

**Town of Williston Conservation Commission (WCC)  
Minutes of Dec 21 2016**

**Approved**

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<b>Members Present:</b>	Jude Hersey, Kim Coleman, Eric Howe, Jean Kissner, Anthony Jordick, Gary Hawley
<b>Members Absent:</b>	Carl Runge
<b>Staff Present:</b>	Melinda Scott, Ken Belliveau (came in at 8:00)
<b>Others Present:</b>	Kate Wanner (Trust for Public Land), Jim and Lucy McCullough, John Carpenter (Catamount Operations Manager)

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- 1. Call to Order:** Gary called the meeting to order at 7:06 AM.
- 2. Public Comment:** None
- 3. Approval of Minutes from December 7, 2016:** Eric made a motion and Jude seconded the motion to accept the December 7 minutes. The motion to accept the minutes as written was carried with a 4-0 vote.
- 4. McCullough property – Catamount Community Forest project –** Melinda stated that the concept of the Catamount Community Forest was initially brought up a couple of months ago when the WCC met with Bob Heiser (VLT) and Kate Wanner (TPL). Since that time, the McCulloughs have indicated their willingness to move the project forward. At the WCC’s request, Melinda invited the partners (TPL, McCulloughs, CFOC, WCC) together to discuss the project and what it might look like, as well as address the WCC’s questions and concerns.

Jim McCullough provided an overview of the history of the proposed project. He stated that landowners of large land holdings are saddled with significant stewardship responsibilities. Catamount Family Center was founded in 1978 as a way to ensure public access and promote good stewardship. The Trust for Public Land proposed the idea of the Community Forest so as to conserve the property under good stewardship in a way that is economically feasible for the McCulloughs.

The proposed Community Forest provides for public access, has good potential for robust funding, and provides for the management of the property. Although the Town will be ultimately responsible for developing a plan for management of the property, the Catamount Family Outdoor Center has implemented a successful model for management over the years and is ready and willing to help. John (Tag) Carpenter is the current Operations Manager, having just started a couple of weeks ago. With Town ownership, the

model for management could evolve over time. This property already has a large parking lot, which is a big advantage.

Jim mentioned the Town's desire for a Community Center. The McCulloughs are contemplating the donation of a parcel for a Community Center, separate from the Town Forest acquisition, with the idea that a building serving as a Community Center could also be used by the CFOC for educational programming.

Tag mentioned some of the nontraditional services Catamount offers and the diverse community groups that use the property. Kate spoke about other models out there for similar projects such as the Barre Town Forest, where the Town has ultimate management authority, and enters into a cooperative agreement with an organization who is qualified to run operations and manage/maintain the trails. Any such agreement has to be in conformance with the conservation easement, which VHCB will draft, along with whatever federal requirements are included, namely that the property has to stay 75% forested. The Pages have agreed to donate their back land to the project, the addition of which will meet the 75% forested requirement.

Kate reviewed the current configuration of Community Forest parcels and retained land, including a parcel proposed for a Community Center. Gary asked for clarification on TPL's role in the process, and Kate stated it is mainly acquisition and the coordination of all the work associated with a purchase such as a boundary survey, Phase 1 Environmental Assessment, Appraisal, etc. She will lead the fundraising effort and help to draft a Management Plan. The USDA Forest Service grant is due January 13 to the State, and by early February to the USDA Forest Service. The Selectboard is considering the proposal at their Jan 3 meeting. Ideally Melinda would bring a recommendation in support of the project from the WCC. It would be even better if at least some WCC members could attend this meeting. Another public hearing will be held in early February, which will be much more widely publicized through a newspaper article, etc.

Jim mentioned that the property has an approved Current Use forest management plan, which could serve as a starting point for the overall management plan. Kate stated that the County Forester will also want to participate in drafting or reviewing the plan. Gary stated he would like to see educational components/uses in the Management Plan. Gary asked about potential changes in State government and what impact that might have on potential funding. Kate said the biggest threat is to Vermont Housing Conservation Board conservation funding, however, there is currently a lot of support in the State legislature for that organization.

Gary asked about the budget for the project. Kate stated that an appraisal has not been done. Until that is done, an exact budget cannot be determined. Gary asked about the potential funding, and Kate stated that she hopes to get \$180,000 from Open Space Institute, \$200,000 from Land and Water Conservation Fund, \$400,000 from USDA Community Forest Program, and \$300,000 from VHCB. Significant contribution from the Town – at least \$400,000, maybe more – will be needed. Jim suggested the idea of committing some current funding and some future funding from ERF.

Kate stated that the closing would likely occur between July and December 2018. Jude asked, what is needed right now from WCC? Kate stated that a commitment to the project and a solid recommendation to Selectboard would be most helpful. In addition, helping to organize and attend the February public meeting.

Gary stated that the Town does not have the resources to manage the property and operations, therefore would rely on the nonprofit to continue the operations. If the organization disappeared sometime in the future, other organizations could be brought in. The property needs to provide some free access for hiking, snow shoeing. Fees could be charged for groomed trails commensurate with expenses.

Melinda asked whether there currently is any free access to the property? Jim stated that access is free for hunters and that the McCulloughs manage when they can come and where they can go for the safety of other users. Certain times of year they don't allow access due to weather conditions, to protect the land and the trails. They have charged fees for other uses, and that will change somewhat with public ownership. It will have an impact on revenue.

Eric asked whether certain events such as weddings will be allowed, and Jim and Kate did not have an answer for that. Jude asked about the Catamount Master Plan – is it still the vision of CFOC? Jim stated that it will be used to help guide the appraisal; however, this purchase would take that completely off the table.

Jim and Lucy plan to stay in their home, which is on part of the retained land. Kate stated that part of funding will consist of stewardship grant endowment – approximately one fifth of the funding, to be used for future stewardship. Kate mentioned the need for a septic easement on the conserved land to service the retained properties, secondly that they would like to retain a lease with a neighboring farmer for haying. Both of these the VHCB and VLT would allow.

Ken stated that people accessing the south part of the property may cross the boundaries of the retained properties to get there. There should be a trail easement. Anthony asked what the management options would be if CFOC dissolves. Melinda stated that although it might be desirable to have the array of programming and groomed trails that exist today, there would be no requirement in the conservation easement to continue those. Those kinds of amenities could either be taken on by another organization or scaled down appropriately.

Ken reminded everyone that the Selectboard has the authority to make decisions about the acquisition, then, the management of the property including what the Town will do with the property. These all have long term budgetary implications for the Town, which will need to be carefully considered. Eric noted that the Selectboard will probably want to know how much the operating costs are. Do we have those numbers? If the CFOC continues to operate or if the Town had to hire out the management to another organization, how much would the annual costs be?

Kim asked whether it would be appropriate at this time to publicize the January meeting more broadly. Ken stated that the Selectboard meeting is a preliminary step to introduce the idea. Ideally it would be followed up by a newspaper article, which would spread the information more broadly. Then a public meeting in February would give people an opportunity to ask questions after they have had a chance to find out a little about the project. Jude mentioned the potential to connect a trail system to the adjoining Talcott Forest and recently acquired NETS-Pine Ridge parcel.

Eric made a motion for the WCC to support the Town's exploration of an acquisition of the Catamount property, and to work with TPL and VLT to obtain funding for the project. Kim seconded the motion. The motion was carried with a 4-0 vote. Jim, Lucy and Tag will put together a balance sheet showing approximate expenses and revenue for the CFOC operations.

Kate also mentioned that on January 5, 10 – 11:30, there will be an additional site walk with TPL's national fundraiser, along with representatives from VHCB and VLT. Kate also mentioned that a SUNY student is conducting an economic analysis for Catamount, similar to the Gund Institute's report for the Barre Town Forest. Jude thanked Kate for all she was doing to help the Town leverage other funding to make this happen, and thanked the McCulloughs for all they have done to conserve the property.

- 5. WCC FY16 Summary for Town Report:** The WCC reviewed the drafted summary for the Town Report and made some suggestions for revisions, namely to acknowledge Mike

Harris, long-time WCC member who stepped down last year. Melinda will make revisions and submit the report.

**6. Staff Report:**

- MPCP boundary survey – in progress
- Summer Intern – WCC’s proposal was accepted by the Rubenstein Perennial Internship Program and we should be getting applications in late January/early February
- LCBP Education and Outreach grant – did not get funded.

Meeting was adjourned at 8:53 am.

Minutes Submitted by Melinda Scott: January 4, 2017

Approved by WCC: January 4, 2017