

10/7 (2) 015

Memorandum

October 3, 2013

To: Acton Board of Selectmen

From: Mary Ann Ashton
Chair, Morrison Farm Committee

Subj: Status Report on Committee's Work
to Date



The Morrison Farm Committee has been meeting since June to evaluate the plan that was taken to last year's Annual Town Meeting and to respond to the feedback that we received. Although last year's plan received a majority vote at Town Meeting, it failed to garner the two-thirds vote required for CPC bonding of the project. Some loved the breadth of last year's plan while others felt that the Morrison Farm property is "practically perfect" just as it is. The Committee has worked these last few months to maintain the broad perspective of the previous plans, and view this year's effort as the first step. The focus for this year has been to develop a plan that will allow for some incremental improvements to the property around the edges and to expand the number of Acton residents who visit the property and treasure its many unique features. We are planning to present to you on Monday evening, October 7, and to share our thoughts about the property. We will also present to you a proposed project which we'd like to submit through the Fiscal Year 2014 Community Preservation proposal cycle, with your support.

Morrison Farm, located at 116 Concord Road in East Acton, is a 32-acre parcel that lies between the Woodlawn Cemetery and Ice House Pond, both of which are Town-owned properties. The rear of the property (approximately 15 acres) is wooded, interlaced with walking trails. The front portion of the property (approximately 17 acres) is open fields with a farmhouse, garage, barn, and three out-buildings next to Concord Road. The property is currently the home for a vibrant community garden, a new orchard, and meadows that are a haven to many wildlife species and birds. Acton's Town Meeting voted to acquire the property in 1997 for \$1.615 million, and took control of the property in 2003 when Mrs. Morrison permanently vacated the property. Previous committees have studied the possible uses and reported on their findings.

We have sponsored six site walks on the property during the months of September and October, including a "naturalist" walk led by Tom Tidman and Andy Magee and a "history-focused" walk led by Anne Forbes and Bill Klauer (scheduled for Sunday, October 6 at 1 p.m.). The first four walks have drawn 15-20 people for each walk, and members of the Morrison Farm Committee have elicited feedback from the attendees about the improvements they are interested in and the ideas that have less appeal.

In response to this feedback and our own deliberations, our committee has focused our efforts this summer and fall on first creating an accessible stone-dust path along the western edge of Ice House Pond that would proceed along the edge of Ice House Pond as far as the path that connects from the meadow. This path will require two short boardwalks over some wet areas. We would also suggest some minor improvements to the parking available at Ice House Pond, and then envision this as a new gateway to the Morrison Farm, with signs inviting visitors to walk and enjoy the vistas alongside the pond, and then entering the meadow from the Ice House Pond trails.

Our committee had a vibrant discussion about the benefits of proceeding with the one-mile loop around the Ice House Pond, which would connect into the planned Bruce Freeman Rail Trail that would run alongside the east side of the Ice House Pond. The additional trails required would necessitate a 200-foot boardwalk over the marsh and the construction of a pedestrian bridge over the Nashoba River using the path of an old crossing bridge. The additional costs for this part of the trail would be approximately \$450,000, and while we continue to be enthusiastic about the benefits of this loop around the pond, we felt that the cost was too steep as a CPC request for this year. We wholeheartedly view this as an important next step, and will continue to research this segment and how and when it might be funded.

We have also confirmed an urgent need to address two historic foundations on the property. We intend to include an archaeological survey of both the Robbins Homestead cellar hole and the Ice House foundation. Each one of these locations, owned by the Town of Acton and marking either side of the Morrison Farm, tell a significant part of Acton's history. Captain Joseph Robbins was living at the Robbins Homestead, a farm owned by the Robbins family since the 1670s, when a rider arrived on April 19, 1775 to announce that the British Regulars were marching to Concord. Captain Robbins sounded the alarm to muster the Acton Minutemen, who marched to the North Bridge in Concord under the leadership of Captain Isaac Davis, where Captain Davis and two of his men perished. In 1895 a stone monument was placed on the site of the Robbins home commemorating the event. The cellar hole of the original homestead, immediately behind the monument, is in deteriorating condition. In our proposal we include the funds to survey the area and to stabilize the foundation to prevent further damage before it is too late.

The Ice House Pond was the site of some of Acton's early industry, including a saw mill and iron forge, and then finally the ice house storage business. Although the pond was used to harvest ice and store it as early as 1875, the most recent Ice House foundation was poured in 1932 and the facility continued in operation through 1954. The concrete foundation of this large building can be seen adjacent to the parking lot by Ice House Pond. In our proposal we include the funds to conduct an archaeological survey of the area, to document what is there before clearing the area around the beginning of the trail.

In following the guidance provided by the Board of Selectmen at their June 10, 2013 meeting, we have investigated the existing farmhouse, barn and outbuildings. We will

share our findings with the Selectmen when we meet on Monday evening, but our plan does not propose any funds related to these buildings at this time.

The bulk of the property (that is, the meadows, fields currently being farmed by community gardeners, and the extensive woods and their existing trails) would continue as currently, and we do not have any plans that would change this part of the property or its use at this time. Although we have discussed whether we should plan for additional parking and/or another means of access into the property, the only parking being improved is at Ice House Pond (clearing, gravel), but the footprint of the existing lot would not be changed. The community gardeners would continue to access parking behind the barn through the driveway adjacent to the farmhouse.

The table attached to this memo summarizes the costs associated with our plans at this time. We are continuing to refine our estimates and will revisit these after we hear your comments. We look forward to sharing our thoughts with you on Monday evening, and will welcome the opportunity to hear your questions and comments. We hope that you will recommend our proposed project to the Community Preservation Committee for the 2014 cycle.

Robbins Homestead & Ice House Foundations		Ice House Trails	Ice House Pond Parking and Picnic Area	Farmhouse	Barn	Totals
2014 Cost	\$27,000	\$153,200	\$49,500	\$0	\$0	\$229,700
Description	Archaeological surveys at Robbins Homestead and Ice House foundation; stabilize Robbins Homestead	ADA accessible stone dust pathway along Ice House pond edge, and Boardwalks #1 and #2	Clear and resurface (gravel) Ice House Pond parking area, add picnic tables, signs	Make recommendation to BOS	Continue to study	
Defer to later Cost	Unknown	\$446,200	\$145,160	Unknown	Unknown	
Description	Handicap access to Robbins Homestead	Marsh boardwalk and bridge crossing to Bruce Freeman Rail Trail	Playground adjacent to Ice House Pond parking area Boat launch			