

Mohawk Trail Woodlands Partnership (MTWP) Advisory Committee Meeting

December 8, 2015

Berkshire East Ski Lodge, 66 Thunder Mountain Road, Charlemont, MA

Staff: P. Sloan, A. Larose, T. Matuszko, B. O'Connor, D. Raimo, E. Coughlin

Members Attending: Keith Ross, Walt Quist, Larry Flaccus, Gisela Walker, Art Schwenger, Kyle Hanlon, Doug Bruce, Whit Sanford, Jeff Neipp, Jim Perry, Cosmo Laviola*, Dicken Crane, Arthur Pantermehl Jr., Wendy Ferris, Fred Jajko, Scott Sylvester, Greg Cox

*needs formal Selectboard Approval

1. Introductions

T. Matuszko commenced the meeting at 6:07 PM and had members of the Advisory Committee introduce themselves. Several members took turns introducing themselves and other members of the Advisory Committee.

2. Review and Approval of October 20, 2015 Meeting Notes

Keith Ross motioned that the committee approve the Meeting Notes of October, 20th. Gisela Walker seconded. The motion carried with Doug Bruce, Keith Ross, and Gisela Walker abstaining from voting.

3. Review and Discussion of Draft Business Plan and Budget for MTWP & Discussion of Draft Governance Structure and Potential Special Legislation

P. Sloan summarized the draft business plan and budget. The focus is on long term sustainability. A key component of the business plan is the establishment of a trust fund created from appropriations that provides enough funding to sustain key programs and activities such as the multi-use center, staffing, the revolving loan fund, etc. The budget is organized around the five programmatic priorities: forest based economic development, forest land conservation, municipal financial sustainability, sustainable forestry practices, and natural resources based tourism. The narrative highlights the key expenditures such as the multi-purpose center, which would provide tourism services, technical assistance, opportunities for R&D related to climate change, invasive species and new wood products, a marketing program and an education program.

Another key piece is forest land conservation. The current budget is designed to fund the protection of approximately 1,800 acres of land. From the regional meeting in Franklin County, participants said that the amount budgeted for this item might be too low and that the plan should allocate more funding for land conservation. Additional discussion is needed on this matter.

The revolving loan fund will help to support forestry based businesses. An existing entity, such as the Franklin County Community Development Corporation, which already runs a similar loan program, will be sought to manage the program. The forest viability program would provide funding in exchange for temporary deed restrictions. A municipal cooperative agreement grant program would be available for municipalities that opted into the program. These municipalities would have to identify eligible activities prior to receiving funding. Also there would be grants and technical assistance to private landowners for management plans to help implement recommendations. Finally, natural resource

based recreation development funding could provide new trails or support other recreation tourism infrastructure in the region.

The total requested amount as drafted in the plan is \$20 million from the U.S. Forest Service and \$5 million from state appropriations over 4 years. The amount allocated to the trust fund is projected to generate approximately 5% interest per year. In addition to the investment income, it is anticipated that staff would apply for grant funding and engage in fund raising for additional income. Major capital expenses would be the multi-use center, establishment of the revolving loan fund, and purchase of conservation restrictions. Additionally, the budget provides a reserve for possible overages or emergencies. This budget is just a “first cut” for discussion. As the project proceeds, there will need to be fine tuning. Additionally, there will need to be a feasibility study to determine the ultimate location and cost of the multi-use center.

Question: How will this be sustained over the long term? Towns might be concerned that this will not be a sustainable program over the long run.

Response: Establishing a trust fund for long term sustainability is a strong approach. It would be difficult to ask for this amount of money if it would all be spent in a few years. In conversations with the USFS, there was interest in the program because it was innovative, could be sustained over the long term, and is driven by the communities. The hope is that municipalities will be on board with this idea.

Comment: Can we perhaps rent or renovate space for the multi-use center instead of spending so much on it in the first few years? This could allow more money to be allocated to forest land conservation.

Comment: We should wait to invest in this infrastructure (multi-use center) until we know this program is successful.

P. Sloan reiterated that towns felt that there was no existing location for public education or a tourism center. They felt it was a constraint to supporting recreational tourism. We need to make sure that these needs aren't lost in the desire to allocate more funding to land conservation. In addition, office and meeting space is needed for staff of the Partnership and potentially U.S. Forest Service personnel. We need to think carefully about this.

Comment: We should look at how this \$15 million initial capitalization could be used locally. There are other ways to support land conservation than just increasing the amount in this line item. One of the biggest problems is that money for land conservation takes years to assemble. Funding could be used to buy and hold tracts until enough Forest Legacy Program funding or state or private funding could be used to purchase it for conservation. This money could be a big help to local conservation efforts.

Comment: There will need to be significant planning to determine what should go into the multi-use center. This would need to be phased in over time.

T. Matuszko stated that this item was placed in the budget as the lack of a “center” was identified in many of the meetings with communities. The initial capitalization should be used to develop the center early on, perhaps by the end of the 4-year capitalization, because after this, funding might not be certain. Additionally, the center will be important for creating a space for future staff.

Comment: The multi-use center will be important to making the northern Berkshires a destination and in helping to create an identity and branding.

Comment: We need to have a thoughtful process and program for the multi-use center, rather than focusing on when it will be created. The individual allocations for CR's vs. the multi-use center will be an ongoing discussion for the future governance board.

Comment: I suggest that we stop using the terms visitor's center and multi-use center. We should instead use the name **MOHAWK TRAIL FORESTRY CENTER**, and it might help to pull this concept together.

Response: Staff and committee members were in agreement with this suggestion.

T. Matuszko asked the committee if anyone felt that funding for the center should be "front loaded" early in the project. D. Raimo stated that in discussions with the USFS, they were concerned that the center would be built and would ultimately go unused if other program elements were unsuccessful. T. Matuszko suggested that the group arrive at a consensus that planning for the Mohawk Trail Forestry Center would begin early in the process, but construction would be delayed until year 2 or 3.

B O'Connor stated that the USFS didn't "bat an eye" when they saw the \$20 million potential allocation. There is no reason this could not be a 5 or 6 year program, and the potential funding ask might be larger. Additionally, the USFS wanted one staff member from each branch to work in the Mohawk Trail Forestry Center. Additionally, the group will likely have to ask for funding allocation each year from the federal government, rather than getting an up-front allocation of \$20 million over 4 years.

T. Matuszko stated that internally, perhaps there could be another funding request coinciding with the rest of the MTWP programs. This could be set up to create an additional trust fund specific to land conservation.

Comment: There is a big difference between this potential idea, and how the plan is written now (with funding for CR's over 4 years). The creation of an additional trust fund could possibly be more sustainable in the long run.

T. Matuszko asked for other comments about the possibility of amending the budget to provide for more funding for conservation restrictions.

Comment: If we create another trust fund specific to land conservation, we should do it creatively, such as with requirements that it be matched, or that it could only fund a certain percentage of CR's.

Comment: Potential additional funding for CR's is just as important as how we allocate and use this money.

Comment: I support additional funding for CR's. However, negotiating funding for CR's doesn't always fit neatly in a yearly budget, it often takes years to complete projects. I would not want to fund an additional trust fund specifically for CR's and remove all of the current allocation for CR's currently in the draft budget.

T. Matuszko stated that this potential additional trust fund would be a supplemental amount of money, separate from that proposed in the draft budget. This money could be used to support conservation activities. It might be used to purchase rights of first refusal, provide seed money to keep landowners interested, get appraisals, provide bridge loans, etc. The trust fund could help to "put deals together" for land conservation, not just purchase CR's.

P. Sloan reiterated that this draft budget was a first cut, and that the governing board would ultimately be responsible for allocating funding.

T. Matuszko suggested that the group arrive at a consensus. The consensus is that in the proposal there will be an additional “ask” (amount to be determined) that will be dedicated for land conservation.

Comment: The towns will not support additional funding for land conservation.

Comment: My experience has been different. In speaking with the Selectboard of Colrain about the MTWP, most of the questions were about CR’s. The board felt that land conservation was important.

Comment: We are only anticipating funding 1,800 acres of additional land conservation. The town’s will not be “hit hard” by this.

4. Review and Discussion of Next Steps and Select Board Meetings & Update on U.S. Forest Service Meeting and Feedback from Regional Information Sessions

T. Matuszko requested that the group move on from the topic to discuss next steps for the project. T. Matuszko stated that both the regional meetings showed overall support for the project and that it was moving in the appropriate direction. Staff is planning on attending Select Board meetings in individual towns in the near future. T. Matuszko asked for comments as to when towns should opt-in and “commit” to this program, and for direction from the committee in regards to approaching towns.

Comment: Have any town officials expressed their thoughts to their Advisory Committee representatives?

Comment: I spoke with the Shelburne Select Board. They were excited about the municipal cooperative agreement payments and seemed ready to opt in.

Comment: I spoke with the Windsor Selectboard. They are likely not ready to opt in, but were curious and interested in the MTWP.

Comment: Why would a town not want to participate in this program? All they would be doing is enabling their residents to have access to funding for CR’s.

Comment: Some town officials don’t want additional CR’s.

T. Matuszko stated that some towns are wary of Federal involvement. However, to alleviate these concerns, the plan was drafted so that there would be no Federal ownership of land.

Comment: There are many other aspects of this program, not just CR’s. Towns will be interested in the other benefits of program.

Comment: I spoke with my town and they were concerned about the effect on tax revenue. However, I think this is a minor issue. I think if we show the towns that this is an opportunity to maintain the quality of life for residents and to give people an opportunity to do something constructive with their properties, particularly as they age. We need to show them that this program is beneficial for residents and for future generations, that we have resident’s interests at heart.

Comment: I think we should ask for support and opt-in at the end of our next presentation to town Select Boards. This would take the form of either direct support from the Selectboard, or bringing the issue to vote at town meeting.

P. Sloan stated that some towns are more cautious. They want to see the “fine print” of the legislation. These towns would like to opt-in after the legislation has been approved at the state level. P. Sloan stated that perhaps there should be a “two step” process, an initial letter of support to proceed with the legislation to designate the area and then a formal vote by the Select Board or Town Meeting to opt-in after the legislation has been passed at the state level.

Comment: We need to market the MTWP differently to each town based on their interests.

Comment: We should produce a summary sheet to help market the MTWP. It could put a more human face on this project.

T. Matuszko asked the committee for additional guidance. Should staff seek a “two step” opt-in, with initial letters of support and then a formal vote to opt-in after legislation passes at the state level, or go with a single opt-in step from towns? Discussion was heard, and a consensus was reached that a two-step approach to “opting -in” should be pursued. At the end of meetings with each town, each Select Board will be asked to provide a letter of support for proceeding with State legislation. Towns will then have the option to opt-in after the legislation passes at the state level.

Question: We need to develop the framework for the trust fund. Towns will need to see how this is going to work. Also, how will the municipal cooperative agreement work?

Response: In regards to cooperative agreement payments, as currently drafted, towns will be eligible for a certain amount of funding, to be used for a certain set of activities. Town’s will specify which activities they want to use funds for and then receive funding. This is essentially a non-competitive grant program similar to grants provided initially by the Green Communities program. Towns could also “bank” funding over time to allow them to spend more than just yearly allocations if they have a big project.

T. Matuszko stated that in discussions with the USFS, the municipal cooperative agreement program was the only aspect of the MTWP that was questioned. Staff will need to make a better case and provide a clearer nexus between this proposed program and the goals of the MTWP.

Question: Is the USFS aware of the amount of state land and the impact of state land on communities? Would they recognize that the nexus is that because of the amount of state land, the towns lack resources and funding?

Response: The USFS seemed less sympathetic to helping make up the state’s PILOT payments shortfall. A better argument must be made.

P. Sloan stated that the USFS could also provide technical resources to towns, such as engineering work. In addition to access to the municipal cooperative agreement payments, perhaps the MTWP would allow towns to have access to technical assistance from the USFS. The USFS does this type of community support for towns near National Forest land. Additionally, the USFS could provide a staff person assigned to be a resource to the Partnership, an idea that was pitched to the USFS. This person

could then coordinate technical assistance in the form of management plans, recreation development, fire protection, pest management.

T. Matuszko asked the group if staff should begin approaching individual towns, working through the town representatives. P. Sloan asked the group if there should be a sub-committee established to help draft the special legislation.

Comment: Please provide a small synopsis of your presentation to each town to review before each Select Board meeting.

Comment: You should ask for some concerns from each town before each meeting, so that each presentation can be customized.

Comment: Meetings with each town should be the chance for each representative to present the MTWP and its ideas. Staff members should be there as a resource only.

T. Matuszko again asked if the group should establish the sub-committee to draft the special legislation. Committee members Keith Ross, Jay Healy, Dicken Crane, Scott Sylvester, and Jim Niedbalski volunteered to serve on the sub-committee. T. Matuszko stated that the sub-committee will meet sometime in January with the next Advisory Committee meeting in March. In the meantime, staff will coordinate with representatives to schedule meetings with towns. Staff will develop an Executive Summary to present to towns. Representatives will help to identify key concerns for each town ahead of each meeting to help shape presentations. Once letters from towns are obtained, legislation could be introduced at the state level as early as June of 2016.

The meeting was adjourned at 8:16 pm.

Next Meetings:

Tuesday, March 8th, 2016 – 6:00-8:00pm, Berkshire East Ski Lodge – Advisory Committee (tentative)

Tuesday, January 5th, 2016 – 1:00-3:00pm – Legislation Sub-committee