

Strafford Conservation Commission Meeting
March 26, 2021
Morrill Education Center, 7 pm
Minutes

Present: Mike Hebb, Micki Colbeck, Dave Paganelli, JT Horn, Kate Root, Steve Wilbanks
Also present: Bob Wilson- Strafford Tree Warden

Minutes from the 2/26/19 meeting were reviewed and approved.

Ashley Community Forest Update: David said that the Alliance of Vermont Communities' (AVC) report to the Strafford Selectboard was received positively. Despite some apprehension about the Town of Sharon's support for the project, their Selectboard seemed very receptive as well. Steve briefly described the two ownership/governance structures being discussed, 'Tenants in Common' and 'Interlocal Contracts,' the latter being the original ownership/governance structure used by ECFiber's 24 towns before legislation was passed enabling the creation of communications union districts.

Ash-Borer Planning Discussion with guest Bob Wilson: A lengthy and detailed discussion around the question of what steps Strafford should, and is currently planning to take, in preparation for the arrival of the Ash-borer. It is currently reported to be present in Orange County, only 15-18 miles away. Bob states that his main priority is public safety on the roadways and how to get the job done as cost effectively as possible. He plans to inventory the ash trees along the town's roadsides this summer with help from Sherm Wilson and Punka Brown, anticipating that it will be completed by summer's end. He will also be in communication with Jon McKinnon, the Road Foreman, to prioritize the problem trees in town. He will use the inventory to make recommendations to the Selectboard. David Paganelli has been actively advising on the project and offered his help with the inventory. Tii McLane has also offered to help as well.

A lengthy discussion of tree removal strategies followed this. Ideally, Bob said, after the trees were cut and if the landowner doesn't want the wood, there would be the opportunity for someone to salvage any useful firewood. There was then a discussion about whether the trees in the right-of-way belong to the landowner or if the right-of-way and the trees actually belong to the Town. There is some evidence that the Town may own the rights-of-way in Strafford, which was provided by Gordon Tuthill, who researched Strafford's land records several years ago when he created Strafford's parcel map. It was recommended that Bob urge the Selectboard to ask its attorney, Paul Gilles, to review the matter.

Further discussion noted that GMP and Consolidated Communications have rights-of-way agreements for their utility lines and that there has been no communications from them about this. It was pointed out that there are also ash trees on the Town Common and an immediate

need to begin to interplant them with oak or other species sooner rather than later to replace those that will be removed. The following actions will be taken:

- Bob will continue to talk with the Road Foreman, Jon McKinnon, about the plan
- He will meet with the Selectboard regarding the right-of-way ownership question
- The ash tree inventory will begin this summer
- The Selectboard will be encouraged to talk with the utility companies about their plans
- A public information meeting will be scheduled before cutting and removal start

Bob was thanked for his work on this huge undertaking.

Back to Ashley Forest discussion: JT reported on the surveying bids recently received for the project. Although the costs were somewhat higher than anticipated by the AVC, which has fallen somewhat short of its fundraising goal, JT stressed the need to follow through with the formal survey and have the boundaries marked regardless of the cost. He said that the AVC has asked if we would be willing to help pay for the surveys. After some discussion, it was agreed that because this parcel was originally offered to the communities as a gift, which would cost the towns nothing, we should expect the AVC to foot the bill for the survey.

JT did remind the SCC that, in spite of these cost concerns, the Ashley Community Forest is an incredibly generous gift to the two towns. He pointed out that while almost everything else the towns own depreciates in value and ends up costing money to maintain, this property will only increase in value as the timber matures and is marketed. JT was thanked for his continued work on this valuable project.

Report on the ongoing 4-Town Forums-

Various members have attended these gatherings and reported that they are well attended. There is hope that from these meetings, strong connections and working partnerships can be forged, to the ultimate benefit to these four otherwise loosely connected towns, which will make them stronger and more viable communities going forward into the future. The next meeting is at 6:30 p.m., April 25th in Tunbridge, to move forward to Step 2, which will include a vote on the actionable priorities and there will be an opportunity to sign up to participate in the next round of discussions.

Wetlands Report- Kate reports that last year's wetland summaries haven't been completed yet by the person designated to do them due to some personal issues. Micki has agreed to help organize the wetland walks this season.

Town Forest Acreage: When the snow is gone, the metes and bounds of the properties will be examined, which should give us a more accurate total.

Next meeting will be April 23rd 2019

Kate Root, Secretary *pro tem*

