

Conservation Commission
Town of Willington

Minutes

Special Meeting

Wednesday March 25, 2022 at 7:00 PM
Held virtually via Zoom

- I. Call to Order:** Chairperson Kathy Demers called the meeting to order at 7:03 pm
- II. Roll Call / Seating of Alternates:** *Members present:* Kathy Demers, Carol Jordan, Peter Andersen, Marilyn Schreiber and Robert Shabot; *Absent:* Jackie Kulig, Patty Phillips & alternate Nora Jones.
- III. American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) Funding Request**

Chair K. Demers provided a general overview of the 1.7 million dollars in ARPA funds that the Town of Willington will receive and types of projects, programs and equipment categories that are eligible for funding. Members discussed possible funding needs related to managing Town-owned open space properties including the Fenton-Ruby Park and Wildlife Preserve, Talmadge Conservation Tract and Knowlton Preserve as well as the benefits of and impact to the properties due to the pandemic. During the pandemic there has been an increased usage of these properties and their trail systems by members of the public seeking safe, socially-distanced spaces for physical recreation and mental relaxation. As such, these properties and their trail systems have and continue to provide significant public health benefits during the pandemic.

Members discussed the need for equipment required to manage the Town's open space properties and trail systems. There are several small meadows within the Fenton-Ruby Park which are adjacent to the trail systems and the historic Taylor homestead foundation site on the property. These areas require regular brush cutting to remove invasive plants and saplings in order to remain as native meadow habitats. This has traditionally been done by volunteers using loppers and a hand-held brush cutter. It has been a time-consuming and physically taxing activity for commission members and other volunteers. There is a need for more intensive management than can be reasonably done by volunteers using hand-held equipment. Equipment also needs to be small enough to get over the Taylor Pond Bridge and down the trail to two of the meadows.

M. Schreiber suggested using funds to purchase a 22-inch walk-behind DR-Trimmer Mower to use to maintain the meadows in the Fenton-Ruby Park. She provided some on-line research she and her husband had done. Questions about some of the specs and accessory costs arose from other members and discussion was tabled, so that M. Schreiber's husband could download more information she could share with the commission later in the meeting.

Discussion was held on the need for pedestrian crossing signage for the two hiking trails that cross Mason Road and traverse on Town open space. C. Jordan had done some research and presented cost information for 18" x 24" reflective yellow signs which included the words

“Slow” and “Pedestrians” and showed drawings of people crossing the road. She noted that the total cost of approximately \$335 for 4 signs, metal posts and hardware might be funded under ARPA. K. Demers noted that Public Works Director Troy Sposato may have some metal posts that could be used to support the signage, which would reduce cost. Members discussed motorist speeds, line of sight and pedestrian safety issues on Mason Road. R. Shabot suggested using simpler, smaller “trail crossing” signs, noting that any signage should be in character with the rural nature of the gravel road and associated open space properties. C. Jordan voiced concern about the potential for speeding on the road and risk for pedestrian safety. P. Andersen stated he felt that crossing signs were not needed since speeds on the gravel road were generally low and pedestrians should be able to see and hear vehicles approaching on the noisy gravel road surface. K. Demers suggested that a simple brown-colored sign as used in many state and national parks depicting a hiker may help alert motorists and also help the public to locate the hiking trails. Members agreed that further discussion about signage options should be tabled until the next regular meeting in April and noted that, if signage was ultimately desired, costs could be met by current budget funds.

Discussion was held about the need to update the 2012-2022 Forestry and Wildlife Management Plan for the Royal Knowlton Preserve and Talmadge Conservation Tract. It should also include the anticipated addition of the adjacent 16+ acre Talmadge Estate property this year. Members noted that an updated forest management plan is important because it provides the Town with professional guidance about maintaining forest and riparian corridor health, climate change resilience, invasive plant and insect management and development/management of trail systems on open space property. Healthy, resilient forests are critical for wildlife habitat and corridors, carbon sequestration, public recreation, clean and adequate water supplies and storm water management. Of note, all three properties lie within the Fenton River public water supply watershed and two are within an aquifer protection area. C. Jordan noted that an updated forestry and wildlife management plan is also an expectation when properties are purchased using matching funds from the CT DEEP Open Space and Watershed Land Acquisition Grant Program (OSWA). The Knowlton Preserve and the Talmadge Tract were purchased in the past using OSWA funds and a grant application has been submitted for the Talmadge Estate property.

C. Jordan noted that the Park & Recreation Fund, upon which the Commission has relied for Management Plans in the past, has a balance of only \$5,992 designated for use by the Conservation Commission. Use of these funds requires Town Meeting approval. ARPA funding would reserve these funds for similar use in the future.

K. Demers noted that Connwood Foresters, Inc., did the current Forestry and Wildlife Management Plan and have recently quoted a price of \$2,800 to provide an update later this year which would also contain the anticipated Talmadge Estate property. Members felt that ARPA funding could be used for the update since forest management plan objectives support public health through the provision, expansion and maintenance of park and trail recreation resources. Furthermore, the plan prescribes actions to help maintain forest and riparian corridor health and resilience which contributes to clean drinking water, protects aquifer resources and provides storm water management. On a motion by K. Demers/C. Jordan: **“The Conservation Commission will request \$2,800 in ARPA funding to have a professional forester update the 10-year Forestry and Wildlife Management Plan for the Knowlton Preserve, Talmadge Tract and the anticipated addition of the Talmadge Estate property.”** Approved unanimously.

Members discussed that the public open space properties and their trail infrastructure, including multiple bridges, boardwalks, kiosks and trail signage require regular repair and maintenance in order to keep them functional and safe for public use. K. Demers and P. Andersen recently did an inventory of the bridges, boardwalks, kiosks and signage on Town-owned open space properties and trail systems managed by the Conservation Commission. They noted the building material components and structure, current condition, as well as the need for any immediate repairs vs anticipated replacement of structural components within the next four years. P. Andersen estimated that in current year dollars it would cost approximately \$7,500 to make all repairs and replacements to boardwalks and bridges within the next four years. C. Jordan and K. Demers noted that some of the building materials needed during the next two years could be purchased with regular budget funds (remaining FY 2021/2022 as well as anticipated FY 2022/2023 budget), but that overall funding needs within the next four years would still exceed current and anticipated funding. Discussion continued that ARPA funds could be used to cover some of the building material costs. Labor has traditionally been provided by volunteers, so labor costs were not considered.

On a motion by K. Demers/P. Andersen, **“The Conservation Commission will request \$3,500 in ARPA funding to purchase building materials to repair and replace boardwalks and bridges on Town-owned open space properties and their trail systems managed by the Conservation Commission.”** Approved unanimously.

Discussion resumed about the DR-Trimmer Mower. M. Schreiber reiterated and offered additional online information members requested earlier in the meeting regarding the walk-behind “DR Trimmer Mower Pro” which can be used for heavier mowing and light brush cutting. Has reliable Briggs and Stratton engine and 2 year warranty. Current “sale” price on the DR website is \$699.99 for manual or \$799.99 for electric start. Typically uses super-thick cutting cords (approximately \$22 for pre-cut count of 24). Optional cutting blades which can be used for thicker brush and to cut small trees up to 3” would incur an additional cost of approximately \$230. Members discussed pros, cons and costs of owning vs renting (approx. \$75/day). P. Andersen said manual would eliminate need for battery and weight. R. Shabot stated that a “self-propelled” model would be better since commission members would have to push the mower over uneven trail and meadow terrain. K. Demers agreed. Possibility of shared use, storage and transport by other departments, including Public Works and the Park & Recreation Department, was discussed. Members generally felt ownership would be more desirable and cost effective over time than rental. On a motion by C. Jordan/M. Schreiber: **“The Conservation Commission will request \$1,200 in ARPA funding to purchase a 22-inch walk-behind, self-propelled DR Trimmer Mower and associated accessories to manage open meadows at Fenton-Ruby Park and Preserve and other properties as appropriate.”** Approved unanimously.

IV. Adjournment: Meeting was adjourned at 8:02 pm.

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Minutes submitted by Kathy Demers, Chairperson and secretary 2022 MAR 28 A 11: 34


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