

DEERFIELD CONSERVATION COMMISSION
1967 – FIFTY-SEVEN YEARS AND COUNTING – 2024
Regular Meeting Minutes – January 8, 2024

Attendees: Haley Andreozzi, Davis Brush, Ken Cohen, Josh Freed, Serita Frey, Erroll Rhodes
Members Absent: Chloe Gross
Visitors & Guests: Jeff Littleton & Steven Lamonde, Moosewood Ecological, LLC

Chair Serita Frey convened the meeting at 7:02 pm.

Moosewood Ecological, LLC – Presentation:

Jeff Littleton (Principal Ecologist & Senior Planner) and Steven Lamonde (Ecologist & Project Manager) from **Moosewood Ecological, LLC, presented an overview of their proposed Natural Resources Inventory** that would professionally **update and enhance the data captured on Deerfield’s 1991 Natural Resources Inventory**. Moosewood was one of four **proposals received by the DCC and reviewed by the members**.

The Scope of Work would include the following “tasks”: **A. Project Coordination and Design, B. Field Surveys, C. GIS Mapping and Analysis, D. Report Documentation, and E. Community Outreach and Engagement**. Prior to conducting field work, Moosewood will gather existing information and review existing files and paper documents including forest management plans, information on Town-owned properties, the Deerfield Master Plan, and the 2009 Open Space Plan. They will also reach out to other agencies such as Fish and Game and the Natural Heritage Bureau for data specific to Deerfield.

The ultimate goal of the GIS mapping and analysis is to identify conservation focus areas (significant areas in Deerfield). Mapping would include a “story map”: a fun, interactive, web-based program that **pulls together all the elements of the project, providing the “essence” of Deerfield’s natural resources...where, what and why they are important...**and offering an accessible alternative to reading the entire NRI report. Links to the story map, as well as the complete NRI, can be posted on DCC’s web page. The newer versions are highly customizable. The full NRI report details the entire project.

Outreach is both a major goal of the project as well as a resource for determining what is important to the community and determining their concerns, issues, and values. Public engagement is an important element of the NRI process and will be achieved using presentations, public forums, and activities such as hikes and bioblitzes, which get people out and excited as they document various species (plants, wildlife, fungi) that they encounter in a designated area within a limited time period.

In addition to reviewing existing information, the **proposal includes 10 to 15 days of field surveys** to audit Deerfield’s natural resources. Field surveys will be conducted to **identify both presently known and additional Wildlife Action Plan habitats**, such as vernal pools, invasive species, rare natural communities, and ecologically significant areas, with the goal of more-accurately representing Deerfield’s natural resources and to better understand its biodiversity. **A review of Deerfield’s regulatory documents with a comparison to Deerfield’s Master Plan** is recommended to determine how well they “stack up” and afford protection in our community. This comparison was last performed, and the results reported, in the *2009 Wildlife Habitat and Natural Resources Protection Assessment*. An update can be added to the proposal. This and the previously mentioned reports can be accessed on the DCC web page of the Town website.

Mr. Littleton responded to members’ questions, making the following points:

The report can include existing trails, commonly used pathways, and old roads. Wildlife activity on game trails can be confirmed by doing camera tracking of mammal movement and comparing it with anecdotal information from the town. Moosewood collects its own data as opposed to requesting residents divulge what may be considered sensitive information. They can also confirm wildlife movement being impacted in proposed areas being developed.

Recognizing the importance of conducting research on both public and private land, **biodiversity assessments are anticipated to be performed on both Town-owned and private property**. To do so, Moosewood will reach out to private landowners, sending letters to request permission to access private property and release the owners from liability. Mr. Littleton noted that identifying important areas is based on natural resources data, not property lines. GIS data is used to identify prime areas, and data sharing agreements with the National Heritage Bureau can also be obtained to collect relevant, albeit publicly-restricted, data.

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The preference is to begin the meetings starting in the fall and continue into the winter, which would allow time for planning, mapping, and community forums (to introduce the project) prior to getting out into the field in March of 2025 for the biodiversity assessment; however, **it was suggested that coming to the community after having done the background work first was preferable.**

The tax map parcel boundaries can be added as an overlay to the maps they produce, but the assessing map database would need to be shared directly with them. **The parcel ID# for the parcel boundaries (on the conservation focus areas) could be on the story map.** Identification of the conservation focus areas informs the DCC of the best or highest priority areas for future conservation and where conservation dollars would be best spent, as well as affording DCC the ability to protect biodiverse areas and watersheds. This information is not always publicly released due to privacy concerns; however, public sharing could be selective (i.e. public maps without specific parcel boundaries) since there is a concern that keeping information closely held could conflict with the fact that the Town is paying for the NRI. Some landowners might have concerns about the consequences of their specific parcel being identified within a focus area; yet others might welcome knowing that their property has conservation value.

It was noted that **although soil and aquifer data has remained the same, a lot has changed since Deerfield's 1991 NRI**, for example, wetland maps created in the 1970's, a Wildlife Action Plan after its third update, and a fifth round of wildlife habitat mapping. **Mr. Littleton remarked that Deerfield has some interesting habitats and species**, and the field surveys could capture smaller data not previously cataloged, including vernal pools, smaller wetlands, significant wetland communities and rare upland communities. Their mapping of potential sites could provide the basis for future exploration by DCC. Their field surveys are *very thorough...collecting hundreds to a thousand data points for any given site, regardless of size*. The diversity of a property dictates the time allotted to it.

Mr. Littleton commented that Deerfield's size of 51 square miles with a population of less than 100 per square mile is about average, and he expects a response rate of at least 10% from residents, given previous experience. **The forums would be one vehicle for reaching out to all the stakeholders (i.e. trail users, hikers, bikers, hunters) who could provide valuable input.** The report **could factor in the impacts and appropriateness of particular recreational activities** on specific focus areas, noting that the State maintains a data layer on these impacts.

The driving force behind the prioritization of focus areas is based on a formula derived from factors DCC and the community choose, ranking them in importance. Moosewood then writes a report explaining the factors, and the rationale for their ranking. Ideally, the timing of the NRI should come either prior to, or at the middle of the Master Plan updating process. Mr. Littleton explained that **the information Moosewood provides would benefit the crafting of the natural resources chapter and influence the land use chapter and that the timing of this project is perfect and will provide the most up-to-date, relevant data to put force into the Master Plan.** Despite numerous boards bringing up the Master Plan update as being a priority, there is still no official start date for this long-overdue activity. Regardless, it should be known that DCC wants the information from the NRI to be incorporated into the updated Master Plan.

Serita Frey thanked Mr. Littleton and Mr. Lamonde for their time and indicated she would be in touch with confirmation after our due diligence.

Motion:

Josh Freed moved to retain Moosewood Ecological, LLC as the organization contracted to conduct the NRI.

Erroll Rhodes seconded the motion.

Discussion:

It was questioned whether the full cost could be encumbered now to segregate it from the balance in the Conservation Fund based on the fund cap. The Town Accounting Department will be consulted to determine the appropriate method of accounting for the transaction.

Concern was expressed that the updated NH Fish and Game *Wildlife Action Plan* (WAP) is scheduled for 2025. It is imperative that the terms of the contract allow for the inclusion of the newest data from that report which could be *plugged into the report* once it is known. It was explained that the WAP identifies the species of greatest conservation need which change with every iteration along with habitat prioritization maps and landscape changes based on new data.

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Vote: *The vote to retain Moosewood Ecological, LLC was unanimous.*

Members commented on how excited they were at the prospect of the NRI and how “cool” the story maps were. Members were looking forward to announcing the project, getting community input, and being able to explain how it will benefit the Town. **Chair Frey will inform Moosehead on Tuesday, January 9th, of DCC’s decision to accept their proposal.** A final version of the contract will require refining and customizing the proposal to achieve the actual work product envisioned by the Commission.

Proposed March 2024 Warrant Articles:

Members were informed that the **BOS, at its 12/11 meeting, voted to place a warrant article on the March 2024 ballot asking voters if they wish to revert to the former 50/50 split on Land Use Change Tax revenue going into the Conservation Fund.** The BOS action comes after the **Town voted in March 2023 to *increase* the allocation to 100%.** Members appealed to the BOS on 12/18 to reconsider their 12/11 action but the vote to reconsider failed. Members will reach out to their personal contacts and ask that they register their opposition to the BOS-proposed article. The importance of public outreach was stressed, focusing on why it is important to maintain the current level of funding, and how the work of the DCC serves to maintain the *rural character* residents have expressed they value, as evidenced by the Deerfield Master Plan. Moving ahead with the Natural Resources Inventory will be a positive example of a worthwhile use of those funds.

In view of the BOS action, members have decided to set aside their plan to request the removal of the Conservation Fund cap. Serita Frey will contact Jim Raymond for an opinion on the legality of the cap, since there is no RSA allowing it. The opinion should also clarify whether the cap only pertains to the amount of LUCT funds coming into the fund or if it relates to the overall balance in the fund.

Stewardship and Easement Monitoring:

DCC has received 24 monitoring reports for conservation parcels for 2023. Bear-Paw will be contacted regarding the status of **Dowst-Cate and Weiss Town Forests.** Serita Frey commented, favorably, that this was the first season that **trees grown on the Merrill/Kay Williams tree farm were being offered for sale.** There was mention of a landlocked **Town-owned parcel abutting Northwood behind the Merrill parcel that needs to be re-surveyed.** It was noted that the **NRI will assist in putting together a list of Town-owned lands which could appear as a tab on the Story Map.** Members were reminded that a list of Town-owned parcels, including those that are in conservation, have been included annually in the Town Report. Judy Marshall has been **researching missing data (map & lot numbers, deeds, assessing maps) and updating that information based on Kate Hartnett’s 2010 inventory matrix** of then-known conservation parcels. It was suggested that there might be an **interest in conserving some of the town-owned properties**, especially if they’re landlocked, or if determined by the NRI to be high-priority habitat. The information could be useful as a reference tool and a guiding document for other boards.

Approval of Minutes:

Motion:

*Serita Frey moved to approve the minutes of the **December** regular meeting.*

Erroll Rhodes seconded the motion

Discussion/Additions/Corrections:

Erroll Rhodes made the following amendment to remove the word *Final* in referring to *decisions* related to the **December non-public session** (Page #3).

Vote:

*The **December** minutes were approved as amended.*

Finance Report:

STATEMENT balances in the conservation fund:

December Ending Balance \$ 423,200.11 Includes Interest of \$848.37 – Earned in Nov. & Posted in Dec.

Includes Q3 LUCT of \$20,000 - Deposit Date: 12/26/2023

LUCT – 2023 YTD \$ 65,500

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Finance Officer Erroll Rhodes reported that the **Conservation Fund balance is roughly 21% ahead of where it was at the beginning of the year.** A comparison of the percentage of growth in the fund in previous years was not readily available, nor was there a prediction for 2024 LUCT revenues. The delay in the Town's deposit of the 3rd Quarter 2023 LUCT to the Conservation Fund was questioned.

Outreach – 2024 LUCT Warrant Article:

Members discussed **strategies to counter the proposed BOS warrant article to reduce the percentage of LUCT being directed to the Conservation Fund from 100% back to 50%** (see additional explanation on page 3). **It is important to stress that the Town retaining 50% of the LUCT will have NO IMPACT on lowering property taxes.**

This is a chance for the Town to reaffirm their vote of 2023; to rebuff the BOS warrant article and confirm that they knew what they were voting on last year. A public education campaign makes the most sense. DCC needs to make a concerted effort to **bolster attendance at the deliberative session on February 3rd** by those in support of conservation; to ask that they make their voices heard in opposition to the BOS warrant.

It was agreed that **the reason most folks have for moving to Deerfield is an appreciation of nature and open space,** although their specific uses of that open space may vary (trail hiking, hunting, biking, snowmobiling, orienteering). Or perhaps they just **enjoy the benefits of Deerfield's rural character and clean water.** Conservation programs **support Town and School recreational programs, and groups like the Boy Scouts.** Tying DCC's work to the *maintenance of their playground* is critical.

It is also important to point out WHO is paying the LUCT; that it is not the residents who are paying. It needs to be understood that LUCT is paid by land developers who are profiting from the development and the resultant shrinking of Deerfield's open space. Preserving open space through the use of conservation funds is actually **in line with the folks who in 2023 were asking to increase the minimum lot size from three to five acres.**

Educational information will be **posted on both the DCC and the Town Facebook pages,** asking that voters defend maintaining conservation funding at 100%. A **privately funded informational mailer** is scheduled to go out to residents prior to the March 12th voting day. The objective is to **inform voters about DCC's work; promoting what has already been accomplished and raising awareness of future endeavors** such as the upcoming Natural Resources Inventory. **Deerfield's support is needed to protect DCC's ability to protect Deerfield's natural resources.**

Regulated Wetlands & Shorelands:

DCC re-submitted its August 2023 letter outlining recommendations regarding the Cross open space subdivision to the **Planning Board.** The letter was read into the minutes of their January meeting but there has been no response to DCC from the Planning Board. Erroll Rhodes asked that the Planning Board ***treat the open space as seriously as they treat the developed space.*** It was agreed that this is the right message, and that the open space not be treated as wasteland. It is unknown at this time how the open space area will be restricted; with a deed restriction or an easement.

Annual DCC Report to the Town:

Members reviewed the **proposed DCC report to the Town for 2023.** Each year, a two-page space limitation results in DCC's standard information appearing on page one and its annual activities being inserted into its *template* on page two. It was suggested that a QR code be substituted for certain information on page one in order to accommodate additional accomplishments. It was clarified that the omitted additional details were not significant and that the use of a QR code could be explored in the future for getting information out. It was questioned and confirmed that monitoring of conserved properties is required to be performed annually.

The meeting adjourned at 8:58 pm.

The next regular meeting is scheduled for 7 PM on Monday, February 12, 2024

(Please check the website townofdeerfieldnh.com for scheduling changes) These minutes were prepared and submitted by Judy Marshall. Revisions, if any, will be contained in the minutes of the next meeting and posted to the Town website, after approval by the Deerfield Conservation Commission