

Catamount Community Forest Planning Committee

Minutes of March 26, 2018

Approved

Members Present: Barb Evans, Michael Clauss, Jeff Dickinson, Patrice Maloney, Rita Dessau, Ben Norris, Anthony Jordick, Kort Longenbach, Ben King, Steve Page.

Members Absent: Terry Marron

Others Present: Melinda Scott (staff), Kim Coleman (facilitator), Kate Wanner (Trust for Public Land), Ethan Tapper (Department of Forests, Parks and Recreation), Jim McCullough, Lucy McCullough, Abbie Bowker, Sharon Gutwin, Sabra Davison, and Tony Shaw.

Goal: Discuss and develop recommendations for forest management at Catamount. Discuss and develop recommendations for horseback riding at Catamount. Begin discussion of dogs at Catamount.

1. Housekeeping items:

- Approve 3-19-2018 minutes: The minutes were approved with revisions.
- Update on March 20 Selectboard meeting: Melinda provided an update to the Committee on the Selectboard's initial response to the COFC License Agreement, which was presented to them at the March 20 meeting. Melinda apologized for neglecting to inform the Committee members ahead of time that the Selectboard was discussing the License Agreement. While she stated that the changes since the last time the Committee reviewed the Agreement were relatively few, she would compile a list of changes or at least provide the memo that went out to the Selectboard, so the Committee was aware of the content of the final agreement. Melinda stated that the reception of the Selectboard to the agreement was somewhat mixed, and that there was a perception and a concern from some Selectboard members that the community forest was focusing too much on the activities of the COFC at the exclusion of other interests in the greater community. Melinda stated her opinion that for this project to succeed, the Committee needs to conscientiously consider the desires of other user interests and make an effort to include other uses where feasible.
- A discussion of the community forest's purposes ensued. Melinda stated the funding sources valued multi-use community forestry, and Kate stated that the project wouldn't have ranked second in the nation were it not for the COFC and all their great programming, in that way this project is unique. Ben King stated that still, the community forest needs to be inclusive of many activities. Kim stated that the topics being discussed by the Committee – horseback riding and dogs – are the most contentious yet, and that the discussions will be heated at times. That being said, the Committee needs to be mindful of using a collaborative process to try and reach a

compromise solution, and above all else, to use kindness to each other as a guiding principle.

2. Public Comment: This item was moved up on the agenda because there were several members of the public who wanted to speak.
 - Jim McCullough introduced himself. He thanked the Committee members for their many hours of dedicated service to this project. He stated that he was speaking as an expert witness on the topic of horses, as a life-long equestrian and trainer with a B.S. in agriculture with horse management course material. He has owned and managed horses and donkeys on the property for many years. He knows they are very large, heavy, unwieldy and often fearful. As such they pose significant risks to other users of the property, and therefore are an untenable addition. While it might work to permit horse riding as a use limited to one or two days a week, the erosion horses cause to the trails is also of concern. Lucy McCullough reiterated Jim's concerns, and spoke specifically about her experience with the donkeys on the property. While docile and calm most of the time, they can be excitable and unpredictable in certain situations, especially when approached from behind. Jim added that the COFC's insurance carrier indicated that allowing horseback riding would likely raise the insurance rates. Horses pose a liability concern that needs to be addressed in the license agreement. Jim also didn't know where on the property could accommodate an equine only trail.
 - Abbie Bowker stated that she is a current Board Member of the Catamount Outdoor Family Center, and she echoes the comments made by Jim and Lucy.
 - Tony Shaw stated he is a Williston resident and is primarily interested in the discussion about dogs, and does not have any comments related to horses.
 - Mark Stannard, a Williston resident, stated he is opposed to allowing horseback riding at Catamount.
 - Sharon Gutwin stated her main concern is related to inclusion of different activities at the community forest; she views horseback riding as being possible with certain conditions and she would like to see the Committee work towards finding a viable solution.
 - Sabra Davison stated she operates Little Bellas at 19 venues across the US. Out of the 19, only one venue allows horseback riding, and the property is much larger than Catamount. Even still, the impact from horses on the trails is apparent. On that property the issue has become very contentious with high conflict between different user groups. She stated that none of the venues allows dogs. She recommended the Committee not allow dogs or horses and if allowed, urged the Committee to very carefully consider and plan for the safety of all users.
3. Forest Management – Ethan Tapper:
 - Ethan reviewed the recommendations for forest management at Catamount (see below), and stated that the integration with other uses will be a key issue. A forest management plan is required for any active forest management activities to occur at Catamount. The current plan expires in 2019, and Ethan is recommending an inventory be conducted in summer 2019 and a new plan drafted using the updated data.

- Patrice asked Ethan to clarify his statement of “this would be a big change” – did he mean that the new plan would be a significant change from the existing? Ethan stated that what’s considered a healthy forest by today’s standards represents a significant change from traditional views of a parklike structure with sparse understory being considered healthy. Current knowledge indicates a healthy forest has a lot of complexity in structure and species, lots of downed woody debris and snags, and can look really messy. Ethan envisions harvests occurring in small sections of the property over a long period of time.
- Steve Page asked Kate if she is aware of any restrictions on forest management placed by the conservation easement. Kate stated none.
- Jim stated that in the past they have conducted harvests during the summer so as to minimize impacts on trails.
- Anthony asked, how often would logging occur? Ethan stated typically a couple of harvests over certain portions of the property during a 10 year period.
- Jeff asked how the timber harvest would be financed. Ethan stated that it would produce revenue for the town, and that the town would enter into a contract with a logger who is recommended by Ethan, and the harvest would be overseen by Ethan. Other noncommercial restoration work could be done in cooperation with US Fish and Wildlife Service.
- Jeff asked about the cost of invasives removal. Ethan stated that invasives removal is expensive, but that the revenue from a timber harvest could be used to pay for it. He recommends addressing invasives before using the revenue for other projects.
- Kate suggested that the management plan can include a recommendation to reinvest any income from timber harvesting back into the property. Another suggestion was to donate any harvested firewood to households in need.
- Ben King asked whether the members wanted to add a recommendation related to the revenue stream, and language was subsequently added.
- The members voted to approve the following forest management goals, with 9 members fully supportive and 1 member supportive:

Forest Management Goals

- To practice active and sustainable forest management. Forest management has importance for:
 - Educational purposes --- demonstrating responsible, sustainable timber harvesting to residents of Williston and beyond.
 - Wildlife habitat enhancement --- there are a number of opportunities to create unique habitat conditions on the property, using timber harvesting as a tool.
 - Cultural and historic importance --- demonstrating the responsible stewardship of forested land on a property with a tremendous history, of which forest management has been a part for centuries.
 - Periodic income generation --- forest management can be part of how we fund other projects on the property, such as wildlife habitat enhancement, invasive species control and habitat restoration.
- To maintain a healthy and productive forest
- To maintain and encourage a diversity of native species, of all taxa
- To maintain a structurally complex forest

- To protect sensitive natural resources, including water resources, significant natural communities and rare, threatened and endangered species
- To manage for the long-term health of the forest
- To protect the forest from the invasion of exotic, invasive species
- To use the timber harvesting, when appropriate, to advance the above-listed objectives
- To strike an equitable balance between recreational and forest management objectives that does not jeopardize our adherence to any of the objectives listed above.

- The members voted to approve the following forest management policies, with all members present (10) fully supportive:

Forest Management Policies

- Conduct forest inventory and update the Forest Management Plan (FMP) with new data in 2019.
- No harvesting will occur on the property until the updated FMP is drafted.
- The new FMP should recommend new management strategies based on the objectives of the Town of Williston, as laid out in the Management Plan.
- Management activities will promote a forest that reflects a diversity of stand ages and naturally occurring forest types in the majority of the forest. Special attention will be given to the conservation of rare and exemplary natural communities, and the conservation and enhancement of native plant and animal species and their habitats, including the establishment and retention of a range of sizes and types of downed woody debris, snag trees, cavity trees, occasional very large or old trees, and a small amount of early successional habitats.
- Contain the current populations of invasive species present on property, and prevent further infestation from invasive species in the future.
- Forest management activities should be done only when the ground is frozen to minimize impacts to birds and amphibians, as well as to wetlands and vernal pools.
- Forest management needs to be done in conformance with the policies stated in the "Protection of Water Resources" sections above.
- If timber management is to take place near trails, efforts will be taken to mitigate impacts to the trail, when possible. Where sections of trail are located on historic skid trails, and no feasible alternative exists, these trails may need to be used by logging equipment to avoid adversely impacting other areas. These trails should be restored to their previous condition as soon as possible following timber harvesting, which may entail additional costs to the town or the timber harvest.
- In situations where impeding a trail is unavoidable, trails will be temporarily closed or rerouted. The location of the rerouted trails will be at the discretion of the Town of Williston in coordination with the Designated Trail Corridor Manager, reflecting relevant site conditions at the time of harvest, and will be routed to avoid impacts on wetlands, springs, riparian areas, and other sensitive natural or cultural features.
- Any timber sale revenues shall be reinvested into management of the community forest property, that in turn shall be reflected in the forest management plan.
- All timber harvests shall be supervised by a licensed forester, as set forth by the forest management plan.

4. Discussion of Horseback Riding

- Patrice stated she would like to address some of the concerns expressed by Jim and others.
 - Horse behavior can be unpredictable at times, and there is a risk of injury.
 - The limited area precludes the management of dedicated horse trails.
 - She knows of several public forests that accommodate several different uses
 - Regulations can be used to limit when horseback riding is allowed and when trails are too muddy it's not allowed.
 - Patrice asked whether COFC has users sign a waiver, as this is pretty standard practice that lessens the liability to the landowner or facility operator. Any waiver related to horseback riding should state that the user is responsible for injury to oneself and others as well as damage to the premises, which would align with State statute.
 - Patrice attempted to research the statistics on safety, but could not find consistent information; however, the information she found seemed to indicate that risks for horseback riding and mountain biking were on par.
 - Patrice would like to put together a proposal for horseback riding at Catamount and would work with others on this proposal if there was interest.
 - Patrice stated that the trail system is dense and feels that some could be dedicated to horseback riding.
- Mike Clauss asked who would be responsible for maintenance, and Melinda stated that has not been determined. It is one of the items that would need to be addressed in a future proposal.
- Steve Page said there are bridges on Catamount that horses can't navigate. He feels the trails on the property need to be walked with that in mind, and that connections to other properties need to be explored to see how they could be integrated.
- Mike asked whether the proposed recommendation would address the Selectboard's concerns about inclusivity, and Melinda stated she thinks it would.
- Abbie and Sabra stated concerns about horseback riding potentially degrading the handicapped accessible trail.
- Ben King noted that the second bullet point regarding hosting horseback riding a few times a year doesn't make sense given the need to further explore the concerns raised in the first bullet point. The language "After consideration of the above points" was added to the beginning of the second major bullet.
- Kim suggested altering the language to "the Committee supports future exploration of integrating horseback riding at Catamount."
- The Committee voted to approve the recommendations on horseback riding, shown below, with 4 members fully supportive, 5 members supportive, and 1 member neutral.

Horseback Riding (Discussed on 3/19/2018)

- The Catamount Forest Committee supports the future exploration of integrating horseback riding with other uses at Catamount. The Committee and/or Selectboard will consider future proposals for horseback riding at Catamount, provided any such proposal addresses the following considerations:
 - Identifies appropriate trails at Catamount for horseback riding - wider multi-use trails rather than single-track mountain biking trails;
 - Identifies potential connections from the Catamount network to existing trails on neighboring properties such as the Talcott Forest, Pine Ridge Forest and/or Riverhill Farm;
 - Provides for adequate parking and safe access;
 - Provides a plan for adequate trail maintenance and a reasonable fee structure to cover the costs of additional trail maintenance and liability insurance;
 - Describes how collaboration with other stakeholders will be achieved and user conflicts minimized; for example, restricting horseback riding to certain days of the week or certain times of day, posting educational signage, or organizing a volunteer trail work day.
- After consideration of the above points, the Town shall consider on an individual basis, a few days per year when horseback riding would be allowed. Any such days would need to be scheduled well in advance as a Special Event, mutually agreed to by the Town and COFC, and posted widely ahead of time to inform all user groups of the activity.

5. The meeting was adjourned at 8:06 pm.