

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

Regular Meeting (via Zoom/teleconference)

November 10, 2022

Minutes

Board members present: Tim Abbott, Karen Burnaska, Linda Francois, Joe Gresko, Eric Hammerling (Co-Chair), Walker Holmes, Amy Paterson (Co-Chair), Elanah Sherman, John Triana, (all by Zoom except Elanah, who attended by phone)

DEEP representatives: Allyson Clarke, Property Agent; Cameron Clegg, Environmental Analyst, LAM; Andrew Hoskins, Chief of Staff

Guests: Shelley Harms, Executive Director, Cornwall Conservation Trust and Salisbury Association Land Trust; Yaw Owusu Darko, Project Specialist, Connecticut Land Conservation Council (CLCC); Aaron Lefland, Deputy Director, CLCC; Catherine Rawson, Executive Director, Northwest Connecticut Land Conservancy.

Welcome and Introductions

Eric H called the meeting to order at 10:32 AM.

Approval of October Meeting Minutes

On a motion by Amy, seconded by Tim, the Minutes were unanimously approved.

DEEP Staff Updates

Status of 2020 and 2021 Annual Reports: Andrew said that he will email the Report drafts in PDF to Amy and Eric before the next Review Board meeting.

Updating 2016-2020 Green Plan: No report

OSWA Grant Submission Update/Other Funding/Program News: The OSWA applications from the last round (due date 9/30/2022) are going through a DEEP internal review with a 12/31/2022 deadline. Andrew's hope is that DEEP will reveal awards in March at the same time that the next grant round is announced.

Status of DEEP's Proposal for Technical Corrections to C.G.S. Sec. 7-131d for 2023 Legislative Session: Andrew said the proposal is still in process and not yet ready for public sharing.

Other: Andrew reported that DEEP will soon announce the new LAM Director.

Discussion: 2023 Review Board Work Plan:

Look back – Amy said that although the original emphasis was on technical corrections, such as layering state and federal easements, 2023 activity will center on exploring substantive changes that will improve the OSWA and UGCG programs, including budgetary considerations.

Presentation: Other state examples of conservation funding programs – Walker presented her research findings on the conservation programs in Pennsylvania and Washington. (Outline of her discussion points is attached.)

After the presentation, Eric opened the floor to questions. Regarding Pennsylvania, Karen asked if there is a ranking system for funding, with subsequent friction among different interests. Walker responded that, because Pennsylvania has different pots of funding, each with their own individual ranking systems, it is unlikely that any competitive pitting among the different interests occurs. Amy commented that the major difference between Connecticut and the other two states is not the program offerings, but that the other states offer efficient 'one-stop shopping.' Amy added that DEEP needs the support of the Review Board to acquire the funding that would enable this level of efficiency.

Discussion – Look forward – A vision for land conservation in Connecticut: What needs to be funded in Connecticut to advance land conservation, farmland preservation, stewardship, park development, equitable access to nature, and accessibility in the outdoors? Elanah suggested that DEEP establish a dedicated fund for accessibility improvements at existing open space properties; Karen concurred. Eric and Andrew responded that accessibility improvements are fundable through the Recreational Trails and Greenways programs. Tim said the need is urgent for more Yellow

Book appraisers, adding that only two are currently working in western Connecticut and that this lack is a chronic problem in other states, as well. Shelley stated that a major hurdle is the frequent grant requirement for matching funds; she added that municipalities need compensatory funding when properties are taken off the tax rolls. Linda said that CLCC transaction assistance grants are a source of match assistance.

Walker pointed out the severe lack of funding for park development and outdoor recreation. Amy mentioned that the two-tier OSWA process inevitably results in smaller projects having less chance of funding. As a corrective, she suggested that OSWA go back to traditional funding and that DEEP create a new category of grants. Amy added that another challenge is the chronic underfunding of the Recreation and Natural Heritage Trust Program. In regard to endangered species, Tim remarked that the State should consider constructing safe highway crossings.

Future discussion items: What are the existing grant programs (within and outside of DEEP, including federal programs) that are meeting open space needs? How are these programs funded? How may these programs be used in new ways? What are the gaps that we need to fill? May the Green Bank be a source of possible open space-related funding? The results of this future discussion may be valuable in guiding development of the next Green Plan; improving application processes; and influencing the upcoming budget.

Other

Re-election of Joe Gresko: The Co-Chairs congratulated Joe on his re-election. Joe said that he hopes to be back as Chair of the Environment Committee and as OSWA contact.

CEQ Environmental Monitor (11/8/2022): Eric reported that this issue of the Monitor includes announcements on proposed transfers of State-owned land in North Canaan (comment deadline 12/9), Waterford (comment deadline 11/18), and Stamford. (Both the land in North Canaan and Waterford are owned by DOT; UConn owns the Stamford parcel.) He asked if DEEP has evaluated these properties and whether or not the agency can require that appropriate parcels be retained by the State to help meet open space goals. Andrew responded that DEEP is in the process of reviewing this information, but has not yet issued recommendations; he added that DEEP may be able to utilize some internal means of intervention. Tim

commented that the North Canaan parcel provides the only “walkable green space” in the Town, but that the Town can’t afford to purchase it. Karen reported that DOT has postponed the auction of the North Canaan parcel. Amy said that CLCC has had some involvement in monitoring these transfers and that she has questions about public notice requirements. Amy encouraged Review Board members to sign up for CEQ updates.

Review Board Member Updates: No discussion

Public Comment: The public comment by guests was integrated into the discussion.

Adjournment

On a motion from Amy, seconded by Walker, the meeting unanimously adjourned at 11:51 AM.

Respectfully submitted, Elanah Sherman, Secretary

Note: Chat transcript is attached to Minutes.

Next meeting: Thursday, December 8, 2022, 10:30 AM – 12:00 PM