

Parks and Natural Resources Committee (PNRC)
Tuesday, March 15, 2022, 7:00 PM
Regular [virtual] Meeting
Minutes -- FINAL

1. Call to order and roll call

The was called to order at 7:07 PM

Attending: Jim Morrow (Chair), Ken Feathers (secretary), Vicky Wetherell, Charlotte Pyle, Tom Harrington, Sue Harrington, Quentin Kessel (Cons. Com. Rep.)

Town Staff Present: Jennifer Kaufman, Jay O'Keefe

Not attending: Juliana Barrett (Alt.), Miranda Davis (Alt.)

2. Approval of Minutes

2.1 Minutes of the January 25, 2022, meeting were approved (moved S. Harrington, second Wetherell)

3. Opportunity for Public comment

No members of the general public were present.

4. By Consensus: Agenda item 5.4 was moved up to allow Jay O'Keefe to have the opportunity to leave early.

4.1 [agenda 5.4] American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) Funding Proposals

Town staff indicated that at the March 14, 2022 Council meeting the proposed uses for ARPA funding were approved. This includes \$ 100,000 for developing a Parks and Recreation Master Plan and \$750,000 to implement the plan. It is anticipated that the town will develop an RFP and seek extensive community engagement throughout the process. Jay O'Keefe indicated that given some staff vacancies currently under active recruitment it was unlikely that a draft RFP for PNRC input would be available until our next meeting in May. Jennifer Kaufman suggested PNRC members review the examples provided in the January Agenda to become familiar with what a plan may involve. Discussion included suggestions for elements to include:

- Increase in trail capacity to address increased use due to covid.
- Ensure that maintenance is included.
- Anticipate changes in usage, especially for Southeast Park, with completion of the new elementary school and increased emphasis on experiential learning.

5. [agenda 4.] Old Business

5.1 [agenda 4.1] Park Updates

Sue Harrington noted that Merrow Meadow trail was now clear of ice. Signs of spring (wood frogs and eggs) were noted. The park is still heavily used especially by dogwalkers, with 7 cars during a recent visit.

Minor repair on the curbs of the bridges is needed.

J. Kaufman indicated that the town will move the sign for Sawmill Brook to the new parking lot and block the potential for angle parking at the former parking location, which is on private land.

5.2 [agenda 4.2] Pollinator Pathway

It was noted that the next meeting of this group has been cancelled. The pollinator pathway website for the town is now up, and Sue Harrington has provided many pictures from Merrow Meadow. (Additional tangential discussion is covered under section 7.1 [old 6.1] below)

6. [agenda 5.] New Business

6.1 [agenda 5.1] Management Plan Goals

The agenda includes links to a draft goals template prepared just before the Covid shutdown. Feathers suggested PNRC members read and react and discuss at the next meeting. Wetherell expressed that the draft was fairly well done, and little additional work would be needed. It was decided that a subcommittee working group would be established consisting of Wetherell, Feathers, and Pyle. The group would evaluate the draft by using it to develop management goals for the Moss Sanctuary. A meeting will be posted for March 24 at 3 PM (location TBD) to allow Kaufman to also attend.

6.2 [agenda 5.2] Parks Programming

PNRC members were reminded that items for the summer 2022 recreation brochure were due by March 23. An idea suggested was bringing in Tom Ouellette (a DEEP retiree biologist, volunteering at Trail Wood) to lead a wildflower day, perhaps structured as a wildflower inventory of a park with public participation. This was thought to interrelate to the pollinator pathway outreach effort. Sue Harrington will try to identify an optimum time for finding the most species blooming at Merrow Meadow for scheduling. Miranda Davis was suggested to be contacted for additional resources.

The agenda has a link to the schedule from the Spring 2022 recreation brochure.

Programs scheduled:

- Tom and Sue Harrington again will offer their “traditional” “Over in the Meadow” scavenger hunt on Mothers Day
- Chris Kueffner and Lynn Stoddard will offer an Earth Weekend program on sustainable forestry at Storrs Adventure Park
- Aaron King will lead a spring migrant bird walk at Mount Hope park
- There will be a trails Day guided hike in Sawmill Brook/Wolf Rock preserve, led by Juston Manville
- Plein Air in the parks will continue to be offered.

6.3 [agenda 5.3] Mansfield Apartments Redevelopment: CEPA Scoping (Comments due 3/24/2022 by COB)

The Agenda includes links relevant to this redevelopment proposed by UConn. PNRC is asked to provide input for Town use:

Mansfield Apartments Comments

There was a wide-ranging discussion, and the following text attempts to capture all those issues that were raised, for later incorporation into Town comments. (The secretary has tried to capture the discussion fully, but has reorganized some of the points, and most are paraphrased, not verbatim.)

A full EIE should be implemented for this activity, especially since none has been done previously for development of this parcel.

While the proposed use will remain residential, the project reflects a fourfold increase in population in this area, which is a significant change in density and should warrant an EIE.

The Moss Sanctuary is subject to a significant protective conservation restriction established and held by the Connecticut Park and Forest Association (CFPA) when they were a key intermediary in the transfer of the property from UConn through CFPA to the Town. In addition to the normal environmental

considerations of an EIE, it is imperative that UConn conduct a full EIE to ensure that this established conservation restriction is not compromised by the proposed action at the abutting UConn property.

The full EIE should include an inventory of current conditions in the Moss Sanctuary, both natural resources, wetland quality, and recreational use to establish a base line and better understand and predict potential impacts of the proposed development. Both potential physical environmental quality effects and the increase recreational use pressure due to increased population residing next door should be fully evaluated. The proposed increase in parking area will likely exacerbate impacts of runoff, and the increased population will likely adversely impact condition of existing trails. A significant upgrade in trail construction may be necessary to avoid adverse impact to trails by an increase in the number of adjacent residents who will use them. The EIE should identify actions needed to maintain a quality natural area experience, and these actions should be considered part of the project cost.

An important design principle noted in the Town Plan of Conservation and Development (POCD) is that the Moss Sanctuary is essentially in the back yard of the Mansfield Apartments, but its boundary should be considered a primary design frontage of any redevelopment and as important as road frontage. Utility and service areas should not be located to impact the Moss Sanctuary experience, but rather be interior to the development.

The post-development sanctuary access should be carefully designed, rather than an afterthought. Provision of parking as allowed under the easement granted by UConn in UConn's deed to CFPA is unlikely to be of use without a workable mechanism to ensure it is available for recreational users not familiar with the area. Although the access must allow vehicular access into Moss Sanctuary, a careful design should discourage the use of private vehicles, including trail bikes, on the Moss Sanctuary trails. Although trail bike use is prohibited by the conservation restriction, the increased number of bike owners adjacent to the Moss Sanctuary will require increased signage and enforcement to ensure this prohibition is honored.

The Town already has problems in Moss Sanctuary with bike use, campfires, and partying, and with increased nearby residential population there will be an expectable increase in the occurrence of these problems. The potential for increased Town expenditures for maintenance and enforcement, due to increased usage, including expectable prohibited uses, should be evaluated in the EIE, and a solution for this cost impact proposed.

The Town may need to consider developing a second access point to Moss Sanctuary on the corner of Birchwood Heights Road and Route 195 that is not "buried" in the UConn parcel. This would encourage Town residents to take full advantage of the Moss Sanctuary without having to traverse a high-density student housing area. This would be an additional expense for the Town.

The PNRG notes that in the Town POCD, the area near the 275/195 intersection is identified as serving to transition from the high-rise downtown Storrs to adjacent parkland and rural neighborhood. The proposed buildings should be lower buildings to accomplish this transition in height, more in keeping with the height of the Price Chopper and Town Hall. Proposing 5 to 7 story buildings that are out of appropriate scale will defeat the carefully developed existing transition zone. In addition, these higher buildings may be visible from within Moss Sanctuary, and this would negatively impact the viewshed and the experience of the natural area.

The PNR supports the need for conducting a full traffic study. It further recommends that critical elements of this traffic study include increased pedestrian traffic and increased potential for car/pedestrian conflict, especially for those crossing South Eagleville Road, already a concern without increased development. In addition the development is likely increase the number of pedestrians at the Route 275/195 intersection, and affect traffic congestion on both roads.

One element of pedestrian safety to evaluate is that currently most users of the Moss Sanctuary park their vehicles at the Community Center and then cross South Eagleville Road by foot, and the increased traffic will likely make this access pathway less safe.

Development of an area somewhat isolated from the rest of campus seems to be not the most desirable in encouraging a sustainable walking campus, rather than one reliant on vehicles. The EIE should incorporate evaluation of the impact of the necessary increase in bus service to connect this development to the new STEM campus area. Concern was expressed about whether the long-proposed campus access road between Bolton Road and South Eagleville Road, parallel to Eastwood Road, would be built as part of the connectivity or traffic solutions, and whether the impact of this would also be included in the evaluation.

One aspect of the traffic study must be a realistic evaluation of the need for parking. The PNR considers that provision of only 450 parking spaces for 900 beds is grossly inadequate, and if this is the number of presumed cars, the traffic study is likely to be deficient in comparison to the probable actual effect of the development. This affects the evaluation of environmental impacts of the parking area as well, by underestimating the size needed. A probable impact of underestimating the number of occupant cars will likely be residents parking in the town offices/community center parking area, impacting these vital town functions. Alternatively, residents may illegally park in locations closer to the Moss Sanctuary not designed for parking, and even enforcement would not counter the negative environmental impacts.

Because UConn developments are exempted from local review and also cannot be explicitly addressed in the Town Plan of Conservation and Development, a full EIE is the only opportunity for public participation to ensure that an environmentally sound development is implemented. UConn, the state's flagship university, should do a full EIE as an example of the right thing to do.

6.4 [agenda 5.4] ARPA Funding Proposals *See item 4.1 above*

6.5 [agenda 5.5] Return to In-Person Meetings

The PNR was asked if they would like to continue meeting virtually or return to in-person meetings. The general sentiment was a preference for in-person meetings, beginning with the next (May) meeting. Feathers asked if we would still need to provide virtual access, in a hybrid format, and the answer was no. Morrow requested that to allow continued distancing the potential for a larger room be explored, rather than using conference room B.

7. [agenda 6.] Communications

7.1 [agenda 6.1] Earth Extravaganza – Saturday April 23, 2022 1-3 pm Mansfield Community Center

PNRC members were briefed on this scheduled event. Activities will include Sue Harrington maintaining a Pollinators table for outreach. A walk at the Moss Sanctuary is also being considered, and a volunteer leader is sought by Jennifer Kaufman

8. [agenda 7.] Reports from Members

No reports were made

9. [agenda 8.] Executive session in accordance with CGS section 1200(6)(D)

There was no need for an executive session

10. [agenda 9.] Future Meetings

The next meeting is May 17, 2022 and will be in person. The location is to be determined.

11. [agenda 10.] Adjournment

The meeting was adjourned at 8:41 PM by consensus (moved Kessel, seconded Morrow)

Respectfully Submitted,
Ken Feathers, Secretary