

Champlain Valley Conservation Partnership Meeting

Wednesday, March 24, 2021; 1:30 PM

Remote GotoMeeting

Attendees: Ashley Parker, SB Project Manager; Melinda Scott, Williston Conservation Planner; Alex Weinhagen, Hinesburg Director of Planning & Zoning; 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; Sarah Dopp, President South Burlington Land Trust

Absent: Dean Pierce, Shelburne Director of Planning & Zoning; Melanie Needle, Senior Planner, Chittenden County Regional Planning Commission; Sarah Gentry Tischler, St. George Selectboard; Larry Lewack, Charlotte Town Planner; Holly Rees, Director of Recreation & Parks, South Burlington; Larry Kupferman, South Burlington Natural Resources & Conservation Committee; Bob Hyams, Hinesburg Conservation Commission; 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 February 17, 2021, meeting were reviewed and were accepted with one minor edit.

Partner News and/or Updates –

The South Burlington City Council has announced a new City Manager to officially start June 1st. Jessie Baker has accepted the position, and is already beginning her transition through meetings with staff.

The South Burlington Planning Commission is continuing to finalize changes to the Land Development Regulations.

Hinesburg is also preparing to bring in a new Town Manager next month. It is Todd Odit who is coming from Jericho.

Shelburne voters approved the requested amount for their Open Space Fund (50K). There has been a push to fast track some changes in development review process for economic development. The NRCC is hoping to also include some changes and feedback in the final review.

Williston is moving ahead with the hiring of a part-time Trail and Natural Areas Steward. Their Town Manager determined that it would be worth hiring a position for 3-4 months, starting in May or June.

Mapping Project –

Ashley kicked off this discussion with an outlook to the future and a focus for reviewing the landscape sections pinpointed by Jens. She would like to bring in partners, like Audubon VT, to begin discussing where potential project opportunities might be, and she feels that these identified areas are a good place to start. She also let the group know that 350 VT, a climate focused non-profit, reached out to see if the partnership might be interested in working with them on their Rewild Vermont initiative. They may fit into the work to be determined by Audubon.

Ashley turned the conversation over to Jens so that he could show the four images he shared with the group via email (see attachment).

Image #1: SW Corner of Williston into Richmond

There is north to south connectivity from Shelburne to Hinesburg. Look at opportunities for under the road connecting opportunities (116 & 2A). VTrans may be interested and some money may be coming in to support projects like that. There are also opportunities to preserve forest area in the middle of St. George. The riparian network knits everything together. Roads could be considered connectivity opportunities. Look at VTransparency to identify infrastructure opportunities and identify potential projects. VTrans won't go after these connectivity/road crossing projects on their own. Could also look at local Town regulations/tools that could be strengthened. There are also communication and outreach opportunities in St. George, especially in terms of letting residents know what restrictions already exist in the Town Plan.

Image #2: Williston/South Burlington border (Muddy Brook corridor)

There are a lot of restoration opportunities, best management agricultural practices, floodplain forest protection opportunities (i.e.: along the Winooski River). Potential partners here could be the Winooski Valley Park District (WVPD) & the Winooski Natural Resources Conservation District (WNRCD). The WVPD is really engaged in a lower Winooski Project with the Intervale.

Image #3: Lake Iroquois to northeast corner of Hinesburg

One of the questions here is what opportunities really exist in this corner of Hinesburg? Lake Iroquois is difficult to work in because there is already a highly developed shoreline. There may be some areas where a 150 ft buffer is still achievable, and at the very least there is opportunity for outreach and engagement. Williston may have some conservation opportunities along the eastern boundary. There also may be a few landowners throughout Mt. Pritchard in Hinesburg.

Image #4: Shelburne Pond to northern Hinesburg to South Burlington

There are a lot of restoration opportunities in South Burlington. Midland Ave is now cutting through the Great Swamp, and there may be wildlife crossing opportunities here. There may be additional opportunities to target water conservation and water quality throughout. Hinesburg really liked this one, and is aware of some potentially interested landowners in Hinesburg.

Patches of forested wetland are more important because more bats are being found there. Don't forget about individual Town natural resources inventories, and incorporate those as we continue diving into any of these areas deeper looking for opportunities.

Do we want to consider anything along Lake Champlain? Jens suggested that due to the large level of development along the lake already, that it's not as valuable as other parts of the region and there is not as much connectivity and cross-boundary opportunities.

The group decided to focus efforts initially on Image #4, and Ashley is going to work on inviting Mark LaBarr (Audubon) and some other interested partners to the April meeting to dive deeper into potential project opportunities here. Jens suggested talking about both forest bird and grassland bird projects. Other partners to try and bring to the table include: Vermont Land Trust – Bob Heiser, WVPD, the WNRCD, and Richmond – Brad Elliott.

Ashley asked Jens to create a better map of Image #4 so that we can all view it better and share it with others.

It was also brought up that now would be a good time to take another look at the partnership's structure and who is officially considered a member. As we grow, it will be important to consider how best to create working groups or sub committees to tackle various tasks, and then report back to the whole. This is going to be incredibly important as we dive into new projects.

Regional Stewardship Discussion –

Ashley provided updates related to two efforts going on in South Burlington. The first has to do with work taking place with the UVM NR206 class. A group of students is working on a project that was originally focused on the City's effort to update the existing management plan, but has become more focused on a volunteer stewardship program that would engage volunteers in various levels of stewardship tasks that need to take place at the park. It would mainly be targeted to fill the gaps in staff and resource capacity, and would be driven by interest and training. When the class is done, staff hopes that there is a program outline that we could begin implementing at Red Rocks, with future expansion to other parks or natural areas. Any management task would need to be paired with training, but essentially, any program like this would take full-time coordination. At a regional level, could there be a regional coordinator opportunity to assist with management/maintenance issues throughout our region?

Ashley also updated the partners on the status of the Dog Recreation Management conversations happening in South Burlington. After holding a joint meeting of multiple City Committees to review and discuss the findings in a staff report related to dog impacts to users and natural resources, Committee members recommended and supported the creation of a task force to discuss and determine solutions for managing these impacts in the City. The Task Force has met twice, but there have been some hiccups due to differences in opinion regarding which municipal body should manage/discuss these issues. Some Committee members are now advocating for this work to happen elsewhere, so staff is waiting to understand what Council may decide to do with this and which body will be asked to take it on.

The partners discussed an idea of an ad campaign or messaging as a way to regionally communicate shared stewardship goals. There may be some potential funding opportunities that could be available to support this kind of effort.

Ashley mentioned the group Land Ethic VT as a potential partner for outreach/engagement with landowners. How could we bring some of their work into our region to support our work and needs? Jens suggested that they may be more focused on rural landscapes which tend to have different land development patterns and uses. He noted work being done in the Intervale that has been more focused on engaging with users of land that have different backgrounds and cultures and working with them on land stewardship and best management practices. This may be something the partnership should consider as our land area is more developed and more diverse than some of the landscape targeted by the Land Ethic VT group. Ashley asked Jens if the Lower Winooski Project team had met again recently. He said he didn't know but indicated Duncan Murdoch would be a good contact to determine whether it might make sense to connect the two groups for conversation.

The groups also went back to the question of trapping on town owned land. Jens had reached out to folks in the Department of Fish & Wildlife, and they relayed that towns are not empowered to regulate trapping on town owned land. State regulates trapping. There is a movement to change the law in the legislature, so the partners may want to pay attention if we begin conserving or protecting land with more wildlife connectivity areas.

The next meeting is currently scheduled for: April 28th at 1:30 PM. It will be remote and Ashley will send along those details as it gets closer.

The meeting was adjourned.