

Catamount Community Forest Planning Committee

Minutes of February 12, 2018

Approved

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

Members Absent: Jay Diaz, Steve Page

Others Present: Melinda Scott (staff), Kim Coleman (facilitator), Kate Wanner (Trust for Public Land), Andrea Shortsleeve (Department of Fish and Wildlife), Chris Saunders, Sharon Gutwin (Williston resident).

Goal: Learn about hunting safety and possible mechanisms of regulation. Discuss and develop recommendations for hunting at Catamount. Discuss and develop recommendations for protection of wildlife habitat.

1. Housekeeping items:

- Approve 1-22--2018 minutes: The minutes were approved as written.
- Barb Evans gave a report on the February 10 open house. 12 people attended, not as many as the previous open house. People were encouraged to write and leave comments about what they wanted and/or did not want to see at Catamount. An informal poll was conducted regarding support/opposition to hunting, horseback riding and dogs at Catamount. There was 50/50 support for hunting, and nearly unanimous support for horseback riding and dogs.

2. Considerations for hunting at Catamount 6:15 – 7:00

- Presentation (Chris Saunders, VT Department of Fish and Wildlife)
 - Hunting is almost always allowed on State land.
 - He understands the concerns about safety and will address those concerns.
 - Hunting is on the decline in Vermont and nationwide, mostly because of increasing suburbanization and urbanization.
 - However, hunting is still an important tradition in Vermont, with 1 in 4 males still hunting.
 - Public support of hunting is high at 86% and has been increasing in the last 10 years primarily because of wildlife-human conflicts.
 - Almost all hunting takes place during the rifle season (16 days in November), and youth deer hunting season (1 weekend in early November) is popular. Muzzleloader season (first week in December) is particularly important for controlling the deer season, because does can be taken.
 - Hunting success rate is at 18%.
 - Hunting is heavily regulated.

- Since 1975, anyone getting a hunter's license for the first time has to take a Basic Firearm Hunter Education class, which is free and available to anyone. Since then, the number of hunting accidents has been reduced by 75%.
 - Hunter orange is not mandatory in Vermont but is becoming more acceptable.
 - The most recent hunting related fatality was in 2011.
 - In the last 30 years, only 2 incidents have involved non-hunters.
 - The great majority of hunting accidents are self-inflicted gunshot wounds.
 - The Town can (and does) have a firearms ordinance but cannot regulate hunting. The firearms ordinance regulates the implement but not the activity. Game wardens will not enforce a firearms ordinance.
 - Posting land does not affect liability. The Town is not liable for property damage or personal injury due to recreational use of property, including hunting.
 - Liability increases if a fee is charged.
 - The Town could post a Safety Zone, which is a 500ft buffer around any building on the property. Buildings being buffered must be on the property and the buffer extends no further than the property line.
 - Safety Zone signs are free and available from the VT DFW, it is enforceable and backed by statute.
 - Posting the entire property or parts of the property against hunting and or trapping involves many legal requirements and must be maintained every year. Signs must be clearly legible and posted at each corner of the property and along the boundary at least every 400 feet, and must be re-dated every year.
 - Another option is to post "Hunting is Allowed by Permission Only." The primary goal is to keep track of who is on the property, but this puts out a different message.
 - Regulating hunting on a town forest is extremely rare.
 - Catamount is ideal deer habitat, with half of it a State recognized deer wintering area.
 - Benefits of allowing hunting include reducing deer/car collisions, garden depredations and ticks, improving forest health, and supporting an important social and cultural tradition.
3. Discussion and voting – Kim suggested using a nominal group process, whereby the group can generate proposed policies, these are voted on and discussed in an iterative manner until the group arrives at consensus or agrees that no consensus can be reached. Kim reminded the group that because hunting currently is allowed, that will be the default condition if the group can't reach consensus.
- Several policies were proposed:
 - Allow hunting north of the powerline
 - Hunting is not allowed at Catamount
 - Establish 500ft safety zone from any abutting land's houses
 - Recommend the Selectboard extend the current Restricted Firearms Discharge Area to include Catamount
 - Allow hunting by permission only, establish a lottery system to limit the numbers of hunters

- Hunting is allowed but no tree stands are allowed
 - Hunting is allowed by permission only, establish a lottery system, consider the policy on a year by year basis
 - Hunting is allowed during rifle season by permission only
 - Allow bow hunting during archery season north of the powerline only
 - Select Board appoints a second committee to study this issue after the town acquires the property and the Management Plan has been written.
- Ben stated that one consideration should be which policy will benefit the greatest number of people? He feels that having a place to walk during hunting season benefits more people than allowing hunting and closing the property to other uses.
 - Melinda reminded the group that there are currently 4 other Country Parks that do not allow hunting, and where people can walk during hunting season.
 - Anthony stated that having a no hunting policy could also potentially benefit the outdoor center in years where there are early snowfalls, they could open earlier.
 - Kort stated that he doesn't have a compelling reason not to support hunting on the property, as he feels it has had and will continue to have a very minimal impact on their operations.
 - Terry stated that she has allowed hunters on her property and over the last few decades has had no issues. Hunters have always been very respectful. She wondered if the town could establish a lottery system to limit the number of hunters on the property.
 - Kim checked in with the group to see if they wanted to continue the discussion, and there was agreement that it was worth continuing to try to reach consensus.
 - Jeff stated that he had conducted an informal poll of his neighbors on Governor Chittenden Rd. Out of 9 respondents, 7 were against allowing hunting, 1 was neutral and 1 was in favor of allowing hunting. Jeff stated that as an abutting landowner, he has safety concerns and doesn't want to have to police the activity of hunters near his property.
 - Rita stated it seems cumbersome to regulate hunting if it was allowed at Catamount.
 - Ben stated if hunting is allowed at Catamount under town ownership, it will be a different experience from hunting on private land, with no accountability.
 - Kate mentioned that the Dept of Fish and Wildlife now has a conservation easement on 118 acres of the Fontaine property. Andrea stated one of the conditions of that easement is that hunting must be allowed.
 - Barb stated she would like to see some accommodation for hunting; however, in light of the conservation easement on the neighboring Fontaine property and some adjoiner concerns, she would consider changing her vote to support a no hunting policy.
 - Kort asked, if hunting was restricted to north of the powerline, does that alleviate any of the abutting landowner's concerns? Jeff stated, no it doesn't.
 - Kim asked whether any other members would change their votes in light of the discussion, and an informal poll indicated the group could reach consensus.
 - The group voted to recommend a no hunting policy, with 6 "5s" (strongly support) and 4 "4s" (support).
4. The meeting was adjourned at 8:00 pm.