**Bethlehem Conservation Commission (BCC) meeting**

**September 21st, 2023**

**Draft meeting minutes**

**Location:** Bethlehem Town Library

**Committee members present:** Margaret Gale, Cheryl Jensen, Rachelle Lyons, Veronica Morris, Betsey Phillips (left at 7:11pm), Vivian Winterhoff

**In attendance:** Chris Jensen, Elise Lawson (left at 7.28pm), Jon Swan (left at 7:01pm)

Margaret called the meeting to order at 6:02 pm.

**Wetlands review guidance and assistance (NRI discussion)**

There are two issues facing the BCC: We need to update our Natural Resources Inventory (NRI) and BCC members feel we are struggling to do our due diligence with protecting wetlands and natural resources when reviewing wetland permit applications. Underlying both issues is that we need a better handle on current state of our local wetlands. So, we need to grow our own knowledge and receive assistance with applications.

Questions that regularly come up in relation to wetlands (and Alteration of Terrain) permit applications in particular are:

How do we know if the permit application is accurately stating the situation on the ground?

When should we exercise our right to comment on an application and when is it not necessary?

Elise shared that anyone who applies for a wetlands permit needs to hire a certified wetlands scientist, so a lot of the due diligence should already have been done by the application stage. BCC members related that we may need only simple advice, an initial point of contact to consult to help point us in the right direction.

**Regarding the NRI:**

Elise brought copies of other towns’ NRIs that she had recently completed, including NRIs for Dalton and Whitefield. She also worked on a wetlands specific NRI for Randolph.

Elise is charging $7,500 to $10,000 for NRIs @$75/hour and $600/field day.

Elise can also create a wetlands specific NRI, as she did for Randolph. This is a functional assessment of the wetlands only. The result is to quantify and rank the significance of wetlands, which can then form the basis for, for example, increasing buffer zones around wet areas. She will get back to us on the specifics but gave the BCC a verbal estimate of around $5,000.

It is essential for her to do fieldwork for at least 3 days. As part of her package everything that feeds into the final report, including the photos, Excel tables, and GIS data is made available to the BCC electronically. She includes a mini training session on how to use the data, including for wetlands permit application assessments. The fee also includes the optional presentation, e.g., to the Select Board Members, at the end.

Often towns will do an NRI and then a wetlands study can be a recommendation that comes out of the NRI, for which grant funding may be available.

However, if the BCC did not want to or could not spend all the funds for the NRI at once, the NRI could be done in stages, with some planning. If Elise was to assess wetlands in Bethlehem first, before any other natural resource as part of the NRI, this could be a way to complete one stage of the NRI.

The usual timeframe needed to complete the NRI is about 1 year, with fieldwork best done in the summer (June). For the wetlands study, the best time to complete it is during growing season, between the spring and autumn frosts (mid-May until October at latest).

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In terms of the need to send out an RFP: “Sole source justification” could potentially be used as we could have a very good reason for hiring one specific person for the work. If it comes to under $5,000, there is no need to go to Select Board. If we do need to go to the Select Board for approval to proceed, they are coming into budget season from now until around Thanksgiving.

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The BCC’s biggest responsibility as part of the NRI or wetlands study would be to contact landowners prior to the fieldwork commencing in order to obtain their permission to access their property for the assessment.

Information from a bioblitz, carried out by local residents (and organized by the BCC), could be included in and complement the NRI.

Cheryl emphasized that it would be a good idea to let other groups in town know that the BCC is completing an NRI. Elise suggested that BCC members reach out to the Planning Board to say that we are planning on doing an NRI or a Wetlands Inventory and ask what would be most helpful to them for us to assess. There was discussion around how much the Planning Board would use an NRI or Wetlands Inventory for their work.

The Planning and Zoning Board is reviewing zoning regulations this year, so this will be the time to give input from a Conservation Commission’s perspective.

In addition, the Town Masterplan will be updated soon (it is due in 2026). A summary on “Natural Resources” will go into the Town Masterplan.

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There was discussion around the urgency of having the wetlands study done, given the above Town activities. Should it be completed this fall or in spring 2024, as there would be more diversity to see in spring, e.g., song birds, specific plants. Relative ranking would still be possible with a fall study, but the absolute functionality or wetlands scores (of which there are twelve and which include ecological integrity, wildlife habitat, scenic quality, educational potential and noteworthiness, for example) wouldn’t rank as highly.

Would it be more beneficial to have some up-to-date data on wetlands sooner rather than later, so we can more effectively feed into the zoning regulations being reviewed, even if it means we don’t have a completely in depth or accurate picture of our wetlands, or is it possible to wait until the full, more in-depth study can take place in the spring?

It is possible for Elise to complete the wetlands inventory in stages – doing some of the field work and the mapping in 2023 and most of the fieldwork in the spring of 2024. However, this way of splitting up the work would make the study less time-efficient and therefore more expensive.

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BCC members can go to the Town of Randolph website to find their Conservation Commission’s wetlands report, also recently completed by Elise.

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Elise will send a proposal for a wetlands study.

**BCC priorities discussion**

Those BCC members present briefly read out their list of priorities (or related other members’ lists) as follows:

**Cheryl:**

1. Wetlands protection
2. NRI
3. Town Forest
4. Roadside Clean-up
5. Adopt a Spot

**Vivian:**

Vivian had not prioritized individual items/projects yet, but listed the following as needing to be the BCC’s focus, with them either being a Conservation Commission’s responsibility per the RSAs or a current, ongoing project the BCC is responsible for:

* Town Forest
* NRI
* Wetlands applications review
* Coordination with other groups and committees in town
* Adopt a Spot (ongoing voluntary roadside clean-up) program

By focusing efforts on outreach and information dissemination (based on updated information in the NRI, for example) it should be possible to raise greater awareness of and interest in many local environmental issues and projects, and recruit new members and alternates who can assist with existing projects, such as creating recreational trails in the Town Forest, managing the Adopt a Spot program, and assist with projects that BCC members would like to engage with, but find little time for, such as performing legislative advocacy (for example, reviewing and providing comment on House Bills, writing letters to the Editor), and perhaps even bring into being new projects that benefit the Town’s ecological resources.

She suggested that the annual roadside clean-up be dropped, as it is very time-consuming for not a lot of return on time and effort investment given the last few years’ experience, and BCC’s members’ time could be more effectively spent on initiatives and projects that have more impact.

The RSAs are clear on the Conservation Commission being an advisory body that cannot regulate, approve, deny or restrict land use, so the approach should be centered on providing information and opportunities for residents to get involved in meaningful projects with a positive environmental impact.

**Rachelle:**

1. Understanding wetlands that we have better
2. Working with the Masterplan update and P&Z ordinances to protect wetlands in particular
3. NRI (due in 2026)
4. Improved connection with other municipal bodies

Cheryl commented that BCC used to coordinate a lot more with the Planning Board.

**Margaret:**

1. Wetlands protection
2. Invasive species action
3. Liaison with other committees

**Betsey (as read out by Margaret, Betsey having left the meeting):**

1. Wetlands protection
2. Town Forest (Stewardship Plan and Developing Trails)
3. One more thing, which Betsey can fill us in on at the next meeting

We will revisit and discuss this agenda item at our next meeting.

**Meeting minutes to approve**

**Cheryl made a motion to accept the draft August 24th, 2023 meeting minutes as amended. Rachelle seconded the motion. Motion passed unanimously.**

**Incoming mail/emails**

No discussion.

**Treasurer’s report**

The BCC’s account balances are as follows:

Town account: $870.00 (with Cheryl’s reimbursement of $68.02 still outstanding)

Savings account: $17,478.45

**Other/New business**

* Chris Jensen, former Select Board member and Bethlehem resident introduced himself and volunteered to become a full BCC member. Margaret made a motion for Chris Jensen to become a BCC member. Rachelle seconded. There was discussion around when Chris’s term should start, and it was decided that we should check this, so that terms would overlap at the right times between different members. We will revisit Chris’s nomination at the October BCC meeting with more information on Members’ terms to hand.
* Rachelle reported that for the next meeting she would like to give an update on the USFWS grant. In a nutshell, the application was unsuccessful, but we have been directed towards a larger pot of funding for bird specialists.

There was a brief mention of funding conflicts existing within the Town and the need for better coordination between different Town bodies when applying for USDA, Northern Borders and North Country Council (NCC) funding. This will be talked about at an upcoming Select Board meeting.

**Next BCC meetings**

Next meeting will take place on October 19th at 6pm.

**Cheryl made a motion to adjourn the meeting at 07:56pm. Rachelle** **seconded. Motion unanimously passed.**

**The meeting was adjourned at 7:56pm.**

Respectfully submitted by Vivian Winterhoff, Recording Secretary.