

Acton
Land Stewardship Committee (LSC) Meeting Minutes
Tuesday, February 18, 2025, 7 P.M., Hybrid

Attendees (in bold)

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

Associate (nonvoting) members: Stuart Amir-Lin, Ken Appel, **Josh Haines**, **Jody Harris**, **Rebecca Harvey**, Everett Kenerson, Mel Lima, Bob Mackin, Adam Nolde, **David Pinsky**, Jim Salem, Bill Smith, Jason Temple, Todd Tsakiris, **Bob Walton**

Others: **Ian Bergemann** (Community Conservation Specialist), **Susan Mitchell-Hardt** (Acton Conservation Trust (ACT))

Tom opened the meeting at 7 p.m.

Review & acceptance of December 17 and January 21 Minutes
Minutes were approved as distributed.

Concerns from the public
None.

Invasive plants, February 2025

Clerk inadvertently entered this as an agenda item. Per John, we are putting off “Invasive plants” until March.

Boardwalk Design Guide project

A link to the “Boardwalk Design Guide Revision Project”:

<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1vqgZpeE5wAlpT0Fd2Fy7jKuWsIBtPfjM1gZYLssWVOc/edit?usp=sharing>

For the record, Bob did get the two books suggested at the January meeting but says that they are not very useful as their construction suggestions mostly involve using logs that are cut “at site”.

It makes sense that, when we have a Design Guide that is “final”, the LSC will vote on accepting it. In the meantime, we can agree on Design Guide entries by consensus. Some possible entries to consider for the Design Guide:

- 1) Place treads barkside (i.e., greenside) up unless the pith side — the heartwood side — is clearly of better quality. Deferred until the April meeting is a discussion on the meaning of “better quality”.
- 2) The meaning of a “level” boardwalk. “Level” as meaning a slope or grade of not more than 4 degrees (a change of a little over 6” in height over 8’ in length) seems excessive to Bob. He suggests that “level” mean not more than 2” in height over 8’ in length. Also, “level” specs should consider tilt of a boardwalk from side to side, a particular concern on an icy day.
- 3) How to deal with what might happen to a boardwalk over time. Built level, a boardwalk could lose this feature over time. The Design Guide could have entries on how to build a boardwalk so that it stays level, or how to re-level it.
- 4) A guide on stringer sizes and maximum spans. This led to a nine-minute discussion (by 4 or 5 attendees, complicated by problems with the zoom audio) too technical to do justice to in these minutes. Bob will continue with possible Design Guide entries for LSC consensus at the March meeting.

Kiosk Inspection

Tom suggests this as a good winter activity for stewards to check on their parcels. Ian shared the checklist “Maintaining Trailhead Kiosks” which can be found at:

<https://doc.acton-ma.gov/dsweb/View/Collection-18973>

The first section lists what the steward can check for in the “Kiosk Structure”. If any issues are found with the structure, let the LSC know, and it can figure out how to address them. The second section lists what to check for in the “Kiosk Information” — essentially items posted on the kiosk. Further down on this website are pictures that Tom took of kiosks at Nashoba Brook. Tom reviewed the signage posted on them.

Discussion points:

- We should be checking that kiosk postings are up-to-date, and that out-of-date postings are removed.
- A contest-posting a while back was for photos for the “Open Space and Recreation Plan 2024-2031”. The OSRP has been published and is now on-line. Signs for that contest can be removed.
- We can take down the 5-year-old coyote posting at Spring Hill Road.
- Re dogs: No specific kiosk signs right now, but there might be something about dogs in the general Conservation Land info. Ian may have more about dogs on trails in a month or two.
- When we send in pictures of our kiosk, include pictures of the legs and roof so there is a record of whether they need repair.
- Signage (now gone) on the Morrison Farm kiosk for an activity at the Acton Woman's Club, a respectable organization in Acton, should be taken down if it's not related to conservation. Signage posted by the Acton Conservation Trust most likely would be allowed.
- The blazing notice on kiosks should be updated as it suggests there are maps in the map boxes. Generally, the map boxes have no maps.
- The tick health notice on kiosks fails to mention the most important single thing about ticks, namely that you should remove them within 24 h. That is the advice (sometimes 36 h) not only of the Massachusetts Department of Public Health, but also of the National Institutes of Health.
- There is a “fantastic” commercial tick testing lab in Acton that usually gives same day service. That should be allowed on kiosks as a public service announcement.
- Ian will be responsible for updating general kiosk documents.
- Tom reiterates that he is encouraging stewards to take a good look at your kiosk(s) the next time you hike your parcel and send Ian photos of legs, roofs and faces.

Bench Donation Request (BSA)

Representing Acton Scout Troop 284, Josh is submitting this request for a memorial bench at Camp Acton:

<https://doc.acton-ma.gov/dsweb/View/Collection-18972>

The bench is to honor Paul Guditz, longtime leader of Troop 284, founder of Pack 1, and responsible for 30 or more of our Eagle Scouts. The site proposed for the bench is shown in a map on page 3 of the above link. It is a site that Paul frequented with the scouts but now is little used although scouts still regularly visit it. It's also out of the way of vandalism — a common problem. The bench request speaks of a granite bench, but Bettina points out that the bench policy may have been updated to allow just one kind of bench, one made of green plastic, not granite. Josh is comfortable with that, and the green plastic bench would be less expensive and easier to install than a granite one. So, all that he needs is the price of such a bench and LSC approval.

Bettina moved, John seconded, and the LSC voted unanimously by roll call that the LSC approve putting a recycled plastic bench in honor of Mr. Guditz at the Camp Acton Conservation Land. Ian will follow up with Josh on this.

Bench Donation Policy

The “Town of Acton Conservation Lands Memorial Bench Policy”, the Bench Donation application, and bench information itself have been updated by Bettina and all can be found here:

<https://doc.acton-ma.gov/dsweb/View/Collection-18952>

If the LSC votes its approval, the updated policy will go to the Conservation Commission, needing its approval.

Discussion points:

- The specified bench is made of recycled plastic. Examples exist at the Assabet River Blue and Green Trail, Ice House Pond, and the East Acton Village Green. In addition to being recycled, the bench is “super nice”, easy to assemble, doesn’t age, and blends into the background. Installation usually involves pouring a concrete pad and attaching the bench to the pad by driving screws through bench brackets and into the wet concrete. The result is a bench that someone can't pick up and take away.
- In general, forms like these and Town web pages should not include the name of a (contact) person who fills a particular role related to the information provided. Including a name just creates work that never gets done. (There is no name on the three bench documents discussed here. There are names on some of the LSC web pages.)
- Although the link to the policy is at the bottom of the agenda, not everyone has had the opportunity to read it. If we are to vote approval of this policy, we should have more time to examine it.
- If the agenda is sent to LSC members (and not just to the Town Clerk), we should include a note in the email that specifies information that members should review in advance of the meeting, particularly if it relates to something to be voted on.
- If we are to review changes in a previously-available document, the revised document should show the change history so that we need only to look at the changes.
- In general, in seeking Town documents, we receive a message, “DocuShare has reached its guest limit”. Is it possible to increase the guest limit? Ian has talked with Town IT about this and can bring it up again.
- Here's a workaround: Send the Committee a link to the agenda and include a pdf of what you're proposing that says, “Check this out. And if you want to see the old policy, this is where you can find it on the website.”

Per Ian: We will put off voting on the updated policy until next month so everybody can review it thoroughly. Then, if approved, it will go to the Conservation Commission for its vote. A reminder needs to be sent out before next meeting for members to review that policy.

Hidden Container/Geocache Policy

Ian made changes only in item 8 and added a new item 10 shown here.

- 8. No containers will be allowed in the formal, Acton Arboretum Upper Grounds, Orchard, or Wildflower Trails (please see map in kiosk).**
9. Think SAFETY when hiding and/or seeking a container. Use common sense!
- 10. No containers will be allowed in historical, biological, or archaeologically sensitive areas, such as (but not limited to) cemeteries, stone walls, stone foundations, animal dens, Native American stone piles, stone chamber, or rock cairns.**

Otherwise, Acton’s “Hidden Container Policy” may be found here:

<https://doc.acton-ma.gov/dsweb/View/Collection-18879>

New to item 8 is “Upper Grounds, Orchard, or Wildflower Trails (please see map in kiosk).”.

Discussion points:

- The notion of unrestricted hiding of containers is not good. Containers should be visible if somebody walking in the woods would look behind trees, behind logs, and in any holes in trees and logs. That should

be all that is required. Anything more should be forbidden. So it should be fairly easy to find them, even though they are “hidden”.

- Item 10 says no containers in stone walls. I've seen cases of quite a few people climbing all over moss-embellished walls. It looked like they were practically pulling the moss out of all the holes to find the geocache.
- Containers may not be buried, per geocache.com rules. Also, we do have “Do not dig any holes or disturb the surrounding environment.”
- We shouldn't assume that everyone is going to follow geocaching.com rules, or even that everyone is going to use geocache.com.
- If we want to cite someone else's guidance list re geocaches, it should say that in this document.
- Parts of item 10 will be very hard to interpret. For example, there's no way for anyone but a certified archeologist to know which pile of stones in the woods is a Native American Indian stone pile. If we're going to get that specific, it has to simply say “No rock piles”.

Ian can revise the draft per the Committee's recommendations. Dale cites two ways to do this: One is to make a very detailed and difficult-to-misinterpret list of things that are permitted and not permitted. Two is to describe what we are trying to get people to accomplish: That people hide containers in places that are near trails so there are not a lot of people walking off trail; that people hide containers in ways that don't disturb the natural state, and so on. In the end, something like this will be a “mix” of some very explicit things that one is not allowed to do as well as a conveyance of what we are trying to accomplish.

The LSC is making a presentation to the Conservation Commission at the ConsComm meeting tomorrow night. The purpose: There have been several complaints that the LSC is making rules that are unfair. The geocaching community saw that something was happening and wanted to make sure that geocaching will still be allowed in Acton. They went to the Cons Comm and the Cons Comm asked Ian to explain what was happening. That is scheduled for tomorrow night. Ian will share this draft with the Cons Comm, letting it know that the draft is not final. The Cons Comm would like to present its thoughts on the draft and then vote on a final version that would incorporate its edits. It wants to make sure that it is giving due oversight to policy and rulemaking for Acton's conservation lands, because it's the authority.

Ian shared additional background information re the 7:25 pm presentation. Ian and Tom will present the LSC's current thinking and let the Cons Comm know that there will be another edited version coming of the container policy. Hopefully, the Cons Comm can review it and understand where the LSC is coming from in terms of needing a container policy.

Ian's updates

– Land Steward Logs: In about a month Ian has about 61 h logged by 8 stewards. Most of their time has been spent walking trails.

– Land Steward Check Ins: At this time, Ian has 12 out of the 23 land stewards scheduled. Others can use the sign-up to check in with Ian at the open times listed. A steward can also propose a different time if none of the listed open times work.

– Scoutland: Ian has had no contact with Bill Klauer since sending him a letter. Following a suggestion that he try an approach not involving Scoutland, Ian emailed Bill asking to learn more about the history of Acton's oldest conservation lands.

Bob reports that he found the deed to Scoutland on the Middlesex South Registry of Deeds, and it doesn't say much of anything except that the land is being given to the Boy Scouts of Acton. It appears to be “exempt” land, therefor presumably not paying taxes. If a piece of land is not paying taxes, it needs to have an administrator who is responsible and responsive. If it doesn't have such an administrator, then a lawyer could be consulted and perhaps something could be done.

Ian will talk to Town Counsel on this. It might also be worthwhile to talk with Acton Conservation Trust folks as ACT folks frequently work on this kind of problem.

An extended discussion followed on land ownership, management and use, people responsible for same, and ways to work with such folks, both in general and with specific reference to Scoutland.

– Eagle Scout Projects: Three boardwalks are in design phase. Two are slotted for Great Hill and one for Guggins Brook. Another scout just reached out to Ian. One possible project: The Newtown Road entrance for (original) Grassy Pond is consistently muddy (and flooded now), and lots of trees have come down in that area. It might be a good idea to make the Grassy Pond access all boardwalk from the parking area. Another scout is building “Amphibian Crossing” signs. Send other ideas for an Eagle project to Ian.

– Annual Town Report: It’s due at the end of this month. Ian will circulate a draft tomorrow for stewards’ review. If there’s anything missing or that needs change, let Ian know. The LSC does not vote on this.

– Monthly Reports: For the past month, Ian has received reports for 7 out of the 21 land steward parcels (counting John’s for Great Hill and combining the one for the Canoe Launch and the Blue & Green Trail). Ian plans to report the number of monthly reports at every meeting to see if he can get reports for almost all the parcels.

– Pitch Pine: Ian reached out to the Mass Audubon ecologist who was involved with the 2022 Flat Rock (Fitchburg) Pitch Pine Project that was funded in part through the MassWildlife Habitat Management Grant Program. The deadline for grant application last year was in October. Should a similar grant be available this year, we should have plenty of time to apply. Ian expects to hear back from the ecologist about the Flat Rock project, and will stay tuned-in for 2025.

Re the pitch pines: John contacted the person who worked the Pratts Brook pitch pine barrens under Tom Tidman, Acton’s former Director of Natural Resources. He said that the present direction is to remove the saplings and medium-diameter trees from that area. Basically, anything that isn’t pitch pine gets cut off.

– Upcoming programs & volunteer opportunities: Ian’s focus for March will be on vernal pools and migration. He will install a story walk, “Noisy Puddle”, in an area that has an active vernal pond. It’s like a sing-along storybook for learning about vernal ponds. Ian will also be reading it at a Municipal Library storytime. The Amphibian Brigade could be active the entire month. For the March 18 LSC meeting, Ian plans to present Acton’s “Open Space and Recreation Plan 2024-2031”, possibly with Acton Assistant Planner Kaila Sauer. On March 23, Ian will be doing a frog walk with the AB Family Network. On March 27 he will present a lecture about vernal pools and migration.

Other Parcel Issues

– Great Hill: About six months ago, John had a person interested in being our Great Hill steward, but that has not worked out. Does Great Hill need two stewards? John feels like he is acting like a second steward now, but he would like someone who could do minimal steward work; walk the trails once a week and report on anything that needs to be done. Then John or a Committee colleague would take care of it. Bob knows some folks who regularly visit Great Hill, although they could be from another town. With John’s permission he will explain to one or two of them the situation and, if they would show interest in helping, he would give them John’s contact information. Also, Ian will make a flyer for John to review and then get posted on the Great Hill kiosk.

In general, any time a steward is visiting a parcel other than their own and observes a significant issue, the steward should let that parcel’s steward know of it.

– Nashoba Brook: A snowplow knocked over the motor vehicle sign at the Davis Road parking. To re-install it, a new post will be needed.

Other Issues

Joe expressed concern over what he feels is a developing belief that monthly reports are obligatory. He believes that they are not, as he was told by Jim Snyder-Grant, LSC Chair when Joe joined, that all Joe would have to do as a steward of a parcel would be to walk the parcel's trails occasionally (at least once a month) and report on anything he finds that's upsetting or disturbing, e.g., tree down, trail blocked. Monthly reports were not required. Joe is supportive of the current push for monthly reporting, but to back up what he is saying, he checked the LSC Mission Statement (MS) found online on the Town website. He found the MS made no mention of periodic reporting, but more importantly the current MS was approved in 2015 and was to be updated biennially (every two years). So, it's probably up to Ian to see that the LSC updates its MS. Ian may want to appoint someone to help with this!

Re monthly reports, Joe feels that putting more things like this on potential members of the LSC is discouraging timewise to those who are fully employed. We have not yet had a full staff of LSC members, except maybe for two or three months at most. Joe's final point is that his high regard for all that Ian does sets the concern that someday Ian will move on. Will Ian's replacement maintain all that Ian does or has started? Joe thinks that would be very difficult. Joe's point is that the LSC must be very careful about what its obligations are for a land steward if we want to have full membership.

Discussion points:

- Bob: Bettina emphasized to me some years ago that an Associate had to do 2 things, walk the trails every month and file a monthly report.
- Bettina: You've had to file a monthly report since the beginning of time. A monthly report can be very simple, "Trails are clear. Kiosk looks good." We just want to know that people are out there, and that you're actually walking the trails. That's all.
- Bruce: We've been asking for monthly reports since I've been a member, but it's not actually in our guidelines and if we want to make monthly reports a requirement, we should put it on our guidelines. Requiring a monthly report is a good idea, but it doesn't have to be a dissertation.
- John: I certainly don't view them as required every month. But if somebody hasn't reported in a year, are they actually checking the land. What a report gives us is that the person is still actually looking. All it has to be is a sentence saying, "Yeah, I looked at the land sometime over the last 2 months".
- Bruce: Current guidelines do say that you're supposed to attend monthly meetings. That could be in place of a report. If people aren't attending monthly meetings, are they really land stewards?
- < Clerk's note: Current LSC MS says "(Meeting) attendance by *associate* members is encouraged but not mandatory.>

Per Tom: What we're hearing here is that as a committee, we need to review these guidelines and make sure that they are matching our values. But that's a topic for another day.

Bettina used to send out a welcome packet to new members in a Pdf. If Ian still has it and wants to use it, it should be reviewed and updated as needed.

Maybe a couple of weeks before our next meetings, we send the guidelines around to everybody. At the next meeting, we can decide on one or two people who will work with Ian offline to update the guidelines, then bring them to everyone.

Bruce pointed out that Guidelines have been on the Acton Trails website since 2004.

<Clerk's note: For this discussion, Joe was referencing the Land Stewards' 2015 Mission Statement. Bruce was referencing the Land Stewards' 2004 "Stewardship Guidelines". Clearly, both should be reviewed and made compatible.>

Other Updates

– Website: Ian is building a "smaller" web page on the Town's website that can just hold our maps, so if our website goes down, we will still have access to the map pdfs — a little "second place" for things to live

when the website might go offline for a few days. This is in response to Dale mentioning that recently the website was out, preventing him from locating a tree on a map.

Also, Ian is still working on making an invasive species website, similar to what John has done.

– Sawyers: Ian is purchasing John’s gear, but he has to wait for a “reimbursement week”. If there's other gear (or things) that sawyers need, let Ian know soon as he would like to buy it all together. Per Bruce and John: Every year a sawyer should get a new chain, and they are different per chainsaw. Ian will email the sawyers to ask for their chain information.

– Chainsaw training: Ian tried to get training for this year. Town insurance is not going for it. There is a State grant for which Ian could apply to potentially pay for a chainsaw training safety class. Alternative: The Town could possibly pay for it out of its budget. If we do pursue paying for it ourselves, we should try to get every sawyer there as well as a couple new people.

– Maps: Ian is currently helping develop the 549 Main Street trail map. Eventually he will help develop a trail map for the Wetherbee Woods. He is trying to get GIS to create maps for all conservation lands like the map it created for Wright Hill.

Next month’s (03/18/25) agenda

Bob’s project, bench policy, the OSRP, hidden containers . . .

Per Rebecca: Do we want to have any agenda item related to coordinated amphibian brigade activity? We’re going to be right in the middle of it at our next meeting. Ian is the person coordinating it for Acton. He will be plugging it into his education activities next month. He will visit with Rebecca about it, and we can certainly talk about it at our next meeting. To that end, Ian proposes vernal pool certification as an agenda item because a nice goal would be to get all vernal pools on conservation line certified.

Evaluate meeting

Good turnout. Some thumbs up, no thumbs down.

Adjournment

At 8:30 pm.

The next meeting is tentatively scheduled for Tuesday, March 18, 2025, at 7 p.m.