Franconia Conservation Commission (FCC)

Meeting: March 21, 2023, 4 pm at Town Hall

Members present: Chris Nicodemus (Chair), Ginny Jeffryes, Red McCarthy, Jill Brewer, Arthur Daily, Dan Zajic

Guests: Kelly Starr (Adaptive Sports Partners’ Exec Director (ASP), Tim Clough (Franconia Area New England Mountain Bike Association (FA NEMBA) president), Janelle Lawton (FA NEMBA), Bill Whalen (NEMBA Board), Joe Harrison (NEMBA Board)

Minutes: Reviewed 2-2-23 minutes. Red moves to approve minutes as amended. Art seconds. Unanimously approved.

Chris: Town Forest tax lot 17-2 and 17-3 update: At Town Meeting last week, the warrant article to put these lots under conservation easement passed. Survey still in progress, awaiting snowmelt. Subcommittee of Dan and Chris will do the application to ACT to hold the easement. It needs fee of $500. Chris moves to permit the $500 expenditure from the Conservation Fund. Red seconds. All in favor, motion passes. Chris mentions that the parcels have a lot of wetlands.

FA-NEMBA guests present their proposal for Lawrence Family Forest trail expansion:

They are a mountain bike trail advocacy group. 60 paid members. They have a trail maintenance fund. Have $100K in grants. They’re working on their master plan. They have an Adopt a Trail program with 700 hours of volunteer hours last year. They have worked with private landowners regarding trails through their land: Schmitts [whose property abuts Lawrence Prop], and Delaneys [who have a FCC-held easement on part of their McKenzie Woods property]. They have been reaching out to area businesses to put in bike racks. They want to make their bike trails more inclusive for multi-use. They propose two projects:

1. Make Ronnie’s Ramble and Tucker’s Trail, and part of Boundary Trail, more adaptive-friendly and family-friendly for biking. Universally designed trails to be done summer 2023. They have grants for this.
2. Create a new trail through Lawrence Family Forest (LFF) summer 2024. [Their presented map shows it to be running parallel to and between Meadow Brook Trail and Ronnie’s Ramble/Tucker’s]. It would be built by current best practices. They have a grant from Northern Forest Center to hire an environmental consultant for NEPA guidelines compliance (NEPA required by federal grant funding), to be done in 2023. The grant funding for the new trail requires it be to create a new trail. They are taking into account the 100-foot buffer required by the ACT easement.

Group discussion of NEMBA proposals: Ginny opposes a new trail. She says that the NH statutory mission of Conservation Commissions is protection of natural resources and watershed resources of a town, not economic development or public use. That’s not what statutory Conservation Fund that we used to buy the property is for. She also thinks that there isn’t enough research yet on what the environmental impact of the new rapid expansion of e-bikes and fat-bikes are. She did some research about trail impacts, and there is a significant impact for 100-400 feet either side of trails on amphibians, birds, other wildlife. She also thinks that more year-round bikes present decrease safety and enjoyment by walkers and snowshoers, especially with rapidly increasing number of mountain e-bikes on trails. She also opposes to putting any trails in the Town Forest, undisturbed for decades. NEMBA responds that concentrating trails in one area is the new environmental trend, to leave some areas without trails. Ginny says that since there are housing developments nearby, the periphery isn’t undisturbed. Chris thinks the concerns are reasonable to look at, but he thinks that part of why LFF was acquired is for recreation. Jill disagrees with Ginny, thinks our goal is both conservation and recreation, to find a balance, and she is in favor of increased adaptive and family access. She says the proposed new trail route was thoughtfully designed and addresses conservation. Dan appreciates the trail work that NEMBA is doing throughout the trail system – new signs, trail maintenance. He says we need to balance needs of environment and the need for improved recreational access. He says bikes will disturb more than walking, but thinks a compromise is important for conservation as a whole. He is generally supportive of the proposal. He mentions that “non-motorized” as per the current conservation easement technically doesn’t allow e-bikes. He says that compromise might be that we don’t permit e-bikes, other than for adaptive program needs. NEMBA guests point out that it isn’t just Adaptive type needs – there are others who want to use e-bikes, and say Kingdom Trails has been struggling with this. Says there will be checks and balances on users, and environmental preservation is important to NEMBA. The connectivity is important to the users. Red is in favor: he taught adaptive skiing – it gets kids out who can’t otherwise enjoy that. Thinks that we can change our access policy if it doesn’t work out. Further explanations by NEMBA guests: They are promoting “Ride with Gratitude”, to teach bikers to be respectful of conservation and private land ownership. They’re turning this into “Recreate with Gratitude” to include non-biker trail users. We can bring any problems we see to FA-NEMBA. Dan uses the trails daily, and points out that unleashed dogs are currently more problematic for walkers than bikers are. ASP adds that their athletes want to be involved in conservation, and getting out there benefits it. Red thinks that bad behavior by users will be addressed or reported by other users. Ginny thinks the property (114 acres) is too small to accommodate 4th trail, especially so close and parallel to the previous trails, and wonders why the first part of the proposal to improve access isn’t adequate. They responds re the new trail question that they want a return loop for users to be possible, rather than the out-and-back trip that improved existing trails alone would provide. Art mentions that part of a trail is on his property, and he thinks NEMBA needs to improve land-owner communication because they haven’t communicated with him. NEMBA says they’re early in the process of outreach, and will include him in their landowner gatherings.

Chris appreciates the trail maintenance. Suggests we have a two-part vote: the trail improvement proposal, and the new trail building 2024 proposal. Ginny thinks we shouldn’t vote today because needs more discussion, and maybe get input from townspeople. NEMBA says would like an answer about existing trail expansion in time to complete that in 2023, and that the second proposal still needs the NEPA review so there is time for that. It’s agreed that further discussion will continue next meeting.

Chris: McKenzie Woods conservation easement due for our annual walk. Chris proposes walking the Middle Earth easement boundaries. May want to look the opposite side along the new ACT easement that bounds it. Dan, Ginny, Chris, will meet March 30 at 8 a.m. on McKenzie Woods Road.

Chris: PSU students are working on 2 NRI components, related to wildlife and water resources for our Tri-Town CCs. The professor wants them to present to us towards end of semester. Trying to arrange a date that works for them and for CCs. He will be in touch when date settled.

Red: Ore Hill/Mountain Road resident’s property erosion from logging: An engineering firm evaluating Sabado land-clearing damage and will file an after-the-fact Alteration of Terrain permit, and will develop a mitigation plan to fix the damage to the previous drainage system, and reestablish the vegetation. Franconia is affected more than Sugar Hill, because the water and debris is running down the hillside to Mountain View Drive.

Ginny: Legislative updates: HB 592 – Eliminating wetlands buffer for small projects: Committee voted Inexpedient to Legislate. HB 609 – Decreasing citizen involvement in SEC for utility projects: Committee sent back to committee. Will not be reconsidered this session.

Ben Kilham bear talk arranged by Easton CC, cosponsored by us, SH, and ACT: May 18 at Laf School. Easton active scheduling other talks as well.

Next meeting: TBA, possibly April 25

Minutes by Ginny Jeffryes