

Mohawk Trail Woodlands Partnership (MTWP) Advisory Committee Meeting

October 3, 2017

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

Staff: Alyssa Larose, Tom Matuszko, Bob O'Connor, Deirdre Rose, Peggy Sloan, Wendy Ferris

Members Attending: Hank Art, Rick Chandler, Greg Cox, Dicken Crane, Larry Flaccus, Beth Girshman, Kyle Hanlon, Jay Healy, Stacy Kontrabecki, Nathan L'Etoile, Ed Munch, Joe Nowack, Jim Perry, Mark Phelps, Walt Quist, Keith Ross, Whit Sanford, Art Schwenger, Janet Sinclair, Scott Sylvester, Gisela Walker

Others Attending: Dwayne Breger (UMass CEE), River Strong (UMass CEE), Jonathan Parrott (DOER), Richard Stafursky (Species Forest, Inc.), Bill Copeland (Massan Ridge), Marti Ferguson (Buckland Board of Health), James Loring (WPI), Ryan Foley (WPI), Nick Songer (WPI), Ted Kim (WPI)

1. Introductions

P. Sloan commenced the meeting at 6:00 p.m. A round of introductions followed.

2. Review and Approval of July 11, 2017 Meeting Notes

At 6:03 p.m., K. Hanlon motioned to approve the Meeting Notes of July 11, 2017. Ed Munch seconded the motion. The motion carried with Jay Healy abstaining from voting.

3. Update on Legislation for a Special Designation for the MTWP Region

T. Matuszko reported that Representative Pignatelli has been appointed Co-chair of the Environment, Natural Resources, and Agricultural Committee, and that the Committee is now holding hearings. Senator Gobi is the other Co-chair of the committee and has been a supporter of forest conservation. The public hearing for the MTWP legislation is scheduled for October 10, 2017. The hearing is the next step in the process. If MTWP Advisory Committee members are interested in attending the Public Hearing in Boston they should speak to P. Sloan or T. Matuszko.

4. Presentation on Recreational & Natural Resource Based Tourism & Economic Development Activities in the MTWP Region

P. Sloan introduced the presentations on recreation and natural resource based tourism and economic development in the region. Whit Sanford from the Greater Shelburne Falls Area Business Association (GSFABA) presented the mission and initiatives of the GSFABA in the region. The business association represents 10 West County towns, including Plainfield in Hampshire County. The GSFABA seeks to improve the economic situation of businesses in the region through networking, partnerships, marketing, events, and advocacy. The GSFABA is part of the Buckland and Shelburne partnership which is funded by both towns and matched by the GSFABA with in-kind services. The GSFABA conducts fundraising, grant writing, and manages partnership projects such as the Salmon Falls parking lot

project. Tourism is a major part of the economy. The GSFABA has produced advertising including banners at Logan Airport and a website to feature West County and its businesses. GSFABA organizes events that draw tourists to the region, and holds a West County Tourism Day, when businesses come together to network. The GSFABA voted to support the MTWP project.

Jon Shaffer from Berkshire East presented next. Berkshire East is a family business that has been in the region for a long time. In 2008 they began rebuilding the business to invest in summer and winter activities. At that time they had no summer business, and now 60% of their revenue comes from summer business. Recent additions include: a mountain bike park, ranked best mountain bike park on the East coast for the third year in a row; three zip line tours; an aerial adventure park; white water rafting; and the mountain coaster. The family also is revitalizing the Warfield House, and hosted 26 weddings this season.

Shaffer noted that the region is accessible to a lot of people in nearby metro areas, but has just been overlooked. Shaffer feels the region could pull in much more tourism revenue with a lot of small efforts. Marketing is very important. The region has the resources and the next step is to get more people here. Shaffer then answered questions from the MTWP Advisory Committee members. A comment was made that Berkshire East is a good example of a business that uses local products and supports the local economy. Shaffer noted their business runs on 100% renewable energy. A question was asked whether summer business is increasing due to climate change. Shaffer said both summer and winter business is increasing.

A MTWP Committee Member asked where clients are coming from. Shaffer said they have international (especially biking), national, and local customers, and a lot of families. People can take a day trip to the area and combine recreation with going to Shelburne Falls. W. Sanford noted that people want rural experiences. She said the GSFABA is working with businesses to provide activities and rural experiences. There is an opportunity to educate people about how conservation can blend with economic development. Shaffer answered a question about allowing trails to be used for snowmobiling and horseback riding. He noted that they just created a non-profit to manage their trails. Key concerns are safety and gaining landowner permission to connect trail networks. Trails also need to be well-marked. Shaffer also discussed challenges including the need for more lodging and difficulty finding enough workers.

Bob O'Connor introduced the Worcester Polytechnic Institute (WPI) students. O'Connor noted that juniors must complete a community project. The students interviewed businesses in the MTWP region to see what their challenges are. The students presented their project. They conducted a business inventory related to wood products and tourism, and passed around a handout of the inventory. Seventy-five (75) businesses were found in the region using web searches and through visiting the region. The students profiled five of these businesses, focusing on challenges that their business face. Common challenges include marketing and social media, business expansion, succession planning, and running a company with limited staff. Elements of the MTWP program that businesses were most interested in are loans and grants for businesses to upgrade equipment, invest in marketing, particularly collaborative marketing of businesses and products, and to network and connect to local markets.

The students then presented several models from other regions that the MTWP project could learn from. These are the Vermont Sustainable Jobs Fund Vermont and the Forest Product Value Chain Investment Program, which assists Vermont's forest products industry with business assistance and market and network development. Another model is the Land of Sky Regional Council's Marketing Local Forest Products: Building Rural Community Vitality and Landowner Prosperity in Southern Appalachia.

The students then took questions and comments from MTWP Advisory Committee members. A comment was made that the lack of broadband is a major challenge in the region for businesses. A committee member noted that organizations exist in the region that assist farms and farmers, and a comparable approach is needed for forests and forest landowners. Maine West was identified as another possible model to look at. A comment was made that marketing is a challenge due to lack of broadband and also that many companies are small with limited staff and no time. GSFABA would like to offer marketing assistance and website/IT training. It's an overwhelming problem and many businesses are struggling with it. A virtual web-based forest resource center could help with marketing. A committee member noted that forestry and resource based tourism businesses are providing products that maintain the rural landscape. This message should be included in marketing messages. A comment was made that local businesses are often 1 or 2 people out in the woods, with no connections to the business association or a web presence. A request was made that more small businesses such as loggers, foresters, and woodworkers who don't have websites be added to the business inventory. Committee members were encouraged to contact the WPI students with additional businesses to add to the inventory.

5. Review of Draft "Frequently Asked Questions" about the MTWP

W. Ferris introduced the draft Frequently Asked Questions. She said the purpose of the FAQ is to try to summarize the project, which is complex, and asked for feedback from committee members on the FAQ. A comment was made to be clear on where the money would be coming from for the project in question #2. T. Matuszko said the intent is for State funding to come through the bill. A two-step process requires Towns to vote to opt-in after State legislation, and then Federal legislation would be developed. A suggestion was made to add a question about next steps in the process. A committee member suggested adding a question about what the effort has already achieved even without legislation. A discussion followed about Question #3 and the role of CRs in the project.

A member of the public asked to add a question about how the project will monitor achievement of goals and to ensure protection of air, water, soil, etc. A member of the public asked that a question about biomass be added to the FAQ. A committee member asked a question related to Question #13 and wondered why the recommendation for a feasibility study of a wood pellet plant has not been taken out of the plan. A question was asked whether the plan can be amended. If the State legislation passes and funding is received the plan will be updated periodically. The MTWP Committee could also choose to amend the plan. Staff will take the comments received and try to prepare revisions to the FAQ for the next meeting.

6. Update on the UMass CEE Wood Heat and Air Quality Study and Public Health

D. Breger from UMass gave an update on the wood heat and air quality studies being conducted by UMass Clean Energy Extension. The mobile truck will be conducting monitoring full-time this winter for 4-5 wood energy heating systems and 2-3 oil systems. UMass is considering a variety of sites with varying sizes. Two schools are committed: Narragansett (wood chip system) and Ashburnham (pellet system). UMass is close to securing a visitor center and two additional sites in Franklin and Berkshire Counties.

P. Sloan asked if sites with varying topography are being considered. D. Breger answered yes, they are looking at sites in valleys, etc. B. O'Connor asked if this type of testing has been done before. Breger answered that stack testing has been done under controlled conditions, but that this monitoring is looking at emissions further away from the stack and the impacts on public health which makes it unique. Monitors may also be placed indoors at some sites if permission is given. A question was asked if there is a long term plan to have ongoing public health monitoring in the region. D. Breger answered that it is not part of the scope for the UMass project. The monitoring truck is now a State resource, and there have been talks of generally monitoring ambient wood smoke, but not as part of this project this winter.

R. Strong from UMass gave an update on the MTWP towns participating in Phase I of the Municipal Energy Analysis program. This phase of the project is collecting fuel use data for municipal buildings and will provide a 10-20 page report to towns with analysis of municipal energy use and recommendations for next steps in reducing energy consumption. Phase II of the project is a screening process looking at heating systems in municipal buildings for clean heating technology opportunities. So far several communities are interested in Phase II. Phase I will wrap up in the next couple of months. A request was made to send out a link to a completed study, and to add a list of participating towns to the UMass CEE website.

P. Sloan reported that FRCOG staff met with members of the Buckland Board of Health that have raised concerns about public health and wood heat. One Board of Health request was to include indoor air quality monitoring as part of the UMass wood heat and air quality monitoring project. UMass is looking into the feasibility of doing this. Another possibility is to add a public health representative to the MTWP board, which would need to be added to the legislation. Discussion followed on whether the representative should have specific expertise in air quality or have a broader background in public health. There was consensus that adding a public health representative would be good. Several organizations were discussed. Staff will research and make a recommendation about a specific organization which will need to be named in the legislation.

7. Carbon Credit Market Project Update/ Other Topics not reasonably anticipated 48 hours in advance of the meeting/ Committee Member or Public Comment/ Adjourn

P. Sloan provided an update on a carbon credit market project in the region. She said she is reaching out to advisory committee members in towns with Town-owned forest land to gauge interest in an aggregate project. She encouraged towns that are interested to contact her.

D. Rose provided a US Forest Service update. A new chief has been appointed, who was formerly the regional forester in the Southeastern part of the U.S. D. Rose and B. O'Connor have been having discussions with non-profits that are working to add forests into the next Farm Bill.

W. Ferris announced an upcoming event in Worthington on a 250 acre woodlot and timber frame shop.

The next MTWP Advisory Committee meeting was tentatively scheduled for January 9, 2018, with a snow date of January 16, 2018.

At 8:14 p.m. the meeting was adjourned.