

Natural Heritage, Open Space, and Watershed Land Acquisition Review Board

Regular Meeting (via Zoom)

January 12, 2023

Minutes

Review Board members present: Tim Abbott, Karen Burnaska, Rebecca Dahl, Linda Francois, Walker Holmes, Amy Paterson (Co-Chair), Elanah Sherman, Joe Welsh (all by video except Elanah, who attended by phone)

DEEP representatives: Cameron Clegg, Environmental Analyst, LAM; Andrew Hoskins, Chief of Staff; Lindsay Suhr, Director, LAM Office

Guests: Shelley Harms, Executive Director, Cornwall Conservation Trust and Salisbury Association Land Trust; Yaw Owusu Darko, Project Specialist, Connecticut Land Conservation Council (CLCC); Catherine Rawson, Executive Director, Northwest Connecticut Land Conservancy; Susan Masino, Professor, Trinity College; Member, Simsbury Open Space Commission; and Co-Chair, Science and Technology Working Group of the Governor's Council on Climate Change in Connecticut

Welcome and Introductions

Amy called the meeting to order at 10:36 AM.

Approval of December 8 Meeting Minutes

On a motion by Karen, seconded by Walker, the Minutes were unanimously approved pending correction of Elisabeth Moore's name (from Elizabeth to Elisabeth).

DEEP Staff Updates

Status of 2020 and 2021 Annual Reports: Andrew thanked Cameron and members of the Review Board for their contributions to the drafts. He said that most suggestions from Review Board members will be integrated into the final drafts, which should be available by the end of February. Amy commented that the content of the Reports may prove helpful in the preparation of the next Green Plan.

Updating 2016-2020 Green Plan: See Discussion, 2023 Review Board Work Plan (below)

OSWA Grant Submission Update/Other Funding/Program News: Andrew reported that February 1 is the deadline for review by DPH and DEEP staff. He said that DEEP has streamlined the feedback process. DEEP staff is working now on drafting a framework for the next round. The hope is still to announce awards and the next grant round at the same time.

Status of DEEP's Proposal for Technical Corrections to C.G.S. Sec. 7-131d for 2023 Legislative Session: Andrew said the proposal should be posted soon. He and Rebecca added that the OPM website is just beginning to "light up" with legislative proposals from different agencies.

Other: Andrew commented that Lindsay, recently hired as Director of the LAM Office, has had a significant impact during her history at DEEP in different positions. Lindsay expressed enthusiasm for her new role. Andrew said he will maintain involvement with the Review Board, but that Lindsay will now be the primary liaison. Andrew also said that DEEP is in the process of filling Lindsay's former position. Elanah thanked Andrew for the clarity and thoroughness of his remarks during Review Board meetings.

Discussion: 2023 Review Board Work Plan

Create a list of recommendations for the new Green Plan, administrative changes, upcoming budget negotiations, and legislative changes for 2024: Amy shared a spreadsheet of the work plan; for the benefit of attendees new to meetings, she clarified that all items fall within the categories of statutory changes and administrative process.

Karen asked if the Green Plan has a specific audience. She added that the answer should determine content. Andrew said the Plan is primarily a policy document that serves as an "articulation of strategy to media and legislators, etc.," but that it is also intended to inform the public. Rebecca added that OPM does its own related plan (the State Plan of Conservation and Development - POCD), but that its only

purpose is approval of granting decisions. She added that the Green Plan is essential for OPM conservation planning.

Amy commented that it would be advisable for the next Green Plan to include an assessment of past goals and the degree of achievement. She added that mere “wish lists” do not help the State move forward in its preservation goals. She added that measurable goals could help land trusts with their own planning.

Lindsay reported that she will be deeply involved in production of both the next SCORP and Green Plan. Walker noted the importance of concurrent planning. Elanah repeated (from previous meetings) her suggestion that DEEP establish a designated fund for accessibility improvements (even though the CT Recreational Trails Program presently includes accessibility as an eligible funding project). Karen and Walker agreed with this suggestion. Walker also reported briefly on a neurodivergent adventure trail in New York. Amy added that more and more land trusts are inquiring about accessibility. Rebecca expressed the importance of defining accessibility.

Walker noted that urban parks projects must go through a far more political process than OSWA applicants. She said there is presently no equitable process for accessing urban parks funding and wondered how LWCF may be harnessed to fund both urban parks acquisition and development. Lindsay responded that STEAP and Urban Act funds are a source of parks funding for smaller municipalities that meet eligibility requirements. Walker added that another barrier to funding is the frequent prerequisite for design work.

Still on the subject of equitable urban park funding: Referencing the rails-to-trails projects, Tim said that DOT might be a source for park development; Rebecca added that transit monies provided to the COGS might fund trails in urban areas. Amy said two solutions might be enhancement of the UGCG program and broader dissemination of STEAP funds. Walker hypothesized that a fairer process would result if bond commission requests were turned into grant rounds administered by DEEP. Andrew concurred that such a scenario could produce a better outcome.

Review Board Member Updates: Tabled

Public Comment

Shelley commented that a three or four year wait is a hardship for owners selling land; she also expressed support for an accessibility fund, but said she does not want to see its administration burdening existing DEEP staff. Shelley also commented that she would like more information on “disability diversity.” Susan announced that Trinity College is in the process of making the campus an arboretum.

Other

Karen suggested that any department’s land conveyance plans should be distributed to multiple agencies.

Tim announced that the Highlands package passed in the omnibus bill with almost every item intact. He added that the lack of a funding increase – it will remain at 10 million - is not an issue because unused funds are still available. Tim also announced that a section of the Housatonic River received Wild and Scenic designation.

Amy reminded attendees that the CLCC summit on housing and land conservation is scheduled for February 1 in Hartford; TPL is co-host.

Adjournment

Without motions, the meeting adjourned at 12:06 PM.

Respectfully submitted, Elanah Sherman, Secretary

Chat is appended.

Next meeting: Thursday, February 9, 2023, 10:30 AM – 12:00 PM