker replied in the affirmative, noting that was an area that needs work. Mr. Walker thought Mr. Bohannon had tried to move the trail away from the waterfront to minimize erosion and allow that area to recover. Ms. Clark said Mr. Haynes had reported that they hoped to have the grant for some of the major work to take place next summer, possibly working with the Student Conservation Association. The Chair asked if that was summer 2022 or 2023 and Ms. Clark confirmed 2023.

iv) *Invasive Species*

Councilor Williams reported that there were upcoming events on the calendar for once the invasives start growing. Green Up Keene is in April, and he hoped to share announcements with their materials like last year, which he said was a success. He wanted to know the possibility of putting an announcement on the City website. Ms. Marcou said she would explore adding that to the Commission webpage if Councilor Williams compiled the information.

Councilor Williams added that so far, he had paid for materials like trash bags out-of-pocket, which he would continue to do if needed, but he would not mind a budget to offset those costs. In addition to trash bags, a future budget for materials could also pay for replacement shrubbery. Vice Chair Madison asked if the Public Works Department or Parks, Recreation, & Facilities Department could provide the trash bags, in addition to conserving the materials left over after Green Up Keene. The Chairman would follow-up with the Director of Public Works. Councilor Williams said he was a big fan of the Public Works Department as they had been great at hauling off the invasives. If the surplus from Green Up Keene and help from the Public Works Department did not work out, the Commission would revisit a budget for these materials.

5) Discussion Items

A) Conservation Commission Speaking Events

Moving into the summer months with Covid-19 numbers trending down, Vice Chair Madison felt it was a safe time to revisit this. The Chair agreed and asked about a composting/waste focus, or water issues. He asked Vice Chair Madison what he would focus on if only one event were possible this summer. Vice Chair Madison said he would want to focus on waste and do a “Trash Talk.” Otherwise, there were opportunities on pollination with Mr. Therriault and invasives with Councilor Williams. The Vice Chair did not want to dominate the decision making. Commissioners were encouraged to think of possibilities over the next month. Vice

Chair Madison would work on a venue for a waste event over the next month and the Commission agreed to leave the April meeting with a venue and speakers, and ideally a date. Vice Chair Madison reminded that the Keene Food Festival is in early June and there are possibilities to pair with that event. He wants to see if the Monadnock Food Co-op would lend their outdoor amphitheater space for an outdoor discussion on sustainable food waste, composting, and solid waste management the evening of or before the Festival, which would ideally have composting and compostable utensils, etc. He thought more people might be interested if waste were put into context of the local restaurants and food system.

Mr. Bill asked whether Green Up Keene was too soon to plan an accompanying speaking event. Vice Chair Madison said it was too quick with the event next month, but he and the Chair agreed that it could be a good accompaniment in future years. Vice Chair Madison agreed that in 2023 they will find other events, such as one he wants to do on water quality accompanying the river cleanup, What's the Buzz on Pollinators, and one on invasives. Ultimately, he got the idea for these speaking events from the Science Café in Nashua and Concord, where a different science topic is discussed each month in a relaxed environment at a bar or café, to hear from a panel of experts and network with likeminded individuals. The Chair would be happy to achieve this goal.

- B) Beaver Brook to Cemetery**
- C) Airport Solar Project Update**

The Chairman said this was not necessarily in the Commission's purview, but it had come-up a few times. Mr. Therriault stated that he spoke with the Assistant Public Works Director, Duncan Watson, who said, "Well, I'm not really sure what we're doing, Revision Energy is managing this, and they will have to give us an answer at some point." So, Mr. Therriault wanted to hear from Revision Energy, but because they are a subcontractor to the City, he did not feel comfortable reaching out to them with questions unless the City authorized it. In the meantime, he wondered if the Commission could invite Revision Energy to come present to the Commission on their plans. Ms. Marcou also reached out to Mr. Watson for information, and he provided a slide show, which was shared with the Commission. The Chairman said the second part of the slide show provided a map of the array location. The Chairman thought it was okay for the Commission to seek pollinator plantings throughout the development of this project. The Chairman said this was informational.

- D) Joint Council Meeting – Eversource Scenic Roads**

The Chairman reported that he would attend the joint Council meeting on April 7. He thought it strange that he could not represent the Commission alone, but understood it was per NH Statute. He said it was a matter of trees that need to be removed along scenic byways. The Commission was unclear as to whether Councilor Williams and Vice Chair Madison would count as a part of the Commission quorum at the Council meeting, but believed they should be. The Chairman reported that he planned to visit the list of trees to ensure they were not picking the wrong ones; he did not think there were nefarious issues. According to those who responded, Ms. Marcou

believed there would be a quorum present on April 7. Ms. Clark said she had done this before for the Commission and it is essentially a formality.

6) New or Other Business

The Chairman said they received the annual dues bill from the NHACC, which was not due until the end of April. The Commission would discuss at their next meeting. They usually do not pay in full and had not always paid on time.

Councilor Williams noted that some Councilors were bringing forward a homelessness initiative to the Finance, Organization, & Personnel Committee, part of which was looking at the issue of illegal camping in the woods that causes ecological damage from trash and human waste. Part of the initiative idea is to have designated camping spaces—Wheelock Park Campground is no longer an option—such as some primitive areas in parks, with trash removal and a Porto Potty. Though how to implement, permit, and determine what is appropriate is unclear. Councilor Williams and the Chairman hoped for a broader discussion next month on the camping issue that he thinks is relevant to the Commission.

Ms. Marcou reported that in May, an Earth Excavation Permit would be presented to the Commission. The matter gained approval from the Zoning Board of Adjustment in March and the Planning Board would hear the matter in April, before the Commission would consider it and send their recommendations back to the Planning Board for their final decision. The property is 0 RT-9, across the road from Otter brook on vacant land where the campground was. This would be the first Earth Excavation Permit presented to the City. Vice Chair Madison asked if this referred to a gravel mining operation and Ms. Marcou replied in the affirmative.

7) Adjournment – Next Meeting Date: April 18, 2022

There being no further business, Chair Von Plinsky adjourned the meeting at 5:34 PM.

Respectfully submitted by,
Katrnya Kibler, Minute Taker
March 28, 2022

Reviewed and edited by,
Corinne Marcou, Administrative Assistant
March 31, 2022