

**LAND STEWARDSHIP COMMITTEE
MEETING MINUTES
APRIL 7, 2004, 4:00 P.M.
ACTON TOWN HALL**

Present: Dave Cochrane, Bob Guba, Maura Herlihy, Gigi Hopkins, Philip Keyes, Peggy Liversidge, Linda McElroy, Nan Millett, Cyril Murphy, Rich Rhode, Jim Snyder-Grant (chair), Tom Tidman; guest: Andy Magee, chair of Conservation Commission

* Next lecture: Gigi and Nan have arranged for Gail Hansche, a nature photographer and board member of the Mass. Bluebird Association, to deliver a slide show and talk on Wednesday, May 12, at 7:30. Ms. Hansche tailors her shows to topics of interest to her audience. As it currently stands, her primary focus will be on bluebirds and their invasive competitors (notably house sparrows and starlings); West Nile virus, an introduced disease spread by birds, will also be touched upon. Gigi welcomes other suggestions to pass along to the speaker, so let her know if you think of anything of interest. Philip will reserve the library conference room for the evening, send out an e-mail invitation, and arrange for refreshments. The speaker will receive an honorarium of \$150.

* Wills Hole kiosk dedication ceremony: It was agreed that the kiosk dedication ceremony will be held on Saturday, May 8, at 10:00. Dave will work with Tom to send out invitations to the Merriam School students and their parents, the head of the school's Service Learning Program, a representative of the Tufts program that provided funding, Conservation Commission members and Selectmen, and Pam Resor; the *Beacon* will also be notified. Bob will head up the kiosk installation.

* High school senior Community Service Day: This year's Community Service Day will be held on Friday, April 30. Bob requested four or five students to spread wood chips along the Nagog Hill access trail next to the horse farm. Linda would like to have a load of loam (already in place at the Audubon Lane entrance to Pratt's Brook) spread in the senior park area, especially to fill in several holes, and then to have some grass seed sown; students could also help with hauling gray birch to a brush pile if she (or someone) can do some cutting before the 30th. Let Ann know if there are any further requests for student work.

Separate from our requests, Tom has asked that a group of students work at the Arboretum and at NARA.

* Process for handling encroachments on conservation land: Andy Magee attended the meeting to discuss the process proposed by the Conservation Commission for handling conservation land encroachments (as outlined in his e-mail dated 3/27/04). The first step would be for land stewards to make a folder for each encroachment problem, which would be kept on file at the Natural Resources Office. These would include a form with basic information (property owner's name, address, description of the problem, date of observation), photos, and a map showing where we think the property boundaries are. Based on this information, a designated member of the Conservation Commission (currently Matt Liebman) would draft a letter to each landowner for the Commission chair's signature. This would request action but leave the door open for further discussion and perhaps an on-site meeting if there is any disagreement. If a meeting is necessary, Andy feels that Tom, as the Town's enforcement officer on conservation issues, should be involved. Legal action by the Town Counsel might be necessary in some cases, but the hope is that most or all problems can be resolved without this step.

Jim has created a simple reporting form, and Bob, who is familiar with the current encroachment problems, indicated his willingness to gather the necessary information. However, since the files will be public information, he suggested that the form not include the name of the steward reporting the violation (as was suggested in Andy's 3/27 e-mail). Bob also said that he might need David Abbt's help in determining property boundary lines, since they are not always completely straightforward.

* Bluebird boxes in Boxborough and Acton: Gigi recently met with Liz Markiewicz, a Boxborough resident who is interested in starting a bluebird program there. (She is also Cyril's daughter.) There are a number of available sites in Boxborough that offer good bluebird habitat. Since the Acton group is currently putting up new boxes (built by Gigi and by last year's high school classes), it has been agreed that Acton will loan around six of the old boxes to Boxborough to help them get started. Jack Dempsey, the high school wood shop teacher, plans to apply for a grant to cover bluebird box construction next fall, but until then we probably won't get any boxes from that source.

* Vernal pools: Jim reported that through an A-B High School student taking an environmental science class he has become aware of a vernal pool website set up by teacher Fred Hohn, which includes a scanned map showing all certified vernal pools and many uncertified ones in Acton. He will send an e-mail with the link. Gigi added that, of around 25,000 known vernal pools in Massachusetts, only 1,400 have been certified; Acton itself has over 100 vernal pools that could be certified.

* Unauthorized vehicle use at Wetherbee and Town Forest: Gigi raised the question of whether a "No Snowmobiling" sign could be requisitioned from the Town to try to deal with that ongoing problem. Bob recommended that we not add more signs since the existing "No Motorized Vehicles" sign should serve as well (or as poorly) as one specifically prohibiting snowmobiling. After a brief discussion, Gigi agreed with Bob's assessment.

Maura reported that there had been problems with vehicles at the Town Forest as well. She recently found that the chains blocking access to the vehicle cut-across had been rammed through and broken by what she is guessing was a pickup truck. She has reported the incident to Tom, who has replaced the chains at both entrances. It was suggested that these incidents are probably done by just a few individuals and that finding out who they are might allow us to take action, whereas additional signs probably will have little effect.

* Fire pit at Guggins: Jim brought up the ongoing problem of use of the fire pit at Guggins. Despite the skepticism that had been expressed about additional signs at Wetherbee and the Town Forest, it was agreed that, as a first step toward discouraging fire pit use at Guggins, a "Closed from Dusk to Dawn" sign be installed in the Rt. 111 parking lot; Bob offered to order and install it.

* Dumping at Spring Hill's Jay Lane parking lot: Phil reported that debris had been dumped, and then burned, at Spring Hill's parking lot at the end of Jay Lane. Since the lot is along Strawberry Hill Road and thus not clearly connected with conservation land, he suggested that we install a sign identifying this as parking for the Spring Hill Conservation Land, along with a no-dumping sign. He and Bob will work together to take care of this.

* Update on Pratts Brook water channeling: Linda reported that during the recent heavy rains she checked the water-channeling project along the yellow trail that Eagle Scout Paul Travers worked on three years ago. She found that it was working well, although a few stones need to be repositioned.

* Brief update re Acton chamber: Linda reported that she recently spoke with Peter Waksman, a Concord resident (and NEARA member) who has been studying the various stone piles in the Spring Hill/Nashoba Brook conservation lands in Acton (as well as similar structures in some contiguous towns); he has raised some good points about the issue of whether and how to make the public aware of these artifacts, which are very possibly of Amerindian origin. He is also concerned about some old foundation structures in the same area that may be threatened by the Robbins Mill development. Linda will check out with Tom who the developer is, and with David Abbt for the old plot lines. She has already put Peter in touch with Belle Choate and Dave Cochrane concerning the historical records. Linda will report further on this and the status of the chamber survey at our next meeting, which will take place after the NEARA Spring Conference has been held.

* Herbicide use on Wetherbee field: Gigi reported that she has observed that some type of herbicide has been used for at least the past few years on the Wetherbee corn crop as well as on the red access trail from the parking lot to the meadow and woods. She is concerned about exposure to walkers and pets and wants signs to be put up whenever spraying is being done, as is legally required. She has made this request several times to both Tom and Andy. It was suggested that either Tom or Andy call Dave Grinkus (John Chalmers' boss) to inquire about what herbicide is being used and to request that signs be posted whenever spraying is done. However, no clear agreement was reached about whether or how to proceed.

Having proper posting about herbicide spraying is Gigi's major concern at this point, but there are two other related issues she would like clarified and pursued: (1) She wonders if the pesticide being used is Roundup, and if so they may also be using Roundup Ready corn, which is genetically modified; if this is the case, she feels it is something that this committee and the Conservation Commission should be aware of. (2) Since the agricultural lease is 20 years old, she would like to see it updated to reflect current standards concerning pesticide use.

* Next meeting: The next meeting will be held on Wednesday, May 5. (Jim will be out of town, so he asked for one or two volunteers to draw up the agenda and run the meeting. In the absence of any volunteers, Linda offered to do this.)