

**Peterborough Conservation Commission Meeting Minutes
May 17, 2018, Peterborough Town House, 7 p.m.**

Present: Jo Anne Carr, Bryn Dumas, John Kerrick, John Patterson, Liz Thomas, Robert Wood, Francie Von Mertens; Barbara Miller, Select Board Liaison

Guests: Emma Adams, Martha Crocker, David Delworth, Jack Ellerkamp, Sabrina Fox, Steve Fox, Andrea Galea, Ashley Hall and child, Karen Kambol, Peter Kambol, Christine Long, Jim Long, Patty Long, Nadia MacStay, John Newman, Maggi Piccard, Ann Staley, Carl Staley, Jim Therriault, Susan Theerriault, Jim Van Valkenburg, Peggy Van Valkenburg

Cheney Field – grazing lease proposal

John Kerrick welcomed guests, neighbors of the Cheney Field (a.k.a. Fernald Field), and members introduced themselves, including Barbara Miller, Select Board liaison.

Francie Von Mertens gave some background, including Conservation Commission (ConCom) history as steward of the Cheney/Fernald Field combined with the 24-acre abutting Wheeler Trail town conservation land (forested); and ConCom process evaluating the proposal to lease the field for cattle grazing. She said that everyone meets on common ground: What's best for the conservation values of the field as public Town of Peterborough conservation land. As steward of the overall property, ConCom considers its "conservation values" including wildlife, scenic, wetlands/water quality, and productive soils relating to forestry and agriculture.

She cited a letter received that day from the Forest Society clarifying that agriculture is a permitted use, not a prescribed use. Uses that would degrade soil productivity are to be avoided. If the town chooses to pursue agricultural use, the Forest Society requires that it follow best management practices: Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) guidelines, likely following an NRCS site visit.

Von Mertens said the ConCom was launching an evaluation of management priorities for all town-owned conservation-land fields. Current management goals for Cheney Field are scenic/trails (creation of two trails, brush-hogging field); and wildlife (meadow habitat; late season brush-hogging to minimize wildlife impacts); invasive plant control efforts.

As for ConCom process in evaluating the proposal, she said the Commission has a good mix of expertise: a forester, a town planner, a farm manager, a regional watershed planner, an environmental engineer—all professionals—and a longtime Planning Board member. She explained first steps taken:

May 10 site visit to determine any site constraints (wetlands, seeps, access) with a follow-up request to walk the site with the potential leasee and Town Manager Rodney Bartlett to discuss constraints and any additional relevant lease details (ex. water; fencing).

Received confirmation from town counsel that the ConCom is manager of the field, beyond a strictly advisory role to the Select Board.

Sought and received clarifying letter from the Forest Society regarding agricultural use as a permitted not a prescribed use.

She said the neighbors' role in conserving the field 30 years ago through fundraising and purchase; placing a conservation easement on it to preserve it as town conservation land in perpetuity; donating it to the town "acting through its Conservation

Commission"; and paying for its annual mowing gives the neighbors a strong voice that the ConCom listens to.

She said the neighbors' presence at the Select Board meeting two nights before, and again this night, gives clear evidence of their attachment and care for the field.

John Kerrick opened the discussion to the guests.

Carl Staley handed out background information written by Dick Fernald to the neighbors (attached), explaining how neighbors conserved the field and see to its mowing. Mr. Staley said that learning the town was considering leasing the field for private grazing use after over 30 years of the field as public meadow was "shocking."

He said he's not heard neighbors complaining about the Cranberry Meadow Trail traversing the field. They understood increased public use of a public field, but he said that's different than a private lease. He handed out an article about "Swift's trail."

Jim Long asked "How did we get here?" – considering private use of a field conserved as public open space "in perpetuity."

Ashley Hall said she grew up in the field, and now her two young children have the same experience that meant so much to her. She said she feared that experience would be taken away from her family through limited use if the land was fenced off.

Mona Brooks spoke to the diversity of wildlife, birds as well as pollinators attracted to the field wildflowers, and questioned whether cattle grazing had environmental or wildlife benefits. She thanked the ConCom for its good works townwide conserving land and stewarding conservation land.

Ann Staley said it's not about the neighbors. It's beyond that, to issues of public access. How can one person have more influence than many? The lease would set a precedent opening up other conservation lands in town to private use. She suggested that it might deter future land donations to the town.

Steve Fox asked, "Who thought this was a good idea?"—that it would reach this point of consideration.

Barbara Miller said the Select Board was approached with the lease concept, and thought it worth exploring, that cattle grazing might be greeted as a scenic positive, and she learned that there likely were environmental gains to well-managed rotational grazing and soil amendments. She also cited the field's grazing history. She said she would send around a document from Stan Fry, the potential leasee, that describes the environmental positives.

She said the Select Board "needs to hear from all," that there might be people in favor of the proposal, and there would be a chance for neighbors and others to speak about the proposal at the June 5 Select Board meeting.

John Patterson (ConCom) said that soil productivity was important with a look to the future, and the lease agreement included soil amendments that would improve the soil.

Jim Van Valkenburg spoke to site constraints, that the field is deceptively wet, and abutting properties reach deep into the field. He displayed an aerial with the Cranberry Meadow Trail on it, but said people use more of the field than the trail, including his snowshoeing around the field in winter. That use would be constrained by proposed permanent fencing.

Patty Long projected photos of the meadow in winter with tracks in the snow crisscrossing the field, indicating that field use is more than the trail. She cited wildlife that neighbors often see, and questioned what impacts on wildlife the permanent fencing would have.

David Delworth said he built his house in the area because of the field, and questioned the appropriateness of leasing a public field for private use.

Peter Kambol questioned how cattle and equipment could access the field given guardrails and drop off along Old Street Road, the field's only road frontage other than a narrow, wet strip along Cheney Avenue.

Evie Loy thanked the Conservation Commission for giving permission for fireworks over the field both as her husband's memorial service and a means of spreading some of his ashes—at his request. She said his connection to the field is shared by many people, and he would have been distressed by the proposed change in use.

Jack Ellerkamp asked Von Mertens who has final say on the field, the Select Board or the Conservation Commission.

Von Mertens said that when it comes to the law, "there's not much that's black and white," but town counsel has confirmed that the Conservation Commission has oversight responsibility on field use. She said she did not envision a "tug of war," but that the process would arrive at consensus, ConCom and Select Board.

Susan Therriault spoke to the many wet areas in the field that neighbors know well.

Peter Kambol quoted from the town's Master Plan vision statement and questioned how the lease proposal aligned with it:

A priority for maintaining, protecting, and enhancing the quality of our natural resources, open spaces and rural environs, with a particular emphasis on protecting the quality of our water resources. Outstanding opportunities for community members and visitors to access and enjoy these resources.

Carl Staley asked if the proposal related to plans at the Stone Barn for an "agrihood." Barbara Miller said that was a separate proposal.

Peggy Van Valkenburg thanked the Conservation Commission for its field stewardship over the years and sensitivity to the natural resources.

John Kerrick thanked the neighbors for attending the meeting to share their questions and concerns, and the neighbors departed.

ConCom officers

Jo Anne Carr moved and Bryn Dumas seconded approval of current officers for the next year, with one change: that Kerrick be "facilitator" rather than "secretary." Patterson and Von Mertens co-chairs; Wood vice chair; Kerrick facilitator. The motion passed.

Von Mertens said that she has ConCom records going back decades and worries they and a lot of ConCom history will disappear along with her some day, and succession has failed despite her hopes and efforts over the years.

Minutes and invoices

Members approved minutes for the April 19 meeting and May 10 Cheney/Fernald field site visit; and invoices 1. for the ConCom's trail guide reprint and 2. selective mowing of the Fremont Field.

Field management

In discussion of fields managed by the ConCom (Fremont, Burke Road, Walcott, Cheney), Carr suggested we start with current management as a baseline of sorts, and move towards a checklist that covers various management priorities including suitability

of agriculture. Working with the Ag Commission towards identifying private lands in town suitable for grazing also was mentioned. As one example, two ConCom members have fields they have said have potential for grazing. Von Mertens mentioned that neighbors of the Burke Road field have vegetable gardens in the field.

Cherry Trees in Cheney/Fernald Field

John Patterson reported on a field abutter's request to cut down a multi-stemmed mature black cherry stand blocking their view of Mt. Monadnock. Black cherry is a top wildlife resource (pollinators at blooms; wildlife eating fruit; multitude of moth inchworms as wildlife food). Mitigation for loss of wildlife resources was discussed: planting pin cherry or other native shrubs. Mitigation typically surpasses the resource impacted, which is a stumbling block.

Access issues for equipment needed to remove what likely would be truckloads of wood also was discussed. Carr suggest winter cutting would minimize field compaction and issues.

Patterson will discuss with the landowners.

/fvm