

TOWN OF NORTHFIELD, VERMONT
Town Forest Stewardship Committee
Minutes of September 19, 2023

Meeting called to order at 6:30pm

I. ROLL CALL

All present from TFSC, Nelson and Blake attending remotely. Also present were Joe Zuaro and Warren Bright, both Northfield residents.

II. APPROVAL OF MINUTES: August 29, 2023

Motion to approve by Russ, second by Ray. Motion carried 4-0-2 with Blake and Colin abstaining due to absence.

III. PUBLIC PARTICIPATION (SCHEDULED): None.

IV. DISCUSSION (*agenda order was amended without objection to discuss the proposed ski trail first to accommodate the public present to discuss only that topic*)

c. Ski Trail Proposal (*order adjusted*)

2. Discuss Further Approval of Trail Proposed at Last Meeting (*order adjusted*)

Discussion continued from the August 29th meeting about the proposal put forward by Joe Zuaro to create a new ski route starting at the Pain Mt. summit and heading downhill along the Northern property line, ending near Butternut Junction. At the last meeting, the group wasn't sure of the approval process and tabled until more of the board was present and more insight into the appropriate process could be obtained. With the full committee present discussion continued. Members of the committee expressed concern over the proposed route's proximity to identified sites of the Male Fern, a threatened species, and the potential for damaging them or disrupting the habitat that allows them to exist there. While the primary use of the trail would be when snow is on the ground, initial thinning/clearing would need to take place during seasons when the ground is bare. Potential solutions discussed included:

- Placing limitations on the time of year during which initial work and subsequent maintenance could take place to be outside of the growing cycle of the Male Fern
- Working with the TFSC to identify areas where the Male Fern grows to avoid both disrupting the immediate vicinity and to ensure that brush removal wouldn't accidentally drag through those areas
- Having a member of the TFSC participate in the initial thinning/clearing

Additionally, concerns were raised that because the steep terrain and remote nature of the run would limit the trail's use to more advanced skiers that the additional clearing was not necessary. Joe suggested that because the approach to the top was, while arduous, not technically challenging, that having a more "intermediate" route would open the terrain to a wider variety of users of the Town Forest, augmenting the more formal ski trails currently available in the contiguous Shaw Center, and providing in Joe's words "a great run if you're only going to take one for the day".

Conversation was had about the extent of any thinning/clearing that would take place, with references made to other areas along the Paine Mountain Trail where though similar work has taken place without permission previously, it is not noticeable to most users of the trail network unless they know specifically what they are looking for.

The group discussed consulting with the State Botanist to determine what measures could be taken to protect the integrity of the Male Fern habitat while still allowing for a new recreational trail to be built.

Motion to approve the request to develop a new backcountry ski trail as presented, conditional on the inclusion of any restrictions to work-timing or route suggested by the State Botanist made by Colin, second by Ray. Motion carried 5-0-1 with Blake abstaining.

1. Standardized Trail Approval Method (to be incorporated into TFP update)
(*order adjusted*)

The group will work to document the official process for reviewing and evaluating potential new trails within the town forest. In summer of 2021 the committee created a New Trail Request Form which was approved by the selectboard and used to document and officially approve/remove unsanctioned trails within the town forest. As the group is currently reviewing the Town Forest Stewardship Plan for revision, it was decided to include both the form and the documented approval process in an appendix.

a. Wayfinding Signage

1. Review and Comment - most members of the TFSC have seen the maps and wayfinding plan being developed by the VOREC committee and many were present at the July selectboard hearing when they were presented for public comment. The TFSC is looking forward to seeing how the project continues to unfold, and would like to provide language for trail etiquette and permitted uses to be included on the maps and any other wayfinding signage.

2. Craft Recommended Uses, Rules, & Policies for Signage

The Shaw Center director is posting new signage listing etiquette and permitted uses for that property, and the committee would like any similar signage to match as closely as possible with what is being created for the Shaw, consistent with strategies of trying to manage the contiguous parcels as one larger connected asset.

3. Allowable Uses

Two areas of discussion were:

- The inclusion of language allowing for “authorized camping”. There is not a clear process documented within the TFSP for authorizing camping on town land, and if we are going to include language stating that some camping can be authorized it would be good to have that process and any accompanying evaluation criteria formalized.
- NU is currently considering allowing Class 1 eMTBs (“pedal assist”) to use the Shaw Trail network. Nelson and Ray are going to bring more information on the classes of eMTBs and any policies currently being implemented to the TFSC’s next meeting so that the group can have a more informed conversation about what should or should not be permitted within the Town Forest.

b. Town Forest Plan (TFP)

1. Cheney Field Mowing Schedule: TFSC chair received concerns about recent mowing in Cheney Field. Concerns included the cutting down of milkweed that could contain laravel Monarch Butterflies which are threatened, and also a tracked machine being used which damages the field when turning sharply. The TFSC had a discussion about developing a Cheney Field mowing schedule,

Colin reminded the TFSC that there is a mowing schedule the town has. This schedule has the field split out into three sections and has one section a year scheduled to mow. It appears that with the retirement of the former Utility Manager that the new Utility Manager was not aware of the mowing schedule. A couple of TFSC members should meet with the Town Manager and Utility Manager to discuss this schedule for future mowings. The TFSC will also write and incorporate the mowing schedule into the revised Town Forest Plan 2. What Wildlife to Consider, How, When, etc. A discussion was had about what Cheney Field is being managed for. Historically it was discussed that it was being managed for grassland for bird species such as Bobolink. The property is most likely not large enough to manage for that species and it was suggested that TFSC look at Vermont's Wildlife action plan and see if there are other Species of Greatest Conservation Need (SGCN) that might be more realistic for the town and committee to manage the field for such as the Monarch Butterfly. Jeremy will look into SGCN and bring a list back for the next meeting. This would also be incorporated into the revised Town Forest Plan.

d. Vacant TFSC Position: The TFSC continued a conversation about filling the vacant seat with the current Shaw Center Director, Andrew Padilla. The proposal comes as an effort to increase transparency with things happening at Shaw Center and the Town Forest. Having the Shaw Center Director at monthly meetings will help coordinate management of both the town and Norwicks properties. Jeremy checked with Jeff and he was going to see if it was possible to assign a seat in that manner. Jeremy spoke with Andrew and he is interested in joining for the same reasons.

V. PUBLIC PARTICIPATION (UNSCHEDULED): None

VI. OTHER BUSINESS

1. Discussed getting some hats made up to identify members conducting trail work out in the Town Forest. Colin was going to work up a simple design. Jeremy checked with Jeff and he ok'd the purchase with a limit of \$200.
2. Russ updated the group on the Hawk Watch work day. Him and Ray went up and did some clearing to maintain the view.

VII. ADJOURNMENT: 8:30 Motion by Russ, Second by Ray, Passed 5-0. Blake signed off at 8 pm.