

Northfield Open Space Committee

Minutes, April 21, 2015

Town Hall – Planning Board Room

Present: Jenny Tufts, Leslie Powers, Julia Blyth, Jerry Wagener, Chair.

Absent: Mike Barry, Kate Rossiter, Joanne McGee, Sue Ross

Guests: Steve Tower, JT Horn from TPL, Brian Nobel (present for part of the meeting)

Jerry called the meeting to order at 7:37.

1. **Adoption of agenda:** Since JT was at the meeting, it was agreed that we should hear the update on the NMH land first, and see how much time was left for other business.

2. **TPL option on NMH land:** Jerry introduced JT, who has been with TPL for 8 years. Before that, he did land acquisition for the Appalachian Trail. JT said that TPL usually works in state offices (Chris was in a MA office). JT usually works in VT and NH (often on big timberland tracts). He is having to learn a lot about MA laws, but because he is senior staff with experience on large land deals, he was asked to cross the border. He is comfortable with the land side, like boundary issues. He met with Bob Macomber and NMH. He wants our help to understand the town and MA.

Brian Nobel came through and talked about the CPA article, and whether it should be on the warrant for the upcoming town meeting. Brian said that the motion isn't worded right and would prefer to vote on it in the fall. JT said that if the funding plan can be stretched for some months, then it is okay to vote in the fall. If it needs federal funding, that is 2 years out. Brian said that probably the town would be willing to call a special town meeting just for this in the fall if need be.

There was some discussion about the river-side parcel for a potential park—JT has told NMH that the town is interested, but would need an environmental sign-off from the state. Brian said that the town would never take the dump, even if it is signed off with a clean bill of health. Jenny observed that the town is liability-adverse. Brian mentioned that the issue is perpetual—there is no limit of liability. Jenny wondered if DCR would take the lower parcel, since they already own the boat ramp, and the town could just have the upper field. JT mentioned that there is such a thing as a “shield of liability.”

JT said that there has been an offer on the water company from Valley Water Systems. They have done inspections and paperwork. TPL will try to shepherd the system through (VWS has to apply to DPU). Don Vann is the utility buyer, and has agreed to take the dam, pipes, filtration, reservoir and Zone A (400 feet setback from the reservoir). There is a question about who will own the land beyond the 400 feet within the water quality protection area; this land could be used for passive recreation and small timber. If the town owned that part, about 300 acres, DCR would want a CR on it. When CPA money is used, the town has to own something at the end of the deal.

JT asked if Northfield could come up with \$300,000 instead of \$100,000, if the EEA and DCR money came through. Perhaps count on income from the timber harvest? Jerry wondered if we could bond the CPA funds, though that would tie up those funds for a long time. It was suggested that the towns' interest was in ownership of the “park” land and no development of the 1600 acres, but it doesn't have the resources to manage more than that. The CPA difficulties were discussed. JT said he was glad to understand the financial realities of the town.

Valley Water Systems is from Plainfield, CT. They own private water companies that serve public. Two or three years ago they got bigger, and started serving towns in NH, and Plymouth, MA. They did a thorough due diligence inspection, and offered a low price to the school because of the capital investments needed. Jenny asked about what happened to the Weston & Sampson Report which indicated the water company was in good shape. JT said that with the school unoccupied, it is a marginal business, but would be profitable with 500 more people. The school previously ran the water company as a capital budget out of their big budget, and the new buyer will want capital, so there might be some dickering over the business interests. JT said that Don Vann (of VWS) will approach the school and the Northfield Water District to try to work out a cooperative agreement where they could loan employees to each other, since the company is small.

JT thinks that they'll be able to get an extension from NMH since TPL found the water company (and he thinks that VWS is the right buyer). The problems are still the real estate: 1) possibly losing the \$2 million and 2) the survey. The school still hasn't gotten the survey done. JT is going to take over the survey process (probably), but the question of who pays (\$100,000 for the survey) still looms. The water company unlocks the ability to sell the land.

The charge given to the OSC is to keep the town on board with the project, to maximize the money, and get the right parcels. JT passed out some maps to get a feel for what the town might want to own. Possibilities: 1) town could hold a CR on the water company land around the reservoir, about 60 acres or 2) town could own the watershed, subject to a CR held by DCR, could harvest some timber, have hiking trails, but no ATVs, no snowmobiles, no big clearings. Jenny mentioned that the Conservation Commission is supposed to be in charge of managing land, but right now the Greater Northfield Watershed Association monitors the town-held CRs. There is a Stewardship Committee being formed. JT asked if owning land was viewed as a burden or an asset. There were mixed feelings; Jerry thought that people don't like to take land off of the tax rolls, but since this is already in Ch 61, there is already not much income, and the logging possibility could bring income. JT said that for 300 acres of timberland, logged every 5 years to manage for the health of the water, would bring in \$5,000- \$10,000 after paying a logger. Jerry asked what the responsibilities would be, since this part of the forest is watershed for the reservoir. JT said that in other states, there are some higher standards for watershed land, such as parking and re-fueling equipment offsite. Logging is important to maintain forest of different ages rather than old growth. There is some obligation to work with the water company to manage the forest for best water quality, but it is fairly minimal.

We went around the table with our gut-level reaction to the town holding a CR or owning land in fee. All agreed that a CR would be easier to manage for the town; Jerry wanted to be sure that the town could put hiking trails on it. Jenny mentioned that the town does already own land, but doesn't actively manage it. JT said that he thought he was hearing that we "absolutely must have the park land" but absolutely won't take the dump, and otherwise would check back about thoughts on ownership of other parts of the land.

The next meeting is May 19.

3. **Adjournment:** The meeting was adjourned at 9:15.