

TOWN OF NORTHFIELD, VERMONT
NORTHFIELD CONSERVATION COMMISSION
Wednesday, January 28, 2026 1800
MINUTES

- 1. ROLL CALL:** Russ Barrett (on-line), Nigel Hicks-Tibbles, David Mears, Suz Stillinger, Deb Zuaro
In attendance: Bill Clements, Bill Dell'Isola, Ginny Kunkel, Mary Nadon Scott (on-line)

2. UPDATES TO TONIGHT'S AGENDA

Suz asked that we add public education to the agenda

3. PUBLIC PARTICIPATION (SCHEDULED):

a. Report from Cheney Field and Town Forest Work Group & Discussion

Bill D. led the presentation of the draft proposal (attached to these minutes) of Access and Accessibility Options. The first four pages pertain to Cheney Field. The group went on to examine other access points in the next five pages.

The essence of the proposal is to create a pilot program "of vehicular access to Cheney Field on an explicitly experimental basis, with clear conditions and limits."

Bill and other members of the work group were praised for their thoughtful approach and hard work that led to this proposal from a situation that has in the past been contentious. Suz asked for clarification about the removal of the heavy equipment staging area as originally included in the water tank replacement contract. Bill explained that after multiple field trips, the Work Group saw no need to keep that area for public parking as there was adequate existing space that could potentially be used.

David moved to authorize the concept of the pilot project and for the Work Group to present it to the Select Board at their February 10, 2026 meeting. Deb seconded and the motion passed unanimously.

4. APPROVAL OF MINUTES: December 10, 2025

Deb moved to approve the minutes as submitted; Suz seconded. This passed unanimously.

5. DISCUSSION

1. Cheney Field Restoration

David stated he wants the Interim Town Manager (and our new Town Manager depending on timing) to be an active part of the restoration with the help of the NCC. He suggests that Jeremy head up the NCC part of the planning and oversight.

David mentioned the possibility that the diagonal unplanned disruptive road could be used if there were future timber removal, though none is planned at this time. Russ stated that he would like the basic structure to remain. No further discussion.

2. Town Forest Conservation Easement – Next Steps and Community Engagement

David gave a brief summary of the presentation he, Jeremy and Mead Binhammer of the Vermont Land Trust made to the Select Board late last year. The Board asked the NCC to continue to pursue an easement.

David discussed a meeting with Bizhan Yahyazadeh, the VP for Facilities Operations & Conference Services about their land north of the Town Forest up from Slate Avenue. Bizhan presented our idea of buying the land to the NU Trustees and reported back to David that they are not interested. He repeated that NU will continue to collaborate with the Northfield Town Forest in other ways and has no plans to develop the land.

-Deb asked that we consider creating an MOU with NU for continued public access to their land adjacent to the Town Forest.

-Nigel wondered if it might be possible to obtain a small amount of land at the Slate Avenue access point.

Suz asked that we consider a public forum to educate about conservation easements and our TF one in particular before continuing to next steps with the Select Board. No one disagreed.

David stated he would discuss with Mead Binhammer; Suz agreed to help organize the event.

3. Reconnecting with Rivers – Upcoming Meeting February 12, 2026: Summary of Potential Actions

Deb reported that the group is trying to build momentum but now that the River Walk/dam removal projects are delayed, she is not sure where we are.

David stated that he is hopeful about the "Committee of Committees" idea that came out of previous meetings. This would be a space for representatives to meet periodically because there is some overlap in what different groups are doing and they could benefit from sharing ideas and assistance.

Deb stated the one breakout group she was interested in was targeting ways to get public school students more engaged.

4. Brainstorming re: Potential Spring and Summer 2026 Events

-David received a letter from the Vermont Center for Ecostudies about partnering with them on a butterfly event in July. Suz suggested this would be a good event to team up with the Berlin CC on.

-We could host a walk at the Garvey Hill Trails as those are less well-known to the town. Perhaps Mariela and/or Judy Knapp could lead. As an aside, Mariela will be graduating from High School and is looking for another student interested in serving on the commission.

-The public forum about the conservation easement

6. UPDATES

1. Town Forest Stewardship Committee (TFSC) update

-Emphasis has been on how to collaborate on the restoration of Cheney Field and on the Access/Accessibility Draft Proposal.

2. VYCC Youth Trails Improvement Project & Fundraising Strategy

David and Jeremy will be meeting with Judy Knapp at the High School and Patrick Pfeifer at VYCC to look at next steps. He also plans on meeting with Tom Davis about possible grants.

3. Northfield Range Conservation – Cooperative Effort with Mad River Valley Conservation Commissions: No update

4. Berlin Conservation Commission Coordination: Deb offered to reach out to them but Russ is on the Berlin Pond Watershed Committee so will see them soon.

7. PUBLIC PARTICIPATION (UNSCHEDULED) None

8. OTHER BUSINESS

Suz asked how to post on our FB page. Jeremy has access and Deb thinks she does too. David said any of us can write an article for the News.

Deb and Bill will get something in the News about the Access/Accessibility Cheney Field Pilot Project

9. AGENDA FOR NEXT MEETING (February 25, 2026)

10. ADJOURNMENT at 1930

Submitted by Suz Stillinger

Northfield Town Forest and Cheney Field Accessibility Working Group

Access and Accessibility Assessment and Recommendation

Working Group Members:

Bill Dell'Isola (chair), Deborah Zuaro (secretary), Mary Nadon Scott, Janan Hamm, Bill Clements, David Mears, Jeremy Whalen, Andrew Padilla, and Virginia Kunkel

Forward:

Building on the recommendations of the *NTF Access Feasibility Study* (Dubois and King, May 2022), the Working Group has developed a set of notes and recommendations aimed at enhancing both access and accessibility to the Town Forest. These notes identify key questions, concerns, and areas for future exploration related to potential access points, and take into account the social, environmental, and practical factors that shape access and accessibility decisions. Particular emphasis has been placed on evaluating options for access and accessibility at Cheney Field.

Many members of the Northfield community have expressed ongoing concern about avoiding permanent disturbance or the construction of parking infrastructure within Cheney Field as cited in the 2022 Feasibility Study. At the same time, many community members have voiced a desire for improved accessibility to the Town Forest, recognizing the importance of equitable access to town-owned land. The Working Group sees Cheney Field as an opportunity for thoughtfully expanded and inclusive access, grounded in stewardship and community goals.

In addition the Working Group assessed other access sites and provided recommendations to improve these sites.

The Working Group outlined their recommendations across three different accessibility focus areas, that have the most impact for accessibility, in addition to providing recommendations for multiple locations that can improve access to the Town Forest.

For this analysis:

- **Access** refers to a means of approaching or entering a place. In this case, it refers to improving the means of approaching or entering the town forest.
- **Accessibility** refers to the quality of being easily reached, entered, or used by people who have mobility challenges.

The Work Group will present this "Recommendation of Access and Accessibility Options" to the Select Board in early 2026.

Accessibility Focus Area 1

Lower Cheney Field Access

(Cheney Farm Road / Byam Gate)

The Cheney Field Accessibility Working Group recognizes Cheney Field as a treasured community asset that should be broadly shared with the community. At the same time, Cheney Field must continue to support important wildlife and nesting bird habitat. The working group also emphasizes the importance of maintaining the peace, seclusion, and quiet character that make Cheney Field a unique resource so close to town. The group agrees that achieving all three goals, accessible community access, ecological protection, and preservation of solitude, requires regulated and conditioned vehicular access.

Concept:

- Regulated Vehicular Access

- Vehicular access to Cheney Field should be limited, intentional, and conditional, with proper oversight and monitoring, rather than open or unrestricted. The working group views regulated access as a necessary tool to balance accessibility needs with stewardship responsibilities and community concerns. This approach is intended to directly respond to issues raised by community members regarding potential misuse, degradation, and impacts to Cheney Field and the Town Forest.

- Parking and Infrastructure Considerations

- The working group assumes that Cheney Farm Road will exist in an improved, hard-packed, and widened condition, rather than the former grass two-track and does not recommend the construction of a formal parking lot. Vehicular access and turnaround would rely on the same one-way traffic patterns anticipated by the Municipal Water Department for tank maintenance, which is expected to adequately accommodate handicap-accessible vehicular access without introducing new infrastructure. Overall, access would remain generally consistent with pre-2025 conditions, with modest improvements following construction that align with the Northfield Water Department's operational needs. Improvements are recommended to the intersection of Byam Hill and Cheney Farm Roads, to widen and level this turn and make it safer for traffic.
- A gathering site should be intentionally furnished to create a welcoming place where people can gather and spend time outdoors. Grant funds could be used to install tables, benches, and other modest amenities that support accessibility, comfort, and shared use, helping to establish the terminus as a functional and inviting gathering space.

-

- Timing and Conditions for Vehicular Access

- Vehicular access should be limited to daylight hours only. Access windows could align with town-wide events such as Memorial Day, Fourth of July, and Labor Day, as well as farmers market days. Over time, and based on experience gained through piloting, access could potentially expand to one designated day per week during the spring through fall seasons.

Concerns:

- Equity and Access

- Equity concerns remain regarding how limited or conditional access opportunities are allocated and ensuring fair, transparent access for all users.
- User Safety
 - Systems would be needed to ensure no users become inadvertently locked behind gates.
 - Ongoing monitoring and active management of gates and any associated permits would be required.
- Capacity and Funding Considerations
 - All proposed approaches would require a combination of grant funding and/or town funding, along with sufficient staff or volunteer capacity to administer programs and manage ongoing processes.
- Stewardship and Resource Protection

There is ongoing concern about potential degradation of Cheney Field and the Town Forest resulting from misuse or abuse of access improvements, underscoring the need for careful management and oversight.

Pilot-Based Approach to improve accessibility to Cheney Field

- The working group supports piloting vehicular access to Cheney Field on an explicitly experimental basis, with clear conditions and limits. A phased pilot program is recommended as a practical way to test regulated access strategies, better understand operational needs and potential impacts, and build a shared vision grounded in lived experience rather than assumptions. Lessons learned through early pilot efforts would inform future decisions and guide potential refinements over time.
- The pilot program would begin at a small scale in 2026, with a goal of offering one to two accessible events during the year. These initial pilot days would help the town better understand staffing needs, traffic management requirements, coordination with town staff and volunteers, and overall operational feasibility. Pilot days could align with existing town-wide events such as Memorial Day, Fourth of July, Labor Day, and/or farmers market days. If early pilots are successful, the town could explore expanding access to one designated day per week during the spring, summer, and fall seasons. All vehicular access during the pilot would be limited to daylight hours.
- On days when the pilot is active, vehicular access and parking at Cheney Field would be restricted to handicap license holders only. Parallel parking would be permitted along Cheney Farm Road, and vehicles would use the same turnaround and circulation patterns currently planned for Water Department maintenance vehicles. On pilot days, vehicles with handicap licenses could either drive directly to the site or be supported through a shuttle or drop-off option. Shuttle or drop-off locations could include downtown or improved parking areas such as Byam Road.
- Operations during pilot events would be coordinated closely with town staff and volunteers, including managing gate opening and closing. Pilot days would also serve as an opportunity to observe and evaluate traffic flow, access control needs, and on-site management considerations. Access on pilot days would

remain conditional and regulated, with the possibility of additional or expanded access during special events, as appropriate.

- A gathering area should be intentionally furnished to create a welcoming, functional place where people can gather and spend time outdoors. Grant funds could be used to install benches, tables, and other modest amenities that support accessibility, comfort, and shared use.

Lower Cheney Field Access Recommendation: The Northfield Conservation Commission to design and implement a limited, regulated vehicular access pilot for Lower Cheney Field, beginning in 2026, to improve accessibility while protecting wildlife habitat and recognizing community concerns. The pilot should use road conditions and traffic patterns that will be used by the Water Department, avoid construction of a formal parking lot, limit access to daylight hours and designated days, and restrict on-site parking to handicap license holders, with optional shuttle or drop-off support. The pilot should be actively managed and monitored, including accessibility-oriented amenities at a designated gathering area, and be evaluated for equity, safety, staffing capacity, and resource impacts before any expansion or long-term changes are considered.

Accessibility Focus Area 2

Byam Road Corridor (Near Lower Cheney Field)

Concept: Use widened roadway conditions created by water line work to add limited roadside parking.

- Downhill side parallel parking: 2–3 spaces.
- Opposite side (knotweed area): If filled, could support 3–4 nose-in parking spaces, plus a turnaround area.

- Total potential capacity discussed: up to 6 spaces along Byam Road.

Considerations:

- Coordinate with contractors already working on the water tank project to shape or prepare parking areas in spring.
- Requires:
 - Approval from abutting landowners.
 - Stormwater and drainage review.
 - Clear signage specifying permitted use and time limits.
- Estimated benefit: reduces walking distance to Cheney Field by approximately 0.25 miles and 150 feet of elevation from the Shaw Center, and 250 feet of elevation from downtown.
- Parking in winter could be difficult without careful attention/plowing
- It will be important to Improve the turn that leads from Byam Road (past the first gate) onto Cheney farm road. Identifying where modifications to road bank/culvert would be important.
- Shorter walking distance may meaningfully improve usability for people with limited mobility, even without fully accessible trails.

Byam Road Corridor (Near Lower Cheney Field) Recommendation: Northfield

Conservation Commission to coordinate with the Water Tank Project contractor, municipal departments, and abutting landowners to evaluate and, where feasible, implement limited roadside parking along the Byam Road corridor using widened roadway conditions created by water line work. Improvements should include clearly signed, time-limited parking, a safe turnaround, and targeted safety upgrades at the Byam Road–Cheney Farm Road turn, subject to drainage, stormwater, and seasonal maintenance considerations, and are intended to reduce walking distance and elevation to Lower Cheney Field for users with limited mobility.

Accessibility Focus Area 3

End of Slate Avenue (intersection with Lybrand Trail)

Concept: Create small parking area at end of Slate Avenue by altering Gate/Rocks

- This would open an area where people could gather with benches/other amenities and enjoy the unique scenery in the drainage.
- This area is level and could accommodate most including those with mobility challenges
- Could serve a pocket park

Considerations

- This area is right on the line between town land and NU land, will need to coordinate with both town and NU

- Creating this space could occur with trail work that is needed along the Lybrand trail
- *Very tight and next to existing driveway- area would need to be pushed beyond that
- Parking and turn around could be tough
 - BD to take pictures and share w/ group
- This would provide a place for accessibility challenged individuals a place to enjoy a scenic and easy to access portion of the Town/NU lands.

End of Slate Avenue (intersection with Lybrand Trail) Recommendation: Northfield Conservation Commission to work with Norwich University, abutting landowners, and municipal partners to evaluate the feasibility of creating a small, accessible parking and gathering area at the end of Slate Avenue. The focus should be on the potential for one to two handicap-accessible parking spaces and a modest, accessible “pocket park” that allows people with mobility challenges to enjoy a scenic and easily accessed portion of Town and Norwich University lands, while carefully considering site constraints, safety, and coordination with Lybrand Trail improvements

Access Focus Areas

Kingston Road

Concept: Create small-scale parking through grading improvements.

- Grading along Kingston Road could yield approximately three-four more parking spaces.
- Signage on Barrows road directing access-seekers is beneficial

Considerations

- This area is already accessed with motorized vehicles (off-roading around gate)
- Access here leads directly onto Norwich Land (not Town Land)
- Could get folks access to higher reaches of Town Forest faster
- Unless motorized access is vastly improved past the gate this is not a strong pathway for accessibility

Turkey Hill Road / Bottom of Turkey Hill

Concept: Establish a new access point via relatively flat terrain connecting to the Town Forest.

- Site walk confirmed that the route from the Lybrand Trail to Turkey Hill Road is relatively flat.
- Idea to place fill at the bottom of Turkey Hill to create:
 - An easier entry point.
 - A gentle path from adjacent NU land into the Town Forest.

Considerations

- This leads directly onto NU land, so will need to coordinate with NU for access and trails
- Does not provide accessibility improvement

Turkey Hill Road /Forest Road Intersection

Concept: Improve this existing parking location at intersection of Turkey Hill and Forest Road
Ideas

- Signage on road will help, right now not clear where to park
- Re-grading road to add more shoulder/parking area may be possible.
- Signage to direct people up to the top of Forest Road since there are signs along the road saying private property (public still has right of way to access town forests here)

Considerations

- Small and cost effective access improvement.
- Does not provide accessibility improvement

Downtown / Northfield Common Area

Concept: Improve how people find and understand access points.

- Install signage or a small kiosk on the Northfield Common.
- Complete installation of existing directional signs for Town Forest access sites and Shaw Outdoor Center.

Slate Avenue/Highland Avenue/Elm Street/Prospect Street

Concept: Streetside parallel parking in town

- Identify areas along these streets where parking is available to access the Town Forest
- Install signs so easily identify where to park, plus signs directing pedestrian traffic to the town forest.
- Many of these sections already identified in NTF Access Feasibility Study

Considerations

- This will add parking within town and relatively close to the Town Forest
- Will improve optics of where to park and how to access the Town Forest
- Need to make sure that areas identified for parking are safe for pedestrians and traffic
- Low Cost
- Winter street parking could be challenging
- Does not provide accessibility improvements.

Shaw Outdoor Center

Concept: Improve visibility and parking options at Green Mountain Family Practice and Shaw Outdoor Center

- Improve signage and information at parking spaces located at Green Mountain Family Practice
- Explore grant opportunities for accessibility equipment administered by Norwich University and Northfield Conservation Commission
- Norwich University to continue to explore addition of parking along Paine Mountain Road
- Explore potential for permanent agreement for the four parking spaces at Green Mountain Family Practice reserved for access to the Town Forest.

Considerations

- Continue to foster strong partnership between Norwich University and Town of Northfield as it relates to Access and Accessibility to the Town Forest.

Access Focus Areas Recommendation: Approach improving access to the Northfield Town Forest in a way that prioritizes clarity, safety, and stewardship while aligning improvements with the Town's operational capacity and partner readiness. Access investments should focus first on

low-cost, high-clarity improvements, such as signage, wayfinding, and modest parking enhancements, while reserving more complex or accessibility-focused interventions for locations where terrain, ownership, and infrastructure can meaningfully support them.

Future Considerations and Work for the Northfield Conservation Commission:

- Research best practices for accessibility improvements in outdoor recreation, drawing from examples in other towns and comparable sites.
- Explore collaboration and partnerships with Vermont Adaptive and Vermont Trails and Greenways Council to learn from existing models, design approaches, and lessons learned for better accessibility to the town forest. Explore grant opportunities accessibility equipment, including options to improve access from the Shaw Outdoor Center.
- Research access-control strategies to address common challenges at remote access sites, including security concerns.
- Identify approaches that minimize impacts to sensitive ecological resources while preserving the peace, solitude, and character that Cheney Field offers.
- Assess opportunities to create “easy-up” or more accessible trail segments, paired with benches and other modest trail-side infrastructure to make routes more inviting and usable.
- Continue to coordinate with town leadership post-construction restoration, requiring continued coordination with the water tank project engineer and Highway and Water Department staff

Reference: Community Mtg Notes, Accessibility, Walkability & Pedestrian Safety Task Force/ Conservation Commission Summer 2025 Notes:

- Goals:
 - Preserve Cheney Field and find other ways to get access
 - Define access
 - Define mowing schedule
 - More resources
 - Locking gate
 - Permanent parking on Norwich land(quarry area)
 - Parking with limited access (e.g. seasonal, sunrise to sunset)
- Concerns:
 - timing - need to make sure decisions are made so restoration is done or not

- Updated schedule
- Narrow roads
- safety - driving hill street and byam roads
- Volume and controls for amount of occupants
- Nesting birds
- More access can affect water storage tank
- Questions
 - access (what do we mean by access)
 - How do we define the space
 - Maintain road
 - We need an updated schedule
 - Why not shaw
 - Other examples of other areas have same issues
 - security/policing options (regulating)
 - Does better access = more traffic
 - Act 250 requirements
 - Can byam be widened
 - More clarification of shuttle idea