

Conservation Commission
Town of Willington

MINUTES

SPECIAL MEETING

Wednesday, December 6, 2023 at 7:00 PM

Call to Order: Meeting was called to order @ approximately 7:10 PM by Chairman Kathy Demers.

Roll Call: Members present included Bob Shabot, Jackie Kulig, Patty Phillips and Kathy Demers

DISCUSSION:

I. Review Conservation Easement Area located on private property of Willford Farms, LLC (Map 21/022-00)

On November 28th, Conservation Commission members J. Kulig, P. Phillips and K. Demers met with Austin Harmon, licensed forester from Hull Forest Products for a site walk to view the proposed timber harvest area on the conservation easement (CE) portion of Willford Farms property. The goal of the site walk was to bring information back to the full commission so it could make recommendations to IWWC, PZC and BOS about Hull's proposed harvest plan on the easement and use of the access road on Town open space property off Meadow Lane.

J. Kulig and K. Demers reported the following observations about the walk:

The proposed woods road access off Meadow Lane which travels across Town open space property (Map 16/ Lot 39) was relatively flat, but there was some standing water over a small portion of the road due to seepage from an adjacent wetland. The road bed underneath was noted to be firm and stable. Non-native invasive plants were growing along the road edges. The walk continued onto the Willford property and through an old field which contained an abundant amount of non-native invasive plants. (A portion of this field will be used as a landing area). At the end of the field, members continued on the woods road and entered the conservation easement area where they reviewed the proposed main skid trail crossing over a small stream (likely intermittent, overflow drainage from upper wetland). There was shallow water flowing and the stream bed was firm and stable. The road approaches, particularly on the north side were somewhat steep, but relatively intact. Members continued on old skid paths within the easement area and observed that the forest, which had been harvested approximately 10 years ago, appeared relatively healthy. It was made up of mixed age classes; good hardwood species diversity but few softwoods; a relatively dense canopy with some evidence of oak regeneration, mostly

in the upland, drier areas; predominance of beech in the understory and diseased ash mostly near or in wetland areas. There was a large forested wetland extending from the southern to central portion of the easement with noted rocky terrain, shallow soils and some areas of small pools of water in hummock-like depressions. Near the western border, a relatively large area of shallow standing water with shrub hummocks (? highbush blueberry) had characteristics of a vernal pool. The wetland boundaries were marked with blue flags and the CE boundaries with yellow flags, but no permanent CE markers were observed (Permanent markers along the CE boundaries were a required condition of the original easement as well as the last timber harvest). During the walk, Mr. Harmon answered members' questions and outlined some of the forestry actions he could prescribe to keep within the conditions of the CE, including a forest thinning that would promote shade intermediate and shade tolerant trees, protect the wetlands, vernal pool and stream crossing, and improve the woods access road on the Town property off Meadow Lane.

Members then reviewed the written narrative and associated maps prepared by Mr. Harmon that described Hull's proposed timber harvest plan for the CE area and addressed the following details:

- The goal of the harvest is to further release and promote more natural regeneration, while also sustaining a long term forest that cannot allow a heavy timber harvest as upheld by the conservation easement.
- Silvicultural prescription: Again cut 30-40% of basal area (cross-section volume of trees).
- Target unhealthy, risk-prone, and poorly formed trees. Retain others for species diversity and wildlife habitat purposes.
- Promote shade intermediate and shade tolerant species (sugar & red maple, yellow & sweet birch and American beech.)
- All existing den and nest trees will be left.
- Most existing dead snags and some white ash trees will be left to promote habitat for saproxylic species (insects/fungi) which require dead wood for 1 or more stages of their life cycle.
- Some trees may as well be girdled and left standing to promote more dead wood in applicable areas.
- Require 1 existing stream crossing using temporary timber bridge mats. Corduroy may also be installed on both approaches to maintain soil stability and reduce erosion and sedimentation into the stream.
- All skid trails, including the stream crossing and other bare soil exposed areas will be seeded and hayed post-harvest as needed. Water bars may be implemented on skid trails as necessary post-harvest.
- No tree cutting would be conducted in wetlands or the vernal pool area (shown on map).
- Buffers: Retain a 25-30 foot buffer from edges of the wetland, vernal pool and stream. No trees will be cut within this buffer but some slash/wood debris may be left within it.

At the end of discussion, the general consensus of the commission was to recommend Mr. Harmon's proposed plan for the CE area and woods road on town property with the following changes/additions:

1. Increase the vernal pool buffer to 50 feet wide to be consistent with Willington's IWWC Forest Practice Regulations to protect water quality and the upland habitat of amphibian species that depend on vernal pools for breeding.
2. Maintain a 25-30 foot buffer as proposed around the wetlands and stream to protect water quality and riparian habitat. (This may also help reduce the risk of introducing invasive species into these areas.)
3. Leave most of the softwood trees to increase species diversity.
4. Leave tops and slash on the ground to protect regeneration from deer browse.
5. Permanent CE markers provided by the WCC should be placed after the harvest.
6. Temporary timber mats and corduroy should be used to cross any standing or running water noted on the access road within the Town open space property off Meadow Lane.

K. Demers will inform Mr. Harmon of the commission's recommended changes/additions to the narrative plan and prepare letters to IWWC, PZC and the BOS.

II. Monitoring Visit of two Town-owned Open Space parcels off Meadow Lane (Map 16 / Lot 035) and (Map 16 / Lot 039)

J. Kulig and K. Demers described their monitoring visit to the two open space parcels (10.01 acres / 6.31 acres) off Meadow Lane. They walked the boundaries and portions of the interior to observe ecological features and look for any signs of boundary encroachment. The boundary lines bordering house lots located off Meadow Lane were not well-marked and difficult to determine. An old wooden compost bin was noted to possibly be located on town property, but the exact boundary line could not be determined during the visit. No other signs of encroachment were noted near the house lots. The western boundary was easier to determine since it was marked by iron pins, stone walls and old barbed wire. A recent heavy timber harvest on an adjacent property to the west of this boundary was well-flagged and without encroachment.

The general consensus was to try again to locate and mark the boundaries bordering the house lots in the spring; perhaps using a metal detector to find pins. The commission also decided not to recommend any timber harvest on the properties at this time, especially since there was already a heavy timber cut nearby. Maintaining the forest in its current mature stage with a closed canopy would help provide more wildlife habitat diversity in the area and reduce the risk of invasive plants in the understory.

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Minutes respectfully submitted by Kathy Demers, Chairman and secretary pro tem

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TOWN CLERK