Franconia Conservation Commission (FCC) \*\* DRAFT MINUTES \*\*

Meeting: Wed March 24, 2021 4 pm, via Zoom

Members present: Chris Nicodemus, Red McCarthy, Jill Brewer, Mary Grote, Mark Ober, Ginny Jeffryes

Others present: Rosalind Page, Kim Cowles, Marilyn Noonan, Cam Newton, Harry Robertson, Dan Zajic, Ted Marvelli, Beth Horan, Chris Thayer.

Previous minutes: Motion to approve minutes of 11-17-20 by Mark Ober, Jill seconds. Unanimously passes.

Chris N (Chair): Today’s meeting is to explore ideas and issues about how to assure the integrity of the community’s valley trail network for the future.

Chris notes there is a lot of property turnover in the valley around the Franconia trail network, which is part of why he put this on the agenda. He made a power point about the recreational history and various regional and local trails, and the Franconia town-owned and/or town-conserved land, and including the ACT piece, which he reviews: He opens with a book by Bradford Torrey, 1902, “Footing It in Franconia”. Author walked all over the town and hiked various peaks, documenting the birds and flora. In the 1990s Tri Town Rec Department created map of Trail network, and the work has continued. The 2016 MTAG grant helped determine importance of the Trail network. Borderlands website has featured our trail network. That was originally a walking, birding etc resource but now includes biking. There are good trails around Franconia: Jericho Community Forest, Sugar Hill town forest trails, the impending Profile School trail. In Franconia the town has Fox Hill Park, Lawrence Family Forest, McKenzie Woods conservation easement; we also contributed a small amount to the 10 acre piece on Wells Road which ACT just purchased. The trails aren’t owned by the Town other than the ones in our town property. We depend on the goodwill of the landowners. He mentions that the FCC has a conservation fund, one of which’s appropriate legal uses would be to facilitate trails.

Chris introduces the people who were interested in speaking to the group.

Rosalind Page is Executive Director of Ammonoosuc Conservation Trust (ACT). She mentions that ACT is a landtrust with goal is conservation easements on various lands – sometimes via fee ownership, sometimes by holding easements. ACT would like to help facilitate our needs here for recreation, and has some resources available to help.

Dan Zajic and his wife own some land in McKenzie Woods, and says he and his wife bought that parcel specifically because of the trail network being part of his piece. It’s rare and valuable. It’s very important to him that this not be lost. He notes that property values are very high this year due to ability to work from home.

Ted Marvelli notes that he walks and snowshoes along them and helps maintain them, and the trails are very important to him, and he would hate to lose it. He doesn’t know what he can do about it.

Beth Horan [a local realtor] notes the trail system is valuable, but says she hears from a few larger landowners that they have been offended by how some trails were expanded or maintained. She thinks there needs to be one point person, and coordination among the various groups involved. Rosalind notes that there are enthusiastic users but the landowners need to agree and be involved.

Mary has a question about the airport. She has heard they are interested in expanding, and whether that would interfere with the trails. Beth comments that the conservation easement would prohibit the airport from expanding in that direction. Chris comments that he hadn’t heard this, but the only direction they could expand would be in the direction of McKenzie Woods Road, but the road would limit that re airplane use. So not an issue.

Chris Thayer (from Sugar Hill) comments as a trail user who is involved with ACT, and who also volunteers in town as a Laf School Board member, that the trail network has evolved from being a long-standing best-kept secret to now being a community asset, which makes it more complex as far as stewarding it. It means the landowners must be involved – the place to start here needs to be with them. There is also opportunity to involve the tri-town community and the other towns’ conservation commissions. He mentions that there are other established trail groups such as the Mt Washington Valley trail network and the Upper Valley trail networks whom we could invite to a meeting in order to inquire of them what strategies they used to set up their trails, and what the pitfalls were.

Chris N mentions re complexity that some of the trails go through WMNF, some of which preexisted the creation of the forest. He reports that NEMBA worked with them so that some have been incorporated as official “old forest ways”. He also mentions re other sections of trails - that while easements are helpful, sometimes they can be too restrictive, for example if a trail section needs to be moved – for example if the land becomes more wet over time.

Ginny brings up the question Beth raised and Chris alluded to: The FCC’s role has been limited to the land which is owned by the town, and to the 35 or 36 acre piece in McKenzie Woods on which we hold the conservation easement. So, re protecting the larger trail network: who is the “we” that is in charge here, and what is our role as FCC regarding the larger trail system? We need to determine that to proceed, and it isn’t clear to her what to do re a point person or organization. Rosalind replies that that could be ACT’s role, if the community chose to invite them to do that. Ginny and Jill express support of this idea.

Ted Marvelli notes that when he moved here 30 years ago many of the trails existed already – they were on open land - prior to the more recent boom of property sales and subdivions. Chris N mentions that Franconia Inn had developed many of these several decades ago for their X-C ski network, which was actually more extensive than they are currently. He mentions that the Franconia Area NEMBA has become more involved in recent years. He is involved with them. Jill mentions that a couple years ago the Friends of Profile Trail group was active in working on trail issues re the connection to Bethlehem, but that recently they haven’t had meetings, perhaps due to Covid. She could explore whether to renew that group’s meeting again.

Chris says this was an initial exploratory meeting, and we have things we can think about between now and next meeting, regarding how to proceed.

Next meeting: 4th Wednesday in April (April 28), 4 pm, via Zoom.

Meeting adjourned at 5:18 pm

Minutes by Ginny Jeffryes