

Peterborough Conservation Commission Meeting Minutes
May 22, 2018 site visit to Cheney Field, 4 p.m.

Present: Bryn Dumas, Jo Anne Carr, Swift Corwin, John Patterson, Francie Von Mertens, Robert Wood; Barbara Miller, Select Board; Rodney Bartlett, Town Administrator; Stan Fry, Amelia Tracey

Purpose of the Cheney Field site visit was to determine any site constraints relevant to a proposal to lease the field for cattle grazing. Access, wet areas, seeps, sinkholes and property lines were the focus.

Access for cattle and equipment appeared to be off Old Street Road, requiring temporary removal of a guardrail segment and creation of an earthen ramp down an embankment. Potential leasee Stan Fry explained that cattle move through a narrow temporary fence, both to access field and for rotational grazing. Access also is needed for tractor and truck for field work.

Town Administrator Rodney Bartlett said a sloped ramp somewhat parallel to the road likely would suffice.

Mr. Fry said filling sinkholes would be part of his field stewardship in addition to biochar applications to upgrade soil productivity. For safety of cows—and people whether or not the lease proposal goes through—he suggested that filling the sinkholes is needed. The sinkholes appear to have resulted from a combination of hydrology and stump burial.

The western Orchard Hill end beyond the cattail wetland appeared to be inaccessible to cattle given wetlands, drainage from a Cheney Avenue culvert, slope seeps, and a property line of the former Fernald lot that reaches well south into the field. Mr. Fry said he would not want cattle walking in the wet areas. Swift Corwin said access was possible across the cattail wetland outflow, narrower than the broader inflow area.

Mr. Fry suggested the conservation easement language encourages agricultural uses for the field. Francie Von Mertens cited a recent letter from the Forest Society that explains the Purposes section of a conservation easement is not prescriptive, but rather cites conservation values standard to easement language reflecting established IRS criteria. Agriculture is a standard permitted use. The other standard IRS criteria that determine public benefit, scenic and wildlife values, also were cited in the easement.

If agriculture is practiced on the land, the Forest Society as easement holder requires that it conform with NRCS (Natural Resources Conservation Service) guidelines that typically relate to water quality, soil health and wildlife.

Mr. Fry asked if the ConCom favored wetlands and hillside seeps, as there are means (subsoil keyline plowing) of directing surface water deeper, building topsoil and soil health.

Jo Anne Carr said that wetlands are jurisdictional, protected from disturbance.

Bryn Dumas and Mr. Fry discussed soil amendments including biochar. Given proximity of neighbors, Mr. Fry said he would not spread manure or other organic fertilizers that have odors.

Mr. Fry said towards the end of the site visit that the field, given wet areas and low grassland quality in other areas, likely would support fewer than the 12 head of cattle originally envisioned.

As for infrastructure beyond two large permanently fenced areas, Mr. Fry said water would be provided in stand-alone small tanks, filled as needed by motorized cart transporting water.

He said plans were to run a fence through the southern woods edge, giving cattle access to shade.

He said the Cranberry Meadow Trail and Wheeler Trail would remain accessible.

Von Mertens mentioned that leasing public conservation land for private use was unprecedented and would have to have very clear public benefit. Mr. Fry cited scenic values of cattle grazing on well managed grassland, increased soil productivity, support of local agriculture, and an educational component relating to agriculture as public benefits. He said that wildlife coexists well with cattle managed on rotational grazing basis.

He said there would be no financial profit to him; to the contrary the field stewardship costs would far exceed any profit from selling beef. He said he has undertaken several other projects in town with public benefit the primary motivation and goal.

As for decreased public access cited by neighbors, Mr. Fry said the Cranberry Meadow Trail would be fully accessible, and in the grazing off-season gates would remain open for cross-country skiing and other winter activities on the field.

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