

Conservation Committee Meeting Minutes
Cape Elizabeth Town Hall
7:00 p.m., Tuesday, April 9, 2024

Present: Matt Craig, Chair, Michelle Boyer, Emily Helliesen Day, Stacey Dietsch, Corinne Ketcham, Bruce Moore, Richard Sullivan.

Staff: Maureen O'Meara, Town Planner

1. Call to Order. Chair Matt Craig called the meeting to order at 7:00 p.m.

2. Public Comment.

Sheila Wellehan, 24 Rocky Hill Rd – She confirmed she would be able to comment on an item on the agenda later in the meeting.

3. Minutes. The March 12, 2024 minutes were approved 7-0.

4. Cross Hill Encroachments.

Ardath Dixon, CELT Stewardship Manager, reported on email inquiries she has received from Cross Hill property owners and is responding and copying the town.

Chair Craig praised the comprehensiveness of her email responses.

The committee discussed how to respond to site visit requests and agreed that a member would accompany Ms. Dixon. They discussed times there were available. There was agreement to wait until May to schedule site visits, to send times to Ms. O'Meara to forward to committee members. Committee members Craig, Boyer and Sullivan offered to site visits.

5. Greenbelt Management Projects

Gnome houses. Dave Croft, Middle School teacher, described his concept based on his visit to Rangeley Trails, where gnome houses were placed in the woods, shown on a map, and are a fun way to explore the trails. He would like to do this in Cape and applied to CEEF (Cape Elizabeth Education Foundation) for funding for two special education classes with 45 students. CEEF wants the project expanded to the entire fifth grade (120+ students). He has asked CELT to provide trails for 2 classes, is asking the town for 2 classes, one class in Fort Williams, and a class in Two Lights State Park.

Each student would build a gnome house that would be mounted on a tree, with a gnome made by the student placed inside the house. A QR code link would also be provided for poems, etc. The project would feature the ecosystem of the trail and the

houses would be mounted for a year. Next year, a new class would use the houses. He wants to implement the project this spring.

Ms. Day asked about the area he was interested in and Mr. Croft was open to what is available.

Chair Craig asked about applicable policies. Ms. O'Meara responded that the Management of Greenbelt and Open Space includes the policies. Generally, any alteration of trails should receive Conservation Committee approval, but there is no prohibition on the project proposed.

Chair Craig opened public comment.

Sheila Wellehan, 24 Rocky Hill Rd – She supports a “Leave no Trace” policy. She visits Two Lights State Park and it still looks like it did when she was a child, which she likes. We should keep areas natural with minimal human intervention. There are more people using trails now and the woods don't need to be decorated. She likes the idea of placing the project at the Children's Garden at Fort Williams, or Turkey Hill Farm.

The committee confirmed the total number is 120 houses, and that Rangeley also has a gnome village where the houses are clustered. These are not fairy houses built from scavenged natural materials, but formally constructed houses. Mr. Moore noted the Coastal Maine Botanical Garden village made from natural materials.

Mr. Croft said they did not want to use fairy houses because they could be destroyed.

The committee noted that the houses would be nailed to the tree, that the project could encourage folks to explore the woods and that there are tradeoffs.

Mrs. Ketcham reflected that people remove signage now and we can expect damage, debris and maintenance needs.

Mr. Sullivan suggested that the houses could be mounted for a specific time and then removed, and Mr. Moore said one trail could be designated to see how it goes.

Ms. O'Meara noted that the committee had purchased 2 wood frame map boxes for Winnick Woods which were vandalized within the year.

Chair Craig noted that a precedent should not be set to allow activities on public trails that do not have a public benefit. A temporary installation may work with a constrained footprint.

Ms. Boyer would like to attach the houses to trees without nailing them.

Ms. Dietsch likes the opportunity to do a cool project that has the experience to build, teach and use the land, but prefers this located in areas that are wild. She would support the Children's garden at Fort Williams, the Library grounds and playground. Use land at the school.

Mr. Croft said the goal is to get people out on the trails.

Ms. Boyer agreed there is not a nature lesson on the playground.

Ms. Dietsch noted an educational event she attended at Turkey Hill Farm. They did research in the woods, but left nothing behind.

Ms. Wellehan suggested a temporary installation could be located at trail heads where there is already signage.

Ms. Dietsch asked if making the house could be a group project? Mr. Croft said CEEF wants each student to have a house.

Chair Craig said it would be easier to consider with a specific location. Gull Crest seems to be the place for everything, so perhaps allowing installation on the trail extending from Dennison Drive north to across from the Sewer Treatment Plant.

Ms. O'Meara asked about maintenance and Mr. Croft said he will do that. Ms. Day said the kids will have to maintain their house and check on it.

Mr. Croft suggested trying this for the summer and then check them in the fall.

Ms. Boyer confirmed that the site was walkable from the school.

Chair Craig said lots of schools have a forest they can use and Gull Crest is town owned property, so we can designate an education area.

Mr. Croft would like to do the project the end of May/June.

Ms. O'Meara reminded the committee, based on their earlier request, that this is the Nordic Trail. We currently encourage trail users to walk on the edge of the trail when it is groomed for skiing.

The committee agreed to allow two locations, the trail described at Gull Crest, and also the trail around the copse of trees on the Town Farm. They will allow up to 45 houses (2 classes) and all houses will be removed by December 1st.

The committee voted 7-0 to grant permission as described.

The committee asked Mr. Croft to return to the committee in January, 2025 with a report on the project. They also want to feature this in a gazette article.

Nordic Loop. The committee wanted to talk to Jay Weiss about proposed improvements, however he is out of town and will try to attend a future meeting. Ms. O'Meara should follow up with the Tree Warden on the root ball blocking the trail.

MCC Team. The committee will be doing a preparation site visit on May 6th.

Dyer Pond Rd Parking restrictions. The committee is interested in the recommendations to be made by the Ordinance Committee.

Trees. Chair Craig noted the significant number of trees down on the greenbelt. Another request for volunteer helpers will be put in the gazette.

Gazette. The committee would like items on chainsaw volunteers, muddy trails, gnome project, and earth day.

6. Next meeting. The next meeting will be held on May 14, 2024 and the agenda will include the MCC Team prep. The meeting adjourned at 8:40 p.m.