

Mohawk Trail Woodlands Partnership (MTWP) Board Meeting

November 17, 2020

Meeting held virtually via Zoom

Staff: Tom Matuszko, Peggy Sloan, Alyssa Larose, Mark Buccowich (US Forest Service Liaison)

Board Members Attending: Hank Art, Chair (Williamstown), Rick Chandler, Vice Chair (Ashfield), Nicole Pyser (Berkshire Natural Resource Council), Larry Flaccus (Shelburne), Kyle Hanlon (Berkshire Regional Planning Commission), Zachary Feury (North Adams), Kate Lindroos (Massachusetts Forestry Alliance), Beth Girshman (Conway), Andrew Kawczak (Hoosic River Watershed Association), Joe Nowak (Adams), Sheila Kelliher (Deerfield River Watershed Association), Keith Ross (Massachusetts Society of Foresters), Whit Sanford (Greater Shelburne Falls Area Business Association), Art Schwenger (Heath), Jeffrey Thomas (Lever, Inc.), Kevin Fox (Franklin Regional Council of Governments), Paul Catanzaro (UMass School of Earth & Sustainability), Bob O'Connor (Massachusetts Executive Office of Energy & Environmental Affairs).

Others Attending: Neal Bungard (USFS), Keith Nislow (USFS), Lindsey Nystrom (MA DCR), Greg Cox (Hawley), Stacy Kontrabecki (Buckland), Frank Lowenstein (NEFF), Lisa Hayden (NEFF), Kurt Gaertner (MA EEA), Carrieanne Petrik (MA EEA), Glen Ayers (Greenfield resident).

Meeting Materials:

- MTWP Board June 9, 2020 Draft Meeting Minutes
- K. Nislow MTWP Presentation Slides, November 2020 Update
- NEFF Scope of Work, November 5, 2020
- NEFF Budget and Additional Information, November 16, 2020
- MTWP Forest Legacy Program Handout
- MTWP Town & Regional Grants FY20 and FY21
- MTWP Adopted Bylaws (1-28-20) with Draft Amendments (8-27-20)

1. Introductions

Chair Hank Art commenced the meeting at 6:01 p.m. He explained that a roll call is needed for any vote, so he will ask for introductions combined with a vote on the June 9, 2020 minutes. He called on each Board member to introduce themselves and vote on the minutes.

2. Review and Approval of June 9, 2020 MTWP Board Minutes

B. Girshman MOVED to accept the June 9, 2020 MTWP Board meeting minutes. L. Flaccus SECONDED. The motion PASSED with the following Board members voting to approve the minutes: R. Chandler, L. Flaccus, K. Hanlon, Z. Feury, B. Girshman, A. Kawczak, J. Novak, S. Kelliher, K. Ross, W. Sanford, J. Thomas, K. Fox, and B. O'Connor. The following Board members abstained: N. Pyser, K. Lindroos, A. Schwenger, and P. Catanzaro.

3. Presentation, Discussion and Vote on the MTWP joining the Forest Legacy Program

H. Art explained that both the MTWP Advisory Committee, and now the MTWP Board, have discussed joining the Forest Legacy Program for several years. B. O'Connor noted that a 1-page summary about the program was distributed prior to the meeting. Lindsey Nystrom, Forest Legacy Program Coordinator from the Massachusetts Department of Conservation and Recreation (DCR) presented the program at a prior meeting. One change since then is the passage of the Great American Outdoors Act in early August 2020, which will increase available funding through the Forest Legacy Program.

L. Nystrom presented an overview of the program. The Forest Legacy Program is a voluntary program for landowners and towns and does not impose additional regulations. The program is administered by USFS and DCR in Massachusetts, and has protected over 2.8 million acres nationally, and over 17,000 acres in MA, since 1993. Forested property can be protected through direct fee purchase or through a Conservation Restriction (CR), in cooperation with the landowner. Awards are made annually through a competitive grant process. In MA, recent projects have aggregated numerous parcels into one project to be more competitive with states that have larger single-tract ownership. Land trusts are key partners for pulling together multiple landowners.

The program requires a 25% non-Federal cost share, through landowner donations, State funding, or other sources. Land or CRs must be held by a state agency or a municipality, and 75% of the project land must be forested. To participate in the program each state develops an assessment of need that guides the program. For a project to receive funding, the land must be located within a designated Forest Legacy area. In MA, the assessment has been amended over time to add designated areas. Currently only a small portion of Williamstown within the MTWP area is eligible for the Forest Legacy program. Adding the rest of the MTWP area would make the funds available in the region. If the MTWP Board wants to join the program, the next step would be for DCR to amend the assessment of need by gathering data to show that the area meets the criteria of the program. It is already documented that the forests in the MTWP region are important for ecological services. This information would be prepared by Nystrom with assistance and input from the MTWP Board. Letters of support would then be solicited from the towns and conservation groups. Approval would then be sought from the MA Forest Legacy Committee and the USFS.

Discussion followed. It was noted that apprehension of the federal government is strong in the region, so towns need to be fully informed about the program. P. Catanzaro noted that UMass researched the economic impacts of the Forest Legacy Program in communities across the country and found significant economic contributions. Based on interviews with people in these regions, the program receives a lot of local support, and would help meet the economic development goals of the MTWP. B. O'Connor said that the State's Landscape Partnership program has partnered with the Forest Legacy program on projects, helping to meet the 25% match.

P. Sloan said the Forest Legacy program is consistent with the MTWP goal of forest conservation, but the strong preference expressed by the towns is for land to remain in private ownership and on the tax rolls. She asked if it is possible to join the program but ensure that a CR approach is used as opposed to fee ownership by the State. N. Bungard said the State could include in the assessment of needs that a CR is the preference for this area, but still leave the possibility for a project that results in municipal or State-owned land. L. Flaccus asked if a municipality needs to approve an application for a project within its borders. L. Nystrom answered yes, if the town is being asked to hold the CR; otherwise, if the CR is being

held by the State, then no town approval is required. N. Bungard noted that the program expects a 50-100% increase in funding for 2021. Applications are usually due in September. Projects applying in the coming year would likely be completed in 2023 or 2024.

At 6:44 p.m., L. Flaccus MOVED for the MTWP region to join the Forest Legacy Program. W. Sanford SECONDED. L. Flaccus clarified that his motion is to join the program with no specific reference to CRs. W. Sanford confirmed, but with an understanding that the CR approach is what should be used most.

H. Art called on each Board member to vote on the motion. The motion PASSED, with the following Board members voting YES: H. Art, N. Pyser, R. Chandler (CR requested), L. Flaccus, K. Hanlon, Z. Feury, K. Lindroos, B. Girshman, A. Kawczak, J. Nowak, S. Kelliher, K. Ross, W. Sanford, A. Schwenger, J. Thomas, P. Catanzaro, B. O'Connor. The following MTWP Board member voted NO: K. Fox.

4. Review, Discussion and Vote on the Administrative Agent for the MTWP

K. Ross, chair of the Subcommittee to review applications for the Administrative Agent, said a copy of the proposal from the New England Forestry Foundation (NEFF) was provided ahead of the meeting. NEFF was the only application received. The Subcommittee reviewed the application and was pleased with the scope of services offered. Clarifying questions were sent to NEFF which are also in the meeting materials. The Subcommittee felt that NEFF answered the questions satisfactorily and that the MTWP Board should pursue a contract with NEFF. Any final issues can be cleared up as part of the contract negotiation. K. Ross said that NEFF has the skills, personnel, and experience to fill the position.

A. Schwenger commented that it is a strong application especially concerning conservation and forest management, but the application was weak with respect to actual administrative support for the Partnership. K. Ross said the Subcommittee tried to address this with the questions. Part of the problem is that the Partnership is still taking shape and it is not clear how many committees and/or subcommittees will be formed that will need administrative support. This will need to be worked out in the contract and fit within the budget. F. Lowenstein from NEFF stated that two different personnel would directly support the Partnership. One staff person would facilitate meetings, take notes and minutes, and one staff person would be a higher-level position working on structuring meeting agendas and other activities. Both would be contracted with consent from the Board and overseen by NEFF. Additional support would be provided by Lowenstein and L. Hayden of NEFF on grant proposals, demonstration projects, and other initiatives. L. Hayden has been working with a similar partnership where she focuses on landowner outreach, grant management, and climate adaptation.

A. Schwenger commented that he wants to make sure the MTWP Board continues to have control, and that the MTWP is a priority for NEFF and not just another program that supports their mission. He noted the support from the Regional Planning Agencies has been key over the years. F. Lowenstein said NEFF has a strong understanding of the region and has worked in neighboring areas. Through other initiatives they have helped grassroots efforts be successful.

B. O'Connor said the State sent the Request for Responses out to small and large groups and would have liked to have more than one proposal. NEFF's proposal is well written, and a smaller group would likely hesitate to take this on. NEFF's staff have incredible experience and the organization is a stable one for this effort to launch from.

K. Ross asked for a motion to proceed with negotiations with NEFF to develop a contract. A. Schwenger MOVED. J. Thomas SECONDED. Discussion followed. A. Schwenger asked if there has been a review of the proposed budget. K. Ross confirmed the budget will be a major part of the contract negotiations. G. Cox commented that the Town of Hawley is most interested in economic development. He did not see where the proposal addresses the needs brought up by local businesses. H. Art noted that natural resource based economic development will be a key part of the MTWP plan update. B O'Connor commented that it is difficult to find an entity skilled in all three goals of the partnership. A roll call vote was taken. At 7:13 p.m. the motion PASSED unanimously, with the following Board members voting YES: H. Art, N. Pyser, R. Chandler, L. Flaccus, K. Hanlon, Z. Feury, K. Lindroos, B. Girshman, A. Kawczak, J. Nowak, S. Kelliher, K. Ross, W. Sanford, A. Schwenger, J. Thomas, K. Fox, P. Catanzaro, B. O'Connor.

H. Art stated the Executive Committee will work on the contract before the next full MTWP Board meeting.

5. Review, Discussion and Vote on Possible Amendments to the MTWP Bylaws

R. Chandler, chair of the Bylaw Subcommittee, reviewed the proposed changes provided to the Board prior to the meeting. He said the current Bylaws were adopted in January 2020 after a lot of review. Most of the proposed changes are administrative. The main substantive change is clarifying that the Chair of the MTWP Board and the Executive Committee are Board members representing municipalities. Proposed meeting clarifications include remote meetings. Appendix A is revised to include the most recent towns that opted into the partnership.

P. Sloan noted that a key change is to make sure the partnership is chaired by a municipal member, both the chair of the full board and the executive committee. H. Art commented that a Subcommittee for education, outreach, and research was missing in the original Bylaws and is added in the proposed amendments.

A. Schwenger MOVED to accept the changes to the Bylaws as proposed. W. Sanford SECONDED. H. Art asked for discussion. There being none, he called on each Board member to vote. At 7:20 p.m. the motion PASSED unanimously, with the following Board members voting YES: H. Art, N. Pyser, R. Chandler, L. Flaccus, K. Hanlon, Z. Feury, K. Lindroos, B. Girshman, A. Kawczak, J. Nowak, S. Kelliher, K. Ross, W. Sanford, A. Schwenger, J. Thomas, K. Fox, P. Catanzaro, B. O'Connor.

6. Review, Discussion and Prioritization of possible USFS Research Projects for the MTWP Region

H. Art stated that at the previous MTWP Board meeting, K. Nislow presented a broad overview of research underway by the USFS. At this meeting, he will present specific examples of projects the MTWP may want to undertake. K. Nislow said the USFS is already involved in near term research in the region to measure, monitor, incentivize, and train forest conservation and management personnel on forest carbon and resiliency best management practices. This work is through the recent MVP grant received by the MTWP region. In this project, the USFS is represented by the Northern Institute of Applied Climate Science (NIACS), which will be working with partners to provide the necessary data. Another component of the project is a forest and climate adaptation program. These practices address a broad array of values associated with forestlands. Training will also be provided for foresters and loggers, and incentive payments to landowners to implement best practices.

For longer term projects, the USFS has an interest in shared stewardship and how initiatives help achieve goals. Research can help inform us of landowner perspectives and measure the impact of MTWP activities. The Family Forest Research Center surveys landowners to understand motives and incentives. A demonstration forest is another long-term research possibility. The Hopkins Memorial Forest in Williamstown was once a USFS experimental forest and has been a research forest for an impressive length of time. Research from Hopkins and other efforts can be used to inform on the ground activities.

K. Nislow said that the USFS engagement with the MTWP going forward could help identify the science needs, opportunities, and capacity, through stakeholder meetings and meetings of the MTWP Education, Outreach, and Research Subcommittee. In the next few months, Nislow will know more about USDA priorities for the future and can help integrate those with local priorities.

H. Art noted that standing committees will need to be formed, and the Education, Outreach, and Research Committee can work with Nislow and the USFS on research priorities and activities. He said that Board members will be receiving a questionnaire soon inviting them to sign up for various Subcommittees. A lot of work of the MTWP will be done through these Subcommittees.

A. Schwenger stated that these are a wonderful set of opportunities, but he wants to make sure the origin of the partnership as a locally driven initiative does not get lost, and that local decision-making and input is maintained. H. Art commented that he sees this as a collaboration with the USFS and that the MTWP Board will let them know how to move forward. W. Sanford noted that she is happy to see the marriage of conservation and development as part of the research opportunities, as it is so important for rural places. Protecting natural resources allows us to support economic growth in the region.

7. Updates on the Municipal Vulnerability Preparedness Grant for the MTWP Region and the MTWP Implementation Grants for Towns/Region

P. Sloan stated that a list of current MTWP town grants are in the packet of meeting materials. There are some exciting projects underway. Sloan asked J. Thomas from Lever Inc. to speak about one of the grant-funded projects. J. Thomas said he hopes the Board can help to identify entrepreneurs to participate in the challenge program that Lever Inc. is launching with funding from MA EEA. Lever Inc. is focused on the economic development aspect of the MTWP. The entrepreneur challenge program is seeking to support new businesses that will create jobs in MTWP region. The business must be in a member town. Eco-tourism, sustainable forest products, maker businesses, and other alternative business models are eligible. So far five applications have been received, all in the eco-tourism area. Thomas is hoping to receive applications from wood products businesses too.

Through the program, Lever Inc. will work with entrepreneurs on their business plan and host a pitch event and help companies launch their business. Lever Inc. has done outreach in all MTWP communities, including posters, presentations to Select Boards, and through social media. The project received some good press in Berkshire County and in the Greenfield Recorder. Thomas noted that he has been in touch with the Franklin County CDC about outreach, and the program can support non-profit businesses as long as jobs are created.

P. Sloan commented that as town and regional projects are completed, they could be highlighted at future MTWP Board meetings. T. Matuszko mentioned the regional MVP grant project focusing on impacts of climate change. The Town of Adams is the lead, and the project contains many components, including culvert assessments, river corridor protection, and carbon sequestration. A second regional MVP grant is looking at implementing the Family Forest Carbon model in the region and working with foresters and property owners to implement Best Management Practices that increase carbon storage and resiliency to climate change.

8. Discussion of Town Requests for an Extension of the Deadline to opt into the Partnership due to COVID -19

H. Art explained that towns had two years from passage of the State legislation to opt-in to the MTWP. Five towns have not opted in. Recently, after the deadline passed in August, Hawley requested an extension for opting in. P. Sloan noted that some towns decided to take the vote to opt-in to Town Meeting. Due to COVID, agendas for annual Town Meetings in the spring were limited to immediate town business. Hawley brought the MTWP vote to a Special Town Meeting in October 2020, which was scheduled after the August opt-in deadline. The vote to opt-in passed unanimously, 28 to 0. If the MTWP Board supports it, staff could pursue whether an extension can be granted due to COVID to provide more time for the remaining five towns to opt-in. This could possibly be through an Executive Order by the Governor or through COVID municipal relief legislation. It is not possible for the Board to ignore the legislation and vote to allow towns in after the deadline.

J. Nowak suggested Hawley meet with its State legislators first. If the Board supports an extension, the other four towns should be notified. Having all the towns opt-in would make the Partnership stronger.

K. Lindroos noted that as a resident of Buckland, a town that has not yet opted in, she is in support of an extension and would help spread awareness. H. Art and others agreed that while an extension makes sense due to COVID, there still needs to be a deadline to opt-in. Staff have made numerous presentations to all town governments, and at some point, towns need to make a decision. The extension should be long enough to allow for a Town Meeting vote in the spring.

At 8:07 p.m., J. Thomas MOVED to request that staff pursue a one-year extension for opting into the Partnership via an Executive Order or COVID municipal relief legislation for remaining towns. W. Sanford SECONDED. H. Art called on each Board member to vote. The vote PASSED unanimously with the following Board members voting YES: H. Art, N. Pyser, R. Chandler, L. Flaccus, K. Hanlon, Z. Feury, K. Lindroos, B. Girshman, A. Kawczak, J. Nowak, W. Sanford, A. Schwenger, J. Thomas, P. Catanzaro, B. O'Connor.

8. Public Comment/ Other Topics not reasonably anticipated 48 hours in advance of the meeting/ Adjourn

G. Ayers offered public comment about the current climate and biodiversity emergency and the importance of protecting rare habitats, old growth forests, and large intact forestland, and promoting natural climate solutions like carbon capture and long-term storage. H. Art thanked Ayers for his comments and noted that many of the projects currently being funded are looking at forest management for carbon sequestration, and that the Partnership's approach is to support sustainable forestry practices.

A. Schwenger MOVED to adjourn the meeting. T. Matuszko and P. Sloan thanked the MTWP Board for the opportunity to work with them on the project over the past 7 years. With the project transitioning to a new Administrative Agent, H. Art stated the Board is extremely grateful to T. Matuszko and P. Sloan for the work they have put into the effort. H. Art noted the Executive Committee will meet in December, and the next full Board meeting will be scheduled for late January or early February.

J. Nowak SECONDED the motion to adjourn the meeting. The meeting was adjourned at 8:17 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Whit Sanford, Clerk – MTWP Board