

Champlain Valley Conservation Partnership Meeting
Wednesday, December 16, 2020; 1:30 PM
Remote GotoMeeting

Attendees: Ashley Parker, SB Project Manager; Holly Rees, Director of Recreation & Parks, South Burlington; Melinda Scott, Williston Conservation Planner; Alex Weinhagen, Hinesburg Director of Planning & Zoning; Melanie Needle, Senior Planner, Chittenden County Regional Planning Commission; Gail Albert, Shelburne Natural Resources & Conservation Committee; Don Rendall, Shelburne Natural Resources & Conservation Committee; Abel Russ, St. George Development Review Board; Jens Hilke, Conservation Planning Biologist, VT Fish & Wildlife Department; Larry Kupferman, South Burlington Natural Resources & Conservation Committee; Sarah Dopp, President South Burlington Land Trust (Phone)

Absent: Dean Pierce, Shelburne Director of Planning & Zoning; Sarah Gentry Tischler, St. George Selectboard; Larry Lewack, Charlotte Town Planner; Bob Hyams, Hinesburg Conservation Commission; Lisa Kingsbury, UVM Planning Services; Kevin Dorn, City Manager, City of South Burlington; Kate Kelly, Hinesburg Conservation Commission

Meeting began at approximately 1:35 PM.

Welcome and Round of introductions.

Changes or additions to Agenda –

There were no changes or additions to the agenda.

Consideration of Minutes from Previous Meeting –

The minutes from the November 18, 2020, meeting were reviewed. A few minor edits were proposed and accepted. Those changes were made and the minutes were accepted as amended.

Partner News and/or Updates –

Hinesburg has been working on their Natural Resource Inventory. They are hoping to make the mapping platform public in the New Year. Their Conservation Commission has also been working on river corridors and considering development happening on either side. They have been asking the question: who is the right entity to manage and steward an area for the long-term? How do you take care of a unique area that doesn't fit the traditional park model? Perhaps this would make for a good future agenda item. In Shelburne, they identify Committee members to tackle specific topics of interest. They also use the Boy Scouts. Other potential groups include: the Lake Champlain Land Trust, the Vermont Land Trust, the Winooski Valley Park District, the Vermont River Conservancy, the Vermont Rivers Program (DEC), and the Lewis Creek Association (Gretchen Alexander). The question of stewardship (long-term) and who should do this long-term is a good one, and perhaps a great piece for discussion in land stewardship topic. The Intervale has also done some land stewardship (specifically riparian).

South Burlington relayed information about a new conservation group in Vermont – Land Ethic Vermont. Ashley has been asked to be on the Steering Committee due to her history with the Land Ethic Leader program and role with the partnership. The group is currently composed of individuals from

Vermont Land Trust, VT Fish & Wildlife, Audubon Vermont, Vermont Coverts, The Nature Conservancy, and the US Fish & Wildlife Service. They are a group committed to fostering and exploring a “land ethic” among Vermont’s residents and visitors. They will be conducting additional future Land Ethic Leader trainings for folks to participate in, so stay tuned for more information as the group continues to grow.

Sarah also shared that the South Burlington Planning Commission is working on revising the existing LDRs. The Land Trust is looking to build up more of a nest egg for future conservation purchases by adding an additional cent to the tax base. Currently, South Burlington has 5% of the existing Open Space monies going towards maintenance costs and projects.

In Williston, the Commission is working with Jens to id significant wildlife areas and to make regulations related to those stronger. There is also an opportunity to purchase a large forested block in Town.

Mapping Project –

Melanie is talking with the state about the latest data update. It may have been user error. There is a new data standard and Melanie can share that. There is more descriptive information from what was in the previous standard. The story map has not been updated yet. Melanie is also making an update to the editing tool on the map viewer. It shouldn’t affect editing or updating the data. She will confirm if the tool is ready to go.

BioFinder Presentation/Discussion –

Jens gave a brief presentation to the group to provide a review of BioFinder and how it could be used to look for conservation opportunities.

In general, the group should look for patterns that are composed of larger and smaller blocks, and then looking for the “stepping stone” blocks to connect them all. Then he suggested adding in the riparian and surface water connectors. These connections are important for wildlife and plant movement, as well as climate change adaption.

Just because BioFinder calls it a priority doesn’t mean that it should be a priority at the local level, but it could help make the case for local conservation efforts because it is a state priority.

It was suggested that members look at BioFinder to see what might be priorities for their Town, and then see what the highest priorities are.

Surface water and riparian area layer includes every stream, river, lake, and pond. It is not a regulatory layer. It just shows where priorities are. Sites are still considered important even if they have been developed already. It is not a great tool for the regulatory process, but it does knit other layers together.

How do we translate information into on-the-ground implementation if it’s not for regulatory use? Basically, any information obtained from BioFinder can be put under further review. It does need more accurate data to be able to be considered more for regulatory use.

Could BioFinder be useful in working with developers for reviewing a project and considering alternative development locations? Yes.

Over time, Jens does feel like surface water data can be further refined with better technology. What area does surface water encompass? It includes buffer areas from the stream center line and then is buffered out. They added a valley bottom land type model. It is a mix of hydric soils and fills out the floodplain. There is also riparian wildlife connectivity, but it isn't as refined.

There are different forest values identified. It is based on 2011 data (30 m pixel). It also includes wetlands and other things. Interior forest blocks show up in even the most fragmented parts of Vermont. Anything at the priority/high priority level should be considered, especially when connected with surface water/riparian data.

Connectivity blocks are lands and waters that allow plant and animal movement. Priority blocks are more common in the Champlain Valley and should be considered. The scale of data we need in the Champlain Valley is different than what's been used in BioFinder overall, but the connections are still important.

Next steps: Redefine the Forest patch using forest canopy. Use VT Conservation design highest priority as the first screen of importance. Then combine local prioritizations. Create a set of regional forest blocks that are protected.

Abel noted that St. George appears to be right in the middle of a major priority block. The Towns make the decisions at the local level, and the state helps. St. George is trying to figure out how to make conservation happen.

Utilizing BioFinder may help the regional group see the big picture better and identify where to focus and then dive deeper. One question is how to get private landowners to work together better to protect what's there? Perhaps mapping data could include information on costs related to conservation so the public can access that information. This conversation is usually a delicate one with landowners that have large amounts of land. BioFinder can also let the partnership see where there might be more opportunities across boundaries, and opportunities to plan where conservation goes.

Landowners are often looking to utilize their heritage. It would be helpful to understand more about why a landowner might be protective of a piece of property. What would be their incentive to conserve? We may be able to connect this work with the Audubon grant award by engaging with landowners and the state.

How do you set expectations with developers? How do we craft language that sets the expectations and also reflects any legal concerns?

Look at the prioritizations first and then move on to the inventory (big picture first and then more details).

Partnership Homework:

1. Look at BioFinder. Check out what priorities are in your Town, and then identify where there might be potential conservation hot spots for the group to consider as a whole.
2. Continue working on updating data in the map viewer.

Ashley will send a note regarding the Homework in January.

Regional Land Stewardship –

Ashley had the idea to begin a conversation with the group around land stewardship and how best to manage regional issues with carrying out responsibilities associated with management/maintenance of Town-owned natural areas/conserved lands. How does each partner manage or maintain their own lands? What are the resources/funding sources/personnel that are used in each Town? Could we coordinate regional work days?

Volunteerism is great but volunteers need municipal support to do what they do. And all volunteers need the training to be able to conduct the management/maintenance task needed. The Lake Champlain Land Trust does organize training and events for volunteers. Others agreed that a regional entity would be great for leadership and resources. Invasive plant experts include Mike Bald and Ethan Tapper – two different approaches.

Before diving deeper into this concept, the group should determine what piece of management/maintenance to focus on. Topics include: invasive plants, trails, trash, and dog waste. Any invasive plant opportunity should be paired with a positive outcome like a planting so volunteers don't get burned out. Events could also be focused on Green Up Day.

At the end of this discussion, it was suggested that the regional partnership act as a clearinghouse for various natural resource themed events, and share the collection of events with each community. Ashley indicated that she could build off of what they started last year before the pandemic. She had intended on starting a list of events that the partnership could share. She will be reaching out to partners to let them know that they should be sure to send any volunteer opportunities to her so she can collate them all and get them out for distribution. This reminder will be sent out in the New Year with the mapping homework.

The next meeting is currently scheduled for: January 27th at 1:30 PM. It will be remote and Ashley will send along those details as it gets closer.

The meeting was adjourned.