

Acton
Land Stewardship Committee (LSC) Meeting Minutes
Tuesday, December 19, 2023, 7 P.M., Hybrid

Attendees (in bold)

Regular (voting) members: **Bettina Abe**, Jon Campbell (Vice-Chair), **Dale Chayes**, **Aaron Moore** (Chair), **Bruce Rachman**, **John Watlington**, **Joe Will** (Minutes), **Tom Wolf**

Associate (nonvoting) members: Ken Appel, Josh Haines, **Rebecca Harvey**, Everett Kenerson, Mel Lima, Bob Mackin, Adam Nolde, Jim Salem, Bill Smith, Jason Temple, Steve Trimble, Todd Tsakiris, **Bob Walton**

Others:

Ian Bergemann (Acton Land Stewardship Coordinator), **Phillip Bogaevsky** (Acton resident), **Jamie Chung** (Acton resident), **Richard Doherty** (Acton resident), **Mike Gendron** (Acton Conservation Agent), **Jody Harris** (Acton Conservation Trust (ACT)), **Susan Mitchell-Hardt** (ACT), **Alissa Nichol** (Select Board LSC liaison), **David Pinsky** (Acton resident), **Melissa Settipani-Rufo** (Acton Recreation Director)

Review and acceptance of November 21 minutes

Unavailable; tabled until January meeting.

Concerns from the public

Per Susan, the ACT Carol Holley Conservation Award will be presented to John at the ACT Annual Meeting March 17 for John's 10 years of exemplary service.

Great Hill disc golf

Per Melissa, the Recreation Department has been considering the establishment of a disc golf course in Acton. A possible location: Great Hill (GH). Life-long Acton residents Phillip and Jamie presented a slide show detailing the possibility, including an overview of the game, possible social benefits and collaborations, costs and logistics, and a possible GH course layout. (NARA is another site being considered, but NARA is outside the scope of the LSC.) Much of the general information Phillip and Jamie shared can be found by googling the app "UDisc". The possibility of a GH course, and the presented course layout, drew the following observations/comments:

Richard, a long-time Acton resident, gave supporting commentary for disc golf but was concerned that the proposed GH course would be too small and offered some suggestions on the layout.

The dogs at GH should be a concern. There is a pretty good population of dogs at GH . . . with zero overlap of the dogs that will be using the dog park that is being developed in town. So there likely will be no change in the number of dogs at GH, and they could "occasionally" grab a disc and run with it.

A couple suggested tee areas may be on private land.

On one hole, the tee throw would be down a popular walking trail.

Re discs going into the GH pond: Folks could actually go in and get them — new discs for free! Also, there are tools for retrieving. A lot of recovered discs could end up at Disc Golf 978, a company in Fitchburg, where they could be re-sold if there would be some sort of partnership with that company.

GH becomes extremely wet at times.

The relatively new Gable and Magoon parcels are relatively dry and could provide an opportunity to expand, although conservation issues could come into play.

GH was acquired for both conservation and recreation. Possibly the pond, the playing fields and the hill ascending from the large playing field were meant for recreation (with possibly skiing on the hill). Right now, the Town is keeping this area for recreation, but there really doesn't seem much use of it for that end, so finding another recreation activity might help keep GH as it currently is.

Consideration should be given to any "fragile" natural areas, e.g., a certified vernal pool adjacent to the large playing field. Also, there would be concern if the course should encroach on the more wooded areas near the open fields, although making a trail in the woods would help avoid some of the existing trails.

The possibility of a disc golf course at GH would eventually go to the Conservation Commission, and a Public Hearing could result. One purpose of this presentation is to get the LSC reaction to it, which could significantly influence the Cons Comm.

Recall that not too long ago the Cons Comm considered the proposal for an orienteering course on Conservation Land. This proposal seems not that different. (The Cons Comm did not reject the orienteering proposal. The Cons Comm "just stopped talking about it". The Cons Comm seemed incredibly skeptical because it thought somebody was going to make money from an orienteering course. See Cons Comm minutes of February 16, 2022.)

Funding: Not there yet, but possibly a Community Preservation Act proposal in 2024 for 2025 \$.

Perhaps Morrison Farm should be considered for disc golf. It's municipal land . . . not yet Conservation Land although there is a move now by the Agricultural Commission to put a Conservation Restriction (CR) on the land, excluding the buildings. It has a large open field, and one could go into woods at the far end of the field. If the CR is to happen, one would have to see that the CR would allow for disc golf.

Another site that could be looked at: Little Desert in Westford. Also, Phillip observed that there seems to be a lot of Acton land north of NARA that seems open and available (between NARA and Little Desert). However, it is privately owned. Jamie also said that the Nashoba Valley Ski Area has been considered.

The LSC has provided Phillip, Jamie, and Melissa with lots of feedback and will welcome them back when a site and course plans become well defined.

Invasive plants 2023, Part 9

Tabled until next meeting.

Funding options (American Elm, MassTrails, other)

In November (2023), John shared his concern over the status of the American Elm in Acton.

History – Nov 2022

- John W: In November he identified multiple Valley Forge variant Elms that died at Stoneymeade, Great Hill, & Pratts Brook (all meadow locations)
- Jim S.G: Provided a link to the history of American Elms in Acton by Bruce Carley (he has worked to cultivate disease resist elms)
- John W: Visited 11 Elm in Arbo and they are doing "OK". Need to be marked (Ian will work with FAA & Garden Club – they had markers) – Hypothesized that larger overgrowth system provided protection from winter storm/wind damage
- Bettina: Elms planted in Arbo 15-20 years ago (either Liberty or Valley Forge) – Arbor Day Foundation still sells Valley Forge



Ian researched possible grants:

The link shown below the first bullet:

<https://www.mass.gov/guides/urban-and-community-forestry-challenge-grants>

This grant resulted in a vegetative management plan that involved public trees. The second bullet suggests that this grant could apply to the American Elm.

A SuAsCo CISMA grant might allow *planting* of the American Elm.

The Mass Wildlife habitat grant funds on-the-ground work—actual planting.

The last two are USDA funded, with the last one related to completed National Grid projects.

Possible next steps:

The link shown below the first bullet:

<https://survey123.arcgis.com/share/77e3ae96618c48afb9f1f31b8ead0c3>

Third bullet: Who would do the planting and maintaining?

Fifth bullet: Bruce Carley of Boxborough would be such a person.

Grant Options

- In 2022 Acton was awarded a \$30,000 DCR Urban and Community Forestry Challenge Grant - <https://www.mass.gov/guides/urban-and-community-forestry-challenge-grants>
- In 2021 – Sandwhich Tree Warden applied to same grant for American Elm trees specifically
- 1) SuAsCo CISMA Grant – funding to remove invasive species and restore native habitat
- 2) MassWildlife Habitat Management Grant Program
- 3) DCR Urban and Community Forestry Challenge Grant (USDA funded)
- 4) Urban and Community Forestry National Grid Partnership Challenge Grant



What can we do now?

- We can report our healthy American Elm Trees to the Northern Research Station of the Forest Service at <https://survey123.arcgis.com/share/77e3ae96618c48afb9f1f31b8ead0c3>
- We can research studies that support which Elm species has been successful (both regionally and locally)
- Come up with a management plan i.e where to plant, who will plant, who will maintain
- Apply for funding!
- Outreach and Education – Bring experts to talk to the community on the American Elm and its iconic history



A discussion ensued on how to identify types of elms — American Elms including Liberty and Valley Forge, Slippery Elms, the invasive Siberian Elm. A “pointer” on discerning types of elms would be helpful.

Update on Mass Trails Matching Grants:

Another potential idea: Nashoba Brook bridge repair.

MassTrails Grant

- Matching grants to help plan, design, create, and maintain trails!
- Up to \$100,000 for recreational trails
- Up to \$500,000 for Shared-use paths
- Reimbursement & Matching – minimum 20% needs to be matched
- Potential ideas:
 - Grassy Pond boardwalk – repairs/rebuild?
 - Ice House Pond thru-way



Open Space and Recreation Plan (OSRP) update

A public forum last week gave really good feedback, and things are proceeding as fast as possible.

Ian's Trails tales, Part 5 (Guggins Brook)

First impressions:

Neighborhood access includes entry from a Boxborough neighborhood on the west side.

First Impressions

- Wide parking area off Mass Ave, Multiple Neighborhood Access
- Jenks & Wright Hill (2x) Access
- 1 Kiosk, Some You Are Here Signs (closer to Half Moon Hill)
- Water is the first thing you encounter, bog and boardwalks throughout!
- Excellent example of a wetland/flood plain!



Trails:

Flooding is generally attributed to beaver dams but was exacerbated recently by heavy rains.

Trails

- Spread out and interconnected!
- Mainly muddy! But still fun!
- Lots of bog bridges and boardwalks (Would be cool to know the total ft/miles)
- Multiple culverts (Still working!)
- Biggest obstacle: Flooding



Wildlife:

Wildlife

- Have yet to find a Conservation Land with more snakes!
- Huge amounts of wetland/amphibian wildlife
- Large population of Chickadees in Buckthorn patches
- Great example of wetland/floodplain ecosystem!
- (Sort of an ideal habitat – even with the flooding!)

Future Recommendations:

Future Recommendations



Current Conditions

- Large trail network with multiple loops and access to 2 other CLs
- 1 large parking lot off major road
- Only 1 "You are Here" located on red trail near Half Moon Hill
 - *Only 1 kiosk*
- Mix of bog bridges & boardwalks
 - 2 working metal culverts
 - Lots of connectivity

Conclusion

Guggins Brook CL is a great example of a floodplain/wetland as it "absorbs" surplus water during light/heavy precipitation and maintains a wide ranging wetland ecosystem. Good example to point to homeowners on why floodplains are important for flooding and habitat. That said, flooding makes access difficult in terms of hazardous trail conditions and muddy trails. Mix of boardwalk and bog bridges works with semi-mild weather. May benefit from a mitigation plan such as mapping all "flooded" sections and deciding if boardwalks/bog bridges will solve. Additionally, might be a good CL for environmental education on wetland habitats and animals aka why wetlands are so valuable!

Future Conditions

- Adding Trail markers at intersections and Access trail markers labeling "To STREET" or "To WRIGHT HILL"
- Similar to above: You are Here Maps at Intersections
- A distance markers at Red Access trails
- Potentially cleaning up parking lot and grading it to create "obvious" parking spaces
- Potentially adding a kiosk near Jenks red access or Half Moon Hill
- Creating a plan for addressing flooded trails with either an "All bog bridges/boardwalks" wherever feasible or a reconnaissance of chronic flooding areas
- Culverts seem to be in good shape – a beaver dam exist in between the 2 culverts
- Connectivity – map and mark Neighborhood access trails

Ian shared his ideas of what mileage signs could look like, where they could be placed, and possible locations for directional signs.

Nashoba Brook/Bruce Freeman Rail Trail (BFRT) link(s)

The link of concern is the one shown here in blue (but not a blue-blazed trail). This trail is on OpenStreetMap but not on the Acton Trails Nashoba Brook map. Should it be shown on the Acton Trails map . . . or should the trail be closed?

Per Bruce, such a link came up when the BFRT was being constructed. Tom Tidman, Acton's Director of Natural Resources at the time, specifically rejected connecting the BFRT to the Nashoba Brook yellow trail because of the possibility of vandalism. That might not be a valid reason anymore and perhaps a connection should be revisited.



Pro and con thoughts were shared on whether to close the trail, leave it as is, or make it an official Acton Trails trail, but no action was taken as no one seemed to feel uncomfortable with leaving it as it is.

Camp Acton memorial bench

Boy Scouts of America wants to install a bench at Camp Acton memorializing a past Scoutmaster, Paul Guditz. Per the policy on memorial benches, the LSC can decide yes or no, where it will go, what it will look like, how it will be installed, and at what \$ cost. One can find the "Memorial Benches on Conservation Land" (policy approved by the Conservation Commission) using "SEARCH ACTON TRAILS" on the Acton Trails website (<https://trails.actonma.gov/?s=memorial+bench>). Between now and the January meeting, folks can read the policy, then vote on the bench at that meeting. Per Bruce, the Scouts would like to restore an old firepit at Campsite 1 and put the bench there. He feels that wood would be an appropriate choice of bench material.

Heath Hen Meadow Rainbow Trail (next to Mt. Hope)

The Rainbow Trail is an informal trail built by kids and staff from the Infant Toddler Children's Center (ITC) at 176 Central Street. It includes signs created by Jody. It was "significantly destroyed" (10 or more trees down, ranging in size from 1 ft to about 4 ft in diameter) by recent weather. Ian reached out to the ITC and it was happy to hear that he is interested in bringing back the trail. The ITC would try to get a volunteer parent group to help. Jody has said that the ACT could find volunteers to help. Ian would like to know if the LSC is interested in reviving this trail and maybe even putting it on the Heath Hen Meadow/Mount Hope map. There was some reluctance expressed about the possibility of it becoming an official LSC trail. However, since the trail is covered by a Conservation Restriction that is held by the ACT, the LSC should hear from Jody (who had left the meeting by this time) on this. Also, it could be helpful for the LSC to check out the magnitude of the problem. Ian will notify Jody, and this will be taken up again at the January meeting. (Clerk's note: The LSC was told of the Rainbow Trail at its 01/17/23 meeting.)

Other parcel issues

There should be significant damage from yesterday's storm. We should prioritize what we have to do. Proposal: Sawyers and helpers should meet at the Arboretum's main (Taylor Road) entrance at 9:30 tomorrow morning to deal with the "ginormous" willow tree that's down at the twin ponds, and then decide what to do with the other issues they know about.

– Pending Pubs (549 Main Street CR, Morrison Farm CR)

Nothing to report.

– Bridges, Board/Bogwalks, Maps, Mowing, Chain sawing, Shed, Website

The new bridge at Heath Hen Meadow is 18 in. above the old bridge and the water is right up to it. Also, the beaver dam is gone. Volunteers had a really good workday at the bridge last week, putting together the old pieces on the cemetery side because the water level was so high. Then Ian and Jon cleaned up the debris on the same side. Ian hauled it away and stacked up the good stuff at the Morrison Farm shed. There is still a little bit to clean up on the Heath Hen Meadow side.

Guggins Brook had two separate Scout bog boardwalk projects completed. The Bulette boardwalk is still awaiting Council approval.

The shelves in the Morrison Farm shed are completed. The shed contents are much more organized now.

Recall the wood turtle project proposed by the folks from Zoo New England at the November LSC meeting. They have told us that they would welcome any LSC help with cutting down trees. The LSC might even partner with them to do some sort of volunteer habitat-building day.

An Acton resident would like to donate some wood found on their shared border with Acton Conservation Land. Based on a photo of the wood, the LSC agreed to accept, and Ian will so inform the resident. The resident also offered the LSC a tent, possibly for storing the wood. The LSC saw no need for the tent.

On meadow mowing: Morrison was finished. The inner Arboretum meadows are scheduled to be done this week. The two little meadows at Nagog Hill are not yet mowed . . . perhaps because the Town is “out of money”?

– LSC membership

Stuart Amir-Lin was approved for LSC Associate membership by the Volunteer Coordinating Committee on 11/30 and by the Select Board last night. After swearing in at Town Hall, Stuart will be steward of Wills Hole/Town Forest.

Also, David is attending this meeting tonight as he is interested in volunteering for the LSC. Being steward of Grassy Pond is a possibility.

Next month’s (01/16/24) agenda

Memorial bench at Camp Acton; the Rainbow Trail

Evaluate meeting

We should resume assigning times to agenda topics that will likely run longer than 5 min. Possibilities:

- We inform presenters to tell how much time they need, and if we can’t allow that much time during the meeting at hand, then invite them to be on a subsequent agenda that shows the length of time that they say they’ll need.
- Have a presenter share their information with the LSC a week or two in advance of the meeting. Or share it via a link in the agenda. Preserve the information on DocuShare.
- Have a presenter give a 5-min overview, not a detailed presentation, and the LSC decides whether to invite them back for a more detailed discussion.
- Use a timer to help control the length of a presentation.

Adjournment

At 8:50 pm.

The next meeting is tentatively scheduled for Tuesday, January 16, at 7 p.m.