



# MINUTES

**Thursday – November 17, 2023**

**5:30 – 7:30 PM**

**Sandgate Town Hall**

**Present:** Sheila Kearns, Linda Schmidt, Nick Zaiac, Charlie Rockwell, John LaVecchia Jr., Andrew McKeever, Dixie Zens, Donald Campbell, David McAneny, Michael Fernandez.

**BCRC Staff:** Jonathan Cooper, Callie Fishburn, Scott Grimm-Lyon, Jim Henderson, Janet Hurley, Samantha Page.

**Public Attendees:** Shelly Finn, Sandra Reidy, John Irons, Janet Hentschel, James Davies, Jeanne Zoppel, Rich Zoppel, Nancy Henderson, Colin Henderson, Owen Henderson, Karen Tendrup, Nancy Tschorn, Julie Robertson, Mark Rondeau, Jean Eisenhardt, Elizabeth Daut, Margaret Pero, Glen Dunkle, Collen Dunkle, Reggie Tschorn, Tim Phillips, Tom Clark, Charles Pike, John Phelps, Rob Viglas, Joseph Nolan, Suzanne DePeyster, James Smith, James Peters, Margaret Phelps, Valerie DePeyster, Sue Clary (remote), Megan Reeve (remote), Mindy (remote), William (remote).

**Panelists:** Jim Henderson, Sally Manikian, Kelly Berliner, Gannon Osborn, Niels Rinehart, Travis Hurt, Ethan Crumley, Bethany Olmstead.

## **1. Minutes of the September 21, 2023, BCRC Meeting**

Sheila Kearns motioned to approve the minutes as presented. Dixie Zens seconded the motion. The motion passed unanimously.

## **2. Battenkill Valley Forest Conservation Project**

Jim Henderson relayed the historical story of the Egg Mountain site and its post-revolutionary connection to Daniel Shays. He posited it as the most significant historic site in Vermont and of national historic importance.

Sally Manikian explained that The Conservation Fund purchases lands with significant conservation value to hold while a protection plan can be developed. The fund purchased the Egg Mountain in 2017 along with several hundred acres from a family timberland holding spanning New York, Vermont, and Massachusetts. She described exploration of the site with Jim Henderson and reaching out to The Archeological Conservancy. She invited attendees to refer to a FAQ put together after meetings with various stakeholders in the years since purchase.

Kelly Berliner explained that an 89-acre inholding has been purchased by The Archeological Conservancy. She asserted that although it may be difficult to prove for certain, based on deed and legal document research and oral tradition, she and partners are very sure of the site's connection to Daniel Shays and family. She described the site as an unusually intact time capsule of remote post-revolutionary subsistence New England economy. She noted that the surrounding acreage involves many more archeologically significant features in need of protection and asserted that state ownership can provide that.

Gannon Osborn, ANR Land Conservation Program Manager, put the larger site into ecological context in the Taconic Mountain Biophysical Region. He said it provides important wildlife connectivity, Battenkill headwaters and climate resilience values. The state has documented 13 different natural communities, 10 plus acres of wetlands and vernal pools, 11.5 miles of headwater streams, and 23 rare plant species on the lands being considered for state purchase. The state would establish the lands as a state forest which would provide open public access for a balance of uses including preservation, recreation, and timber production. He described the state land acquisition process. He also described the management planning and stewardship processes.

Niels Rinehart explained the Payment in Lieu of Taxes (PILOT) program whereby the municipal tax rate applied to the assessed value of the land at the time of purchase would determine the base PILOT payment for each town. The state then adjusts that base payment every 3-5 years based on a statewide analysis of property values. All Vermont taxpayers would absorb the loss to the state education fund. He provided an example of PILOT values for Rupert ( $\pm$ \$2400) and Sandgate ( $\pm$ \$9700) based on last year's assessed value and tax rates.

Gannon then fielded questions from the audience and panelists addressed each in turn.

- The state will notify adjacent landowners (and involved towns) throughout the public planning process.
- The state management planning will consider how best to protect the archeologically significant features.
- The state acquisition process takes 2-5 years and the planning process can take 2-5 or more years. An interim stewardship plan would be in place at closing with open public access.
- Other potential buyers of the property could include other non-governmental organizations, the Green Mountain National Forest, abutting landowners (e.g., boundary line adjustments) or private buyers. The Conservation Fund will not hold the land indefinitely.

- If the state were to build structures on the site, Vermont Building and General Services (BGS) would pay the towns in lieu of taxes for the new structures.
- With the state plan to protect 30% of Vermont by 2030 and 50% by 2050, is there a plan to address the tax impacts of this? Panelists from ANR pointed to findings that every \$1 spent on land conservation returns \$9 to the state in recreation and other uses on the lands.

### **3. Adjournment**

Sheila Kearns motioned to adjourn the BCRC meeting inviting interested parties to stay and discuss the Battenkill Valley Conservation Project further. Dixie Zens seconded the motion. The motion passed unanimously at 7:31.

Attendees continued discussions.