

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

Regular Meeting (via Zoom)

February 9, 2023

Minutes

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

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

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

Welcome and Introductions

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

Approval of January 12, 2023 Meeting Minutes

On a motion by Amy, seconded by Karen, the Minutes were unanimously approved, with one abstention.

DEEP Staff Updates

Status of 2020 and 2021 Annual Reports: Andrew announced that the Reports were posted yesterday and that many comments of Review Board members had been incorporated. He added that DEEP is working on the 2022 Report now and that a draft might be completed by the next Review Board meeting.

Updating 2016-2020 Green Plan: Lindsay reported that the Department has had internal meetings on the Plan and that she may have new updates at the next Review Board meeting.

OSWA Grant Submission Update/Other Funding/Program News: Andrew said that February 1 was the deadline for internal

reviews. He predicts he will have a fuller report at the next Review Board meeting.

Status of DEEP's Proposal for Technical Corrections to C.G.S. Sec. 7-131d for 2023 Legislative Session: The proposal has been posted.

Other

A free-ranging discussion on numerous topics followed the above:

Amy asked how the Board might be most helpful to DEEP in revising the Green Plan. No definitive answer was offered.

Andrew announced that the proposed budget includes \$10 million for open space and \$3 million for the Recreational Trails program in 2024 and 2025 (total \$26 million). In response to Amy's suggestion that OSWA grant rounds occur twice a year, Andrew said that a double round is not presently feasible. Shelley said that, although she is not opposed to more frequent rounds, greater predictability is the key issue. Walker and Amy agreed, pointing out the importance for applicants of consistency, predictability, and reasonable timing in the grant cycle. Amy said one goal of forthcoming rounds should be a wider pool of applicants and that expanding the eligible uses of funds should help meet that goal.

Eric cautioned that unused money suggests to the legislature that "you don't need the money if you're not spending it." Lindsay responded that most unused money is actually committed to projects. Andrew said he would provide at the next meeting an accounting of committed funds not yet spent.

Old Business: Discussion - 2023 Review Board Work Plan

Continue to create a list of recommendations for the new Green Plan, administrative changes, upcoming budget negotiations, and legislative changes for 2024: Walker suggested that the Review Board consolidate Work Plan ideas into several overarching themes that would include park development. Using a spreadsheet Amy shared as a foundation, Board members came up with the following thematic list: 1) financing; 2) administrative issues; 3) UGCG expansion; 4) urban forests; 5) SCORP; 6) Green Plan; 7) Recreation and Natural Heritage Trust Fund; 8) wildlife funding; 9) access of open space to marginalized groups; 10) park development.

Elanah proposed that the Green Plan address the perceived complicity of open space advocates with anti-affordable housing proponents.

Shelley wondered if DEEP plans to create a new open space percentage goal. Several members addressed the need for a uniform definition of open space and agreed that a definition should be included in the next Green Plan, and applied to the calculation of acreage in the Plan. Eric mused whether or not farmland should be included in the definition. Joe W said his work with land trusts has led him to think the State should consider setting up a separate fund that would enable it to buy and hold land while partners are searching for funding. Catherine led a brief discussion on the establishment of LLCs for the same purpose.

2023 Legislative Session Updates

Joe G said one of his legislative goals is to ensure that bonding for OSWA and the Recreational Trails and Greenways Program is included as a permanent annual budget item, obviating the need to raise a bill for that funding in the Environment Committee each year. He added that he also plans to work on definitional issues. (Different statutes have different definitions.) Amy proposed devoting the next Review Board meeting to the definitional dilemma and its resolution.

Andrew reported that several new staff positions are proposed in the DEEP budget (and no subtractions).

Review Board Member Updates: Tabled

Public Comment: Incorporated into previous discussions

Adjournment

On a motion by Amy, seconded by Linda, the meeting unanimously adjourned at 11:59 AM.

Respectfully submitted, Elanah Sherman, Secretary

Chat is appended.

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