

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

Regular Meeting (via Zoom/teleconference)

May 13, 2021

Minutes

**Board members present:** Tim Abbott, Karen Burnaska, Linda Francois, State Representative Joe Gresko, Eric Hammerling (Co-Chair), Walker Holmes, Dan Morley, Amy Paterson (Co-Chair), Elanah Sherman, John Triana, Joe Welsh (All by Zoom, except for Elanah, who attended by phone.)

**DEEP representatives:** Allyson Clarke, Nicole Lugli, Deputy Commissioner Mason Trumble

**Guest:** Catherine Rawson

**Welcome and Introductions:** Eric called the meeting to order at 10:30 AM.

**Approval of Minutes of April 8, 2021 Meeting of the Review Board**

Linda made a motion, seconded by Karen, to accept the Minutes as presented. The motion passed unanimously, with one abstention.

**DEEP Staff Updates**

Status of 2020 OSWA Grant Awards:

Nicole announced that DEEP staff is still waiting for compliance corrections from about six applicants. The compliance deadline is May 23, 2021. Public announcement of awards is expected to occur in late May.

Update on Public Comments on OSWA and UGCG Applications:

Eric thanked Nicole for sending out the survey results. Nicole and Mason reported that 40 people responded and that many voiced the importance of predictability and transparency, including the need for a set schedule. Some respondents also noted the importance of directional signage at sites and the need for applicants to do better outreach on their own websites.

As an aside, Mason suggested implementation of a \$400,000 funding cap in the face of funding limitations. The consensus among Review Board members regarding any cap was uniformly negative. Eric said that the percentage limitation already acts as a cap and that a cap would discourage applications. Amy added that one complication of a cap is that it would skew percentages; she added that the expected infusion of federal dollars makes a cap even more unnecessary. Walker said that a cap would act as a disincentive to bold projects. Tim stated that the already competitive application process makes a cap unnecessary.

The discussion regarding a cap led to consideration of unclosed projects and scoring criteria. Mason proposed denying funding to any applicant with unclosed

projects. In response, Eric expressed concern that such a hard-and-fast rule would not take into account the unavoidable complications sometimes confronted by applicants. Amy added that such a restriction could have the effect of derailing applicants' strategic planning, thus causing serious disruption. As illustration, John said one defect in title is all it takes to produce a delay. Tim noted that such a restriction could result in the State having to return millions in Highlands money and that continuing to impose roadblocks could drive applicants away. Nicole suggested a future discussion focusing on how to avoid being overly restrictive while still imposing reasonable requirements.

Mason conjectured that an alternative to caps and the above-discussed restriction would be to provide funding to only top applicants. Eric responded that, if the criteria are right, this approach might be a palatable alternative; he added that a priority approach might also act as extra motivation for denied applicants to get it right the next time. Walker said that one consequence of a 'top applicants' approach would be heightened scrutiny of criteria that would, in turn, "require increased attention to context." Amy added that Information sessions for potential applicants would be more important than ever if this approach is adopted; in response, Mason proposed that all information sessions include frank discussion of funding shortages. Amy said that, in regard to funding limitations, greater demand than supply constitutes a good argument for increased funding.

Mason recommended that prior completion of all projects be a priority factor. Tim proposed a limitation of one project per applicant, as well as higher scoring for proximity to high-density areas. Allyson announced that the appraisal process has been simplified, with just a yellow book appraisal, plus review, now required. Allyson also suggested that scoring criteria be developed for UGCG applications. Mason expressed appreciation for the candid discussion of ideas at the meeting and asked for help from Review Board members in preparing and educating potential applicants. Amy asked Nicole to email her an easy link to application criteria for the Board to review.

Status of 2021 OSWA Grant Round:  
Tabled

Status of Current OSWA/UGCG Funding (currently available [bonding and CIA], authorized/unallocated bonding):  
Tabled

## **Business**

Discussion of CEQ Annual Report: Preserved Land:  
Tabled

2021 Legislative Update (HB 6441, HB 6577, SB 887, others):

No update

Federal Funding Updates:

RCPP

Highlands

LWCF

Tabled

Preparation of Connecticut's 2021-2025 Green Plan:

Tabled

**Adjournment**

On a motion from Linda, seconded by Joe G, the meeting unanimously adjourned at 11:45 AM.

Respectfully submitted, Elanah Sherman, Secretary

**Next meeting:** A **Special Meeting** will be held on Wednesday, May 19, 2021, time TBD. The purpose of this meeting is discussion of potential application revisions, including criteria and scoring.