Windham Regional Commission
Natural Resources Committee Minutes
April 26, 2018

Members Present: Gabby Cuiffreda, Chair; Andrew Toepfer, Bill Dunkel, Lise Fortin, John Whitman, Kevin Stine, Susan Hammond

Absent: Liisa Kissel, David Deen, Lynette Hamilton, Everett Wilson

Staff present: Emily Davis

Public: None.

Presenters: Jeff Nugent of the Windham Regional Commission, and Joan Weir of Vermont Land Trust.

Meeting convened at 5:01 p.m.

1. Meeting Minutes:
   - Action: Minutes from the March 2018 meeting were approved on a motion by Bill Dunkel, seconded by John Whitman, and with a unanimous vote.

2. Review Revised WRC Natural Resources Committee Purpose & Objectives Statement:
A final draft (dated April 4, 2018) was drafted by Emily Davis after comments and language suggestions following the March NRC meeting. The Committee agreed that the statement was much more simple and readable.

John Whitman had asked if there were any substantial changes. Emily responded that the edits were mainly breaking up and simplifying long sentences, adding clarifying language, and providing more examples of relevant topics of interest to the NRC.

   - Action: This final draft of the Natural Resource Committee’s Purpose & Objectives Statement will be brought to the Executive Board for approval by Chair Gabby Ciufredda, with a motion by John Whitman, seconded by Bill Dunkel, and with a unanimous vote.

3. Presentation of the Biodiversity Mapping Project for the Windham Region:
Jeff Nugent, GIS Planner with the Windham Regional Commission and Joan Weir, South East Regional Director of the Vermont Land Trust gave a presentation on a partnership project that they had started several years ago. There were presenting it to the NRC for its relevance to Act 171 and the forest fragmentation planning of regions and municipalities, the potential role their data may play in the
revision of the Windham Regional Plan, and to inform the discussion of proposed land use districts in the Regional Plan update.

The two described their project, which used Vermont Conservation Design mapping data for the state, The Nature Conservancy’s Resilient Sites for Landscape Conservation data set (which identified priority areas based on their landscape complexity), and finally a map of forest productivity. They then used parcel data to exclude parcels that were under 25 acres, since this would be used for landowner outreach by the VLT. The resulting project’s goals was to identify parcels that were priority for conservation based on climate change adaptation, biodiversity, and forest productivity.

The Committee had noticed that the trend for conservation priority was in the eastern areas of the Region, not in the western areas where there is the Green Mountain National Forest, and where conservation is typically prioritized. There was some discussion about how being explicit in the project’s goals (climate change adaptation and forest productivity) had consequently identified these parcels that were not conventionally thought of as high-value. Data sets like VT Conservation Design include many conservation goals, and so there is a large percentage of the Region that is either Very High Priority, or Priority.

John Whitman made the observation that this mapping project did not include connectivity, and agriculture, which are goals that we typically see in conservation planning. Jeff and Joan responded that they were not goals of the project, and this is a good example of how identifying goals is critical to map analyses and policy development.

John also commented that the use of terms like, “conservation,” “resources,” “productive rural,” and “forest,” have a level of ambiguity in the existing Proposed Land Use plan in the Windham Regional Plan, and that these terms need to be defined clearly so as to avoid confusion and policy discrepancies.

Andy Toepfer suggested that an interesting lens to review the land use categories in the updated of the Regional Plan would be to see which areas are “underrepresented landscapes” in conservation. Which are the underrepresented landscapes or soils in conservation, and how can we incorporate those into the Proposed Land Use plan?

There was also some discussion about how Act 171 uses data like VT Conservation Design, and how the WRC can assist towns with interpreting that. Kevin Stine had suggested that having Jens Hilke or Monica Pryzerhart from VT Fish & Wildlife present about Act 1717 planning, and VT Conservation Design at a Full Commission meeting would be of value to the Commissioners and the Towns.

4. Upcoming Events:
Emily briefly described some of the upcoming events that may be of relevance to Committee members, and that were being hosted or supported by the Green River Watershed Alliance. She encouraged Committee members to visit the group’s website for more information or to register, and welcomes their attendance to any of the public events.

Kevin Stine had also added that there was a public open house on the evening of May 2, 2018 to learn about the proposed Somerset Integrated Resource Project located on the Green Mountain National Forest, Manchester Ranger District. It will help describe the multiple resource management activities designed to bring the project area closer to desired future conditions as provided in the Green Mountain National Forest Land & Resource Management Plan. Emily and Kevin said that they would try to find that information and pass it along to the Committee members.
5. Other Business:
   - Gabby had again encouraged the other Commissioners to fill out the guest speaker survey that was distributed to all of the members, and hand it back to Emily. This would help her and Emily arrange for guest speakers in the future that would be of interest to the group, and work towards informing them of relevant issues and topics.
   - She also mentioned that in coordination and partnership with the WRC Energy Committee, there would be guest speakers from Green Mountain Power to discuss their response to wildlife corridors, micro-grids, and other topics of interest to natural resource planning. They are tentatively scheduled for Thursday, June 7th at 5:00 at the WRC conference room. Given this date, Gabby advised that the regularly-scheduled May 24th meeting would be cancelled.
   - Gabby also mentioned that Marion Major is preparing a field trip to the Searsburg wind turbines for some time in July or August (so as not to disrupt bear travel). The Committee will stay tuned for that date.

6. Next Meeting: Joint meeting with Energy Committee with Green Mountain Power guest speakers, Thursday, June 7th at 5:00 pm.

Adjournment: The meeting was adjourned at 6:40 pm.