

Mohawk Trail Woodlands Partnership Advisory Committee Meeting

September 17, 2014

Berkshire East Ski Lodge, 66 Thunder Mountain Rd. Charlemont, MA

P. Sloan, FRCOG and T. Matusko, BRPC

The meeting started at 6:04

1. Introductions, Overview of Project & Role and Responsibilities of the Advisory Committee (6:04 p.m.):

P. Sloan introduced the project partners. Meeting attendees then introduced themselves, the town they represent, and their background related to the project.

Sloan provided a brief overview of the project, including the study area, as shown on the 20 town map provided at the meeting. The intent of the project is to increase forest based economic development and conservation, increase the recognition of the region, and to bring more state and federal resources to the region from the U.S. Forest Service and EOEEA.

A key question for the committee is should we proceed with a federal designation. The hope is that committee members will take information back to Select Boards and town members and discuss whether we should proceed.

A key comment from the public outreach was that an “Advisory committee” should be created to ensure that the project will maintain a community focus, and decisions are driven by communities.

It is hoped that the committee will help with the following:

1. Determining the key features of any legislation
2. Developing a plan including specific project and policy recommendations
3. Assist with drafting legislation if enough communities are interested
4. Reporting back to your community to give them your thoughts and view points on how the project is proceeding.

Once the draft plan is finished, regional meetings will be held as well as meetings with Select Boards. It is hoped that the town representative could be part of the Select Board meeting.

The Advisory Committee will meet 3 or 4 times. An effort will be made to keep meetings focused.

T. Matusko went over meeting protocols. The project team will try to keep the meetings flowing, get the committee materials in advance, and request that committee members look at materials before meetings. With an Advisory Committee we will get a diverse set of opinions – an exciting aspect. Members need to respect the opinion of all committee members, staff and guests. Please try to have one conversation at a time.

BRPC and FRCOG will be co-facilitators. The hope is to reach consensus on issues. The goal is to get a strong product that represents the will of the communities. This is an exciting opportunity to have communities from both counties meeting since this does not happen often. If we can't get consensus, then members will be asked to vote.

We would like to get meetings started on time and to end on time unless the group wants to continue longer. Once there is agreement on an issue it should not be revisited unless the group agrees to revisit.

2. Review and Discussion of Project Goals & Key Framework Elements (6:19 p.m.):

T. Matuszko presented the project goals. The handout provided to meeting participants prior to the meeting lists the project goals. The goals are the broad themes for the project. They are listed in no particular order. Tom read through all of the goals.

Tom explained that the goals were developed as a result of the public meetings and additional work that has been done. Extensive regional plans were also just completed – Sustainable Berkshires and Sustainable Franklin County – which included extensive public processes and outreach.

The goals try to cover the main themes – economic development, land conservation, community sustainability, and bringing in additional technical resources. The goals will set a framework for the plan. They are supposed to be broader but will help provide a framework for more specific recommendations.

Tom asked for comments from the committee on the goals. Discussion followed:

The goals talk about working forests, and then talk about conserving forests, but all forests are working. The goals need to highlight when we are talking about harvesting as an important tool and not mince words. Let's recognize that all forests are working and provide support for all types of forests.

Tom M. - the intent was to not limit the project to harvesting, but to include it.

A committee member agreed with the previous comment. If people look at the history of stewardship that the state has done so far it has been negligent. They have not logged in 50 years, forests are subject to blow down, there is growth of scrub brush which can fuel fires. State forests need to be harvested and managed, not tucked away and unproductive and just pretty to look at. If these become lazy forests it will harm us.

There is a distinction between lazy forests and lazy management. All forests are working but not all management is beneficial. There is lazy management, not lazy forests. Distinction is in the management. Forests still are providing oxygen and water supply protection.

Tom M. - the intent was to provide resources to landowners about forest management, to aim for the best forest management that we can.

There is a tension here that has been brought up in terms of working forests/landscapes and preservation. As the president of a rural management association, I hear differing points of view about land – some people support working lands, others want to see land left alone. Some lands should be actively managed by not managing them, such as old growth forests. One size doesn't fit all. Educating the community and public is very important to accomplish these goals. Around this table we may agree but there are people out there who think that when they hear a chainsaw the environment is being damaged. What is missing is how do we educate the public?

Generally in agreement, education is lacking, young children are not taught about forestry. My children had the benefit of growing up on a farm but their peers in school don't have that experience.

Tom M. – We will craft a specific goal about educating the public.

What about the percentage of conserved land?

Tom M. – We will talk about that.

Feasibility study for wood pellet plant is missing from goals. There should be a goal relating to the production of local renewable energy to reduce reliance on foreign oil/gas etc.

Do you plan on identifying existing resources for technical assistance? If UMass has educators, Williams College, how much do they do with the general public? We don't want to duplicate.

Tom M. - Yes, we will be identifying resources as much as possible in the plan.

Who will provide the technical resources, education etc.?

Tom M. – We will try to figure out who. Part of the plan will be identifying resources.

Related to resources – it is great to “support” CRs, but support is a weak word. Want to see identify funding for CRs.

What type of funding are we identifying? For communities to sustain tax deductions or implementing the program?

Funding to purchase CRs from landowners.

Tom M. – We would like to get some type of payment to communities out of this program for impacts.

Peggy S. – Also there has been a lot of discussion about at what point is too much conserved land in a town? We want to identify new revenue streams but also give towns more control about land being conserved.

My main concern is what will be the tipping point for conserved land? I don't know how much more we can absorb in the next 10-15 years. I want to focus on where our town will be down the road. We just went through the land partnership program in Leyden with 11 landowners, and the only partnership with the state was the money they provided to the landowners for the conservation .

Tom M. – We are still at exploratory phase, but will need to figure out how the partnership will work. One thought is to set up a committee like this one to provide input to the funding agencies. We have discussed the idea of having communities having a say after a certain percentage of land is protected. It could be up to the town about additional land conserved and priorities for funding.

I would like to see more flexibility in CRs so new landowners can play a big part in how that community will grow.

Tom M. –The CR will be worthy of a lot of discussion and we will be working out those details.

Bob O-Connor – I went to a lot of community meetings, and they changed my thoughts about conservation because your towns have a lot of unmet needs, and we should focus on economic development. We want to have someone from our department be more involved, but not to be more involved than what you want it to be. More than just passing out money.

Tom M. – The framework elements start to get into details.

What input does DCR have in this? A lot of what we read through, isn't that the responsibility of DCR? They have foresters to help landowners?

Bob O. – DCR is part of the puzzle, there are also farmers with forests, etc. We see this as a way for the different agencies at EOEEA to work together to provide services that make sense. Other agencies are also involved.

Tom M. – With a designation we are hoping that the State pays greater attention to this region. We have heard from the meetings that the State is cutting staff, foresters etc. We hope that this will provide us with additional services.

Peggy S. – If there are specific recommendations that the committee would like to make to improve forestry practices, we would bring that back to DCR.

About the viable proposal, my understanding of this is what we are trying to achieve a proposal to the U.S. Forest Service?

Tom M. – We are trying to get a viable proposal that benefits the municipalities. That is the main mission.

To whom is the proposal being made to?

Tom M. – If we want to get federal funds to help with this, then the Federal government (U.S. Forest Service) needs to be asked into this area. In order to do that, we need the State legislature to sign on. So the proposal will go to the communities, then bring it to state, then the federal government. We have a long way to go. The goal is to get a viable proposal for communities.

So is there no interest from the EOEEA office if the feds aren't interested?

Tom M. – We hope to get more money from the State, but also would like to get some from the federal government. We are told that the U.S. Forest Service doesn't spend a lot in MA right now.

If we can't agree on federal ownership there can still be a plan B where we are working together with the state.

Bob O. – Yes we are in this to work with the communities if there is some way that the state can help.

My concern is that with federal money comes federal control. Is there going to be a guarantee where their control stops? Will rules be inflicted on us?

Peggy S. – The parameters will be within the legislation which will give a framework for what is acceptable and what is not. We have heard repeatedly that land should remain in private ownership. We will discuss whether there should be any federal ownership or not.

Not talking about federal ownership, but if they put money towards this, will they want control over the whole area?

Peggy S. – Our understanding from the forest legacy program is that no additional regulations apply.

I'm nervous about the designation, how much control will they have going forward?

I'm here representing SFABA. I'm most interested in the economics of this and what the State and federal government can help with economic development, improving the forests and environment. I don't want that to get lost in this discussion about conservation. Also we have particular issue in terms of rural areas - we get short thrift from the State, and are judged on urban ideas and perspectives on what we should and should not be doing. This partnership could be a real model helping all of rural MA and New England. I am familiar with the Conte Refuge, it has been a boon even though invisible, and has helped the economy.

It would be stronger if this is positioned as a model that could be picked up by other regions.

My concern is that we have not had a lot of impact dealing with our own legislature in Boston, if strings are attached how will we have an impact on the federal government?

Tom M. – Hopefully some of these "string" issues will be resolved as we work through this. There will be an element of risk that will be incurred, but hopefully we can build a proposal where the benefits will outweigh potential risks.

Is this an all or nothing proposition? If not all of the towns want to go through with it, can some still choose to?

Peggy S. – We are waiting to see which towns are interested and then we will evaluate whether or not it makes sense to proceed. We have never said we need to have x number of communities.

Should include the forest serving as flood control in the goals, this is very important for towns.

Peggy S. – We will make changes and send out another draft for the next meeting.

P. Sloan then passed out the Framework. The purpose is to guide legislation for designation. A couple original elements dealt with state actions, and we felt these deserved a separate section in the plan with the recommendations, so these were removed.

P. Sloan went through the elements. Discussion followed:

Element #2, can we edit it to say no net loss of tax dollars? It is my understanding that Chapter 61 reduces taxes. If we lose one parcel we get a cut in taxes.

Should clarify private “tax-paying” ownership, not non-profits/ tax-exempt ownership.

I’m an assessor in my town, and every time a house is built it costs us money. We don’t ask them to pay the difference.

My concern is we have no room to grow. We cannot lose any tax revenue, we have no room in our budget.

So if someone built a house in town, then your school costs go up?

In this region we have declining enrollment so we would welcome more students.

Peggy S. – It would be difficult to define no net loss. But we will discuss a provision to give towns a choice in land protection. We will probably have more demand than funding for CRs.

If the taxes lost by conservation is made up for by PILOT money, than there is no net loss. I can see where no net loss is a reasonable thing.

Another way to look at it is no net loss in conservation – swap conservation lands if new conservation is desired, by the town holding the CR. Could be a townwide CR.

Bob O. – At one point we did a study of the 20 towns, if you are in chapter 61 and you sell a CR on your land, then there is no net loss in taxes. If a parcel is not in Chapter 61 than yes there would be a loss.

If we are going to draft a resolution, I would like to see one where the state will give the town a certain amount of money for reaching a threshold of CRs in your town. Get a block of money in lieu of taxes from the state. Vermont does this.

Peggy S. – We had a meeting with our legislators about how to get reliable payments with this designation. We want to brainstorm ideas with you.

The other way to conserve land is if someone is making money on the land, than that conserves the land. Economic viability is something to consider.

Peggy S. – We will try to incorporate the concept of no net loss in revenues.

Should be no state, town, or federal right of first refusal.

Don't get the point of that. Why keep a non-profit group from owning a parcel of land?

Need land to stay in private ownership and pay taxes. With right of first refusal, the land could be taken off of the tax rolls which is a big concern of rural towns.

Concerned that land would end up in the State hands.

Focusing on CRs to be held by the federal government?

Peggy S. – CRs would be held by the state, town or local land trust. Under the forest legacy program the State or town holds the CR.

Working forests – change to forest harvesting.

Add in addition to private landowners, towns might need technical assistance.

Are we just talking about one visitor center? Geographically Charlemont is on the other side of the mountain, and tourists are not going between the two. It would be fairer to have one on each side/county.

Peggy S. – We can certainly recommend this, we hoped to get input on what towns were interested in hosting a tourism facility.

Would the demonstration forest be owned by the US Forest Service?

Peggy S. – We will need to discuss this. Originally proposed that they could own a small amount of land, but we have heard from many communities that they don't want any federal ownership. Perhaps the U.S. Forest Service could lease land or work with a private owner. Need to get consensus.

Can the visitor center be more broad than just a tourism information center? Something that talks about our region as a special place for visitors and residents.

Peggy S. – That's what we heard from several communities that they would combine it with technical resources, education, marketing, etc. We may need to rethink that if there are multiple centers.

SFABA has done some homework on this and can share it.

#6 talks about wood product manufacturing, wouldn't it make sense to put the wood pellet facility under this? We need to get this going in order to accomplish renewable heating conversion. Which comes first? Seems if the pellet facility were developed it would drive demand.

Peggy S. – We also need to have demand to make it feasible over the long term.

There is also the benefit that money stays in the community with wood heat, not specifically stated but important benefit.

Wouldn't it be better to seek other large users as well? Colleges, hospitals, industrial facilities? Create a critical mass.

Tom M. – We thought it would have the most direct benefit for municipalities to offset operating costs.

Would like to see a discussion of short rotation biomass crop production on agricultural lands. Fast growing biomass crops – switchgrass etc. - not just woodchips, for use at a pellet plant. Is there enough wood out there to sustain it? The sustainability aspect needs to be stressed here. Get more proactive about providing a feedstock. In Williamstown we have had more agricultural loss from abandonment than development. Could convert abandoned farmland to biomass crops.

Maybe they could give us a demonstration forest in the Vermont National Forest? They certainly could improve upon its forest management. It's close to us, and has tens of thousands of acres. Those forests are mismanaged.

How many times does anyone around here work on a 2,000 acre parcel? A demonstration project in our area might be on a smaller parcel.

Who is this aimed at? Who are you demonstrating to? What the state does and doesn't do on there land doesn't have relevance to private landowners. If demonstrating to tourists, than that is a different aspect.

Peggy S. – The intent was to demonstrate new best management practices to private forest landowners, such as addressing climate change.

There are ways that this can be accomplished without the U.S. Forest Service owning any land. Once they get a foothold, they are under the tent. The most straightforward thing would be no ownership. They could have a demonstration forest on State land or lease private land, same with the visitor center. This is a common practice. While these things are desirable the federal government does not need ownership.

Is this restricting who private landowners could sell their land to?

Currently the U.S. Forest Service can't purchase land in MA.

As a private landowner don't you want as many opportunities to sell your land? I don't want people telling me who I can sell my land to.

The Forest Service can't buy land in VT without approval of the town. This is a common provision. Same exists in the Adirondack Park. About 98% of those sales go through, but this does give towns the ability to discuss what will happen.

Currently the U.S. Forest Service can't buy land in MA. We wouldn't be taking anything away by not allowing them to purchase land.

Peggy S. – Please take the key elements home, and weigh in about federal ownership.

Maybe we should change "demonstration" to "education." Could get more money, and could be tied into UMass, GCC, MCLA.

Not very far away is the Harvard Forest, a world class demonstration forest. Pouring money into another demonstration forest may be short-sighted.

Peggy S. – If you have specific thoughts send an email to me or Tom so we can report back at the next meeting. These are critical pieces of any proposal.

Tom M. - What is most helpful is whether you think this is a good idea or bad idea, and how to accomplish it? More specifics on how to accomplish is helpful.

3. Review of Purpose of Plan and Content & Presentation and Discussion of Draft Project Background Section (7:47 p.m.)

Tom M. briefly reviewed the purpose of the plan. Peggy asked committee members to send comments on the first section.

Will there be a chart of forested land and how much is protected?

Peggy S. - Yes we will have that.

4. Working Forest Renewable Heating Initiative Study & Update on U.S. Forest Service Liaison (7:50 p.m.)

Bob O'Connor introduced the DOER staff. This proposal reflects the need to connect the dots between conservation, forestry, towns, etc. We started hearing that schools were heated with oil, and that there was interest in heating schools and public buildings with wood. Some communities and the MFA were also interested in pellet manufacturing. We heard that, and EOEEA has come up with a proposal.

The U.S. Forest Service is very interested in this idea (of the designation), and sees it as the way of the future for the forest service. They have funded a part time liaison to work with this group. They are very interested in doing rural economic development.

Technical assistance was a big need identified. In the interim, a grant program emerged from the new farm bill, that wants to look at how whole regions and landowners to do good sustainable management on agricultural and forest land. The state has put together a proposal with the MFA, conservation districts, and state agencies for the grant. We are in the final group of 200 applications, with 100 awards anticipated. It is a \$5 million proposal to help farmers and forest landowners. It includes flood control issues, and includes all towns. If your town is interested in sending a letter of support for the final proposal we would be happy to include it. It is meant to support the small landownerships that make up the landscape.

Bob introduced Dwayne Breger and Rob Rizzo from DOER to present the renewable heating initiative.

DOER's mission is to provide clean and affordable energy to residences, businesses and municipalities. DOER is focused on renewable thermal technologies to help areas that are dependent on oil, in order to reduce cost burden and keep dollars in the economy. Wood heat is a particular focus. Our goals seem to be aligned, supporting renewable energy, committed to reducing GHG emissions, reducing the cost burden of oil heat, and economic development.

DOER is committing \$350,000 to work with the 20-town region and will cooperate in any form that would be effective to help jump start some of this activity to develop wood pellets manufacturing and wood pellet heating in the region. Recognizing this is the beginning, there is an expectation that we could bring additional funding to implement the activities.

This would be in direct partnership with this initiative and the region, the RPAs, and towns.

Five steps to get this going:

This will provide a lot of information to help with the decision making process.

1. Conduct a resource assessment for the 20-town region. Looking at data on forests, cutting plans for past 10 years, and what is currently under Ch 61 and management plans. The consultant will come up with a good estimate of what is available now, and what will be available for a long period of time on a sustainable basis. This will be the first RFP/RFQ. We will make that available to this group.

We want to measure the carbon that is currently being sequestered in the region. We will come up with a good estimate. We will then say what happens if we increase harvesting of wood for heating? This will give an understanding of benefits attributed to forests that aren't always thought of.

2. Complete market analysis and plan for development of a wood pellet manufacturing facility somewhere in the 20-town region. Will require more regional meetings and meetings with stakeholders to get a good understanding of what the concept for a pellet plant would be for the region.

Talk to municipal officials to see what interest there is in converting schools and municipal buildings to wood heat. Then will take a look at the buildings for the potential of converting to wood heat, and will build a database.

Homes and businesses – the c consultant will do a survey of homeowners in the region to get an understanding of who is burning wood, what other fuels are being burned, and what the interest is in burning pellets.

3. We will also evaluate the reduction in fossil fuel use, GHG reduction. Also need to look at potential air impacts of increased use of wood heat. There are varying levels of appliances out there in terms of particulate matter. We are talking about the best of appliances, but still need to look at this.

4. Creation of a business plan for the development of wood pellet plant somewhere in this region. Typical business plan, will cover every aspect. Will know from the previous tasks what the size should be. We will ask consultant to not just look at private ownership but also community owned model, such as a cooperative. We are looking for suggestions and input from the Advisory Committee.
5. Final task will be the development of a regional economic impact study to look at what it means to put in a wood processing distribution center in the region, for foresters, truckers, etc. to see how it impacts the economy.

Discussion followed:

Avril Cook operated a facility in Adams, he could come and talk to us.

John Burser putting one together right now?

DOER – The wood pellet facility planned for Wilbraham has been funded. It will be small scale. This project would be on a regional scale, as we see it. The business plan will determine what output is viable. The business study will also address the chicken and egg issues with demand and supply.

Peggy – Will there also be funding to help homeowners, businesses, and communities to convert to wood heat?

DOER – We cannot put a dollar amount on it now, but yes, we would like to help build a plant, and fund conversion. We are doing that through current grants. But this would be targeted to this region. The studies would roll out over the next months, to help inform some decisions for the designation process.

What about getting the harvesting equipment – chippers – to the forest landowners? This is expensive equipment.

DOER – Yes this could be included.

Are you just looking at this region?

DOER – The intent was to do economic development here, but we don't have limits, we could look outside of the region. The idea would be to keep it as local as possible within the 20-town region.

Bob O. – DOER liked this proposal because it is full circle – the wood comes from this region, and goes back to the communities. It could be a model for other regions.

On the conversion side, will you be looking at chip systems as well? This would not support a pellet plant but could be an important part of the equation.

DOER - We will take in data about wood chip demand.

Rather than reinventing the wheel, there was an article in today's paper that Burlington is now 100% powered by renewable resources. Important lesson to be learned from that. There are still plenty of trees in northern VT.

DOER – The studies are an important foundation for starting the effort.

I worked with Gordon Boyce to have studies done for the heating systems at all Mohawk Schools. One of them, Hawlemont, has applied to DOER for a grant to convert. Concentrating on one school, then will work on others. I can provide copies of the studies.

DOER – We have read them all, and have received a partial application from Mohawk which we can discuss after the meeting.

Bob O. – The goal of this project is to work together as a group of communities to make progress.

DOER – We don't want to do this by ourselves, we want to engage with you, the Advisory Committee, and FRCOG and BRPC.

Is this contingent on the designation? Can we be involved regardless of how the designation goes forward?

DOER - This is not contingent on the designation, but we hope it can provide information for the process.

EOEEA - This study is a commitment by the State to look at wood heat conversion and pellet manufacturing in your region, and is not tied to the designation. These studies will happen.

How long until you hire a consultant?

Our region has lost so many jobs (Sprague, GE), we need to work on these issues (energy cost, transportation issues) so that it does not happen again. Our energy needs to be as cost effective here as it is in South Carolina. We need to look at existing rail lines for transportation.

VT is a "ready resource" that is "right up the road". Let's look beyond our borders.

6. Other Updates, Next Meeting Date & Other Topics:

Discussion on Conservation Restrictions was tabled until next meeting. The potential date for the next meeting is November 19. Tom asked that committee members email him and Peggy with their thoughts re: the proposed elements.

Approved by the Advisory Committee on November 19, 2014

Committee members agreed that Berkshire East was a good location for meetings and that the 6-8 PM time slot also worked well. One committee member said that Leyden Town Hall might also be available if we are unable to book Berkshire East during the ski season.

Meeting adjourned at approximately 8:20 PM.

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 Berkshire East Ski Lodge, Charlemont
 September 17, 2014
 Please Print Clearly

Name	Affiliation	Mailing Address/E-Mail	Telephone
Tom Mahy	BRPC	[REDACTED]	[REDACTED]
Peggy Sloan	FRCOG	[REDACTED]	[REDACTED]
Jaclyn Paccio	BRPC	[REDACTED]	[REDACTED]
MAEK Phelps		[REDACTED]	[REDACTED]
Fred Tajko		[REDACTED]	[REDACTED]
Dwayne Bregel	MADOER	[REDACTED]	[REDACTED]
Rob Rizzo	MADOER	[REDACTED]	[REDACTED]
Keith Ross	MASAF	[REDACTED]	[REDACTED]
Jim Barry	Mass DOER	[REDACTED]	[REDACTED]
HANK ART	TOWN of WILLIAMSTOWN	[REDACTED]	[REDACTED]
Drew Jones	HOORWA	[REDACTED]	[REDACTED]
Larry Flaccus	Shelburne	[REDACTED]	[REDACTED]
KYLE HANLON	BRPC	[REDACTED]	[REDACTED]
Doug Bruce	BRPC	[REDACTED]	[REDACTED]
Carl McKinney	Clarksburg	[REDACTED]	[REDACTED]
Arlene Mayes	Clarksburg	[REDACTED]	[REDACTED]
Daniel J. Caron	Stuor	[REDACTED]	[REDACTED]
Jim Perry	Deerfield River WA	[REDACTED]	[REDACTED]
Art Ponteruch	Ashfield Representative	[REDACTED]	[REDACTED]
Tom Brulé	Town Floris	[REDACTED]	[REDACTED]
SCOTT WILSON	COLEMAN	[REDACTED]	[REDACTED]
Stacy Kontrabeck	Berkland	[REDACTED]	[REDACTED]

