

TFSC Sep 20, 2021

Brad called the meeting to order at 6:05.

In attendance:

Subcommittee members: Nelson Hoffman, Lydia Petty, Russ Barrett, Brad Johnson, Colin Bright

Community members: Stephanie Maas, Jonathan Spencer, David Black, Mat Katz

The group introduced themselves. Most non-committee members were present to discuss potential access to town forest.

Public participation (scheduled):

There was no scheduled public participation.

Approval of Minutes:

Moved by Colin, seconded by Russ. Lydia's name needs correction, Nelson to change. 5-0-0

Updates from committee members:

Lydia and Colin went on a run to check out the new trails (unsanctioned) coming off the East side of the ridge. They parked on Barrows road and ran in through Kingston; Kingston is not particularly friendly for vehicles, though there is a turnaround near the NU property line. There are trails to both sides of Kingston, with those on the North/West side of Kingston connecting through to the existing trails on Paine Mountain. Lydia and Colin went up to the Hawk Watch and headed downhill and east on the trails in question, which look relatively new, or at least like they're getting a lot of new use. All trails appear to be on Norwich property, but are only accessible from Town land. There's extensive trail building (rock formations etc.). The trails intersect with VAST trails in a few places. Norwich will need to be involved in figuring out how to manage these new trails. Brad will reach out to Collin O. to find out whether they know about or want the new trails.

We need more direction from Selectboard (maybe?) about the general opinion on how involved we need to be with trails that come off of town property.

The group discussed a potential site visit either this fall or in the spring when it opens back up, possibly to be combined with the reroute discussion for the Ridgeline trail, but as fall sets in the trails will become hard to follow. October 11, 17, and 24 were discussed as possibilities. The weekend of the 24th there is a NU FTX and it is youth hunting weekend. Scheduled date for hike TBD.

There was a small group hike on Scragg Mountain, from Waitsfield back through to Northfield. There's a new trail on the Northfield side that avoids some of the steeper and more slippery sections of the previous trail. There is a group hike scheduled for this coming Sunday, 9/26 at the Middlesex Town Forest.

A small group (Russ, Brad, Washington County Forester and the Commissioner of FPR) inspected potential access points for timber harvests in the town forest. The county forester is open to rewriting our forest management plan, but we will need to formally request this assistance through the Select Board if we want it. There hasn't been a timber harvest in the TF since 1991, but timber management is one of the responsibilities laid out in the TFSP.

Working group updates:

Town Forest Access:

Lydia:

There have been two site walks and a community forum to collect input on the parking study being conducted by DuBois and King, paid for by a CVRPC grant applied for by the Town Manager and Economic Development Director. There is an additional walk this Thursday at 6:30 PM, and a survey is posted online through the 30th. The events have been well attended and there has been lively conversation. While a clear consensus hasn't emerged, there has been lots of useful information brought up. Specific concerns raised at the site visits and forum that should be mentioned to this group are fires and trash (more near the party sites than at the access points). Typically the sites are cleaned up by individual community members.

Discussion ensued among the TFSC around establishing a formal routine of trail inspections to maintain awareness of issues like fires, downed trees and trash. Currently the group all keeps an eye on things informally, but setting up a schedule would help us stay more on top of it. To be discussed in more detail later in the meeting.

Conversation returned to the parking study, and the TFSC decided to allow the public to make their comments here rather than waiting until the unscheduled public comment section at the end of the meeting.

Stephanie:

Should there only be one solution for access, or do we need multiple solutions? There are a variety of users, and there probably needs to be a variety of solutions to adequately solve the problem.

Lydia:

There are some constraints because of how the study is funded, but it's largely correct that there should be a number of solutions. The consultant is only contracted to present three options with one to be refined. It's likely that we'd decided to pursue multiple options but have to start with one specific idea for financial reasons. That being said, if there isn't community support for the ideas generated by the study, the town isn't going to implement them.

Stephanie:

How are the consultants determining what the priority is?

Lydia:

They're looking for consensus from the group discussions and survey results, and then look at the physical realities of what can actually be built.

Stephanie:

The neighborhood walks, community forum, and survey results are not likely to capture the full spectrum of the community, both the heavy users that already have access, and those that don't have technology access or the ability to get out for the walks. Should we consider whether we need to make specific request to accommodate the needs of populations not being reached? Should the TFSC be taking a strong standpoint on this topic?

Nelson:

It's important to consider that this is not the group that sponsored the project. At the same time, this group has strong and differing opinions on whether there is adequate access, which has been the topic of much conversation at our meetings. We don't have a lot of information on the environmental impacts of increased access, etc. and the TFSP doesn't provide the necessary clarity on which of the uses of the town forest we're supposed to be prioritizing.

Colin:

The TFSP calls out priorities of the land to be recreation, education, conservation, and timber management, but doesn't say anything about how we're supposed to balance the areas where those uses conflict with each other. We've been trying to work within the guidelines given in the plan to implement its goals, but need more guidance from the Selectboard on how to prioritize the forest's many potential uses.

It's important to note that the study could actually point to no one in the community wanting any changes to current access to the town forest. There are multiple plans pointing to questions about whether access needs improvement, including the TFSP, and this study is a good tool to help determine that.

Stephanie:

How are we going to get grants if we reject the options provided by the consultant? If we don't pursue their options we won't be able to get funding.

Nelson:

There is some public confusion about what grants/opportunities are in what stages of development. The parking study is a feasibility study being conducted under a grant from CVRPC that was applied for by the

town. There is also a group of community members working on a possible VOREC application. The TFSC endorsed the VOREC grant letter of interest, which includes many things (mapping, trail signage/wayfinding/kiosks, loaner outdoor gear for community members), and implementing the results of the access study, which again could be no action. Since it's only a letter of interest, it's also possible that the scope of the grant (if the town is invited to apply) could change in the application.

Stephanie:

How are we going to get grants if we reject the options provided by the consultant? We can't get the grant if we're not going with what was recommended by the consultant.

Colin:

Since the VOREC grant is still only in the letter of interest stage, it could still be revised to not include an access infrastructure project. Also, if those funds were still included in an approved grant application and the community didn't want to implement that portion of the project, the town could return that portion of the funding. It's important to note that the letter of intent for the VOREC grant included implementing the result of the parking study currently underway, which could indicate no community support for increased access. Since neither the parking study nor the VOREC grant are projects that the TFSC is responsible for, it might be good to move on to another topic.

Dave:

Where can we see the letter of intent:

Brad:

The letter of interest was just a form online, and is not available for public access through the town. If we're invited to submit a grant application that would be. The group working on the letter of interest was not able to obtain any previous examples from the state and doesn't know if they are available through the grantor.

Jonathan and Stephanie expressed concern with the survey for the study. They feel that it isn't reflective of realistic solutions, and by showing many parking lot options and nothing smaller scale that it is intended to steer the survey results to show that the public is supportive of a small parking lot. They feel that it's implied by the survey that parking is going to be a part of the plan regardless of community desire. It would be better to use a wider variety of solutions in the survey to not confuse people about what could potentially be happening. Additionally, community members expressed concern about the transparency of the process.

Colin:

This is good feedback for DuBois and King, who authored the survey and are the group conducting the feasibility study for the town. We'll pass that feedback on to the town manager who is in charge of the project locally. Since the TFSC isn't the owner of the feasibility study or the survey, it would probably be good to move on to other topics.

Mat:

Randolph is a really good example of how access can be created in a low key way, and people in town should check that out as an example. It was funded by VOREC and has been very successful in providing local access in a way that felt appropriate for the scale of the area.

Dave:

While there are minutes and agendas for NCC and TFSC meetings, he's concerned that he can't find them for NRRR meetings, that there isn't appropriate oversight over the NRRR, and that they aren't being transparent. They're steering a public process and priorities without any accountability. No one knows who they are.

Lydia offered to provide some background information on NRRR and its steering committee, of which she has been and is a member. The TFSC agreed that the insight could be helpful in the conversation even though it isn't directly related to the TFSC.

Lydia:

NRRR is not a municipal government body which is why there aren't minutes or agendas posted, but all of the meetings have been advertised and open to the public who are always encouraged to attend. The steering committee was formed in 2018 as a result of a grant issued to the town by VTrans and was comprised of members of many different community groups (Rec Committee, NCDN, NCC, NU, Selectboard members, the Town Manager, VTrans, VT ACCD, and other community members) working with planning

contractor SE Group. All of the NRRR steering committee members are listed at the beginning of the NRRR plan, which is available on the town website. The resulting document was formally accepted and endorsed by the Selectboard in early 2021. Since that time, members of the group have continued to meet to discuss ways that community volunteers can help the town carry out the priorities identified through all of the public engagement that took place during the planning process.

Stephanie:

So who is the implementation committee that is deciding which projects happen?

Lydia:

There isn't an implementation committee. The NRRR plan was adopted by the Selectboard, and a group of community volunteers from NRRR has been exploring how they can help the town enact the priorities identified in that plan. What gets implemented is decided by the town.

Dave:

There isn't any transparency in this NRRR group. People are advocating for their own agendas and not what the community wants.

(Lydia and Colin left the meeting)

(Dave left the meeting)

Other Working Group updates:

Because of the time and energy given to discussions of the parking study, the TFSC decided to postpone discussion of scheduled trail maintenance, seasonal considerations for trail use, potential rerouting of the ridgeline trail, and needed updates to the TFSP until a subsequent meeting.

Nelson:

Mowing of Cheney field will be scheduled by the Water Dept. Mat expressed concern about the knotweed growing in Cheney. Nelson stated the intent is to avoid knotweed for this season's mowing, but that it needs to be managed properly for conservation planning.

Nelson nominated Mat Katz to be on the TFSC. Russ clarified that nominating and appointment to the committee goes through the NCC. Brad will bring this to the NCC.

Motioned to adjourn by Russ, second by Nelson: 3-0-0

Meeting adjourned at 7:22PM.