

Andrews Community Forest Committee
Minutes of Regular Meeting
March 10 2025 6:00pm to 8:00pm

Attendees:

In person: Melissa Wolaver (co-chair), Ian Stokes (co-chair), Brad Elliott, Chase Rosenberg, Jim Cochran, Sam Pratt

Remote: Julian Portilla, Nancy Zimmy

Minutes taker: Sam

Time keeper: Brad

[February 10th 2025 Minutes](#): approved - Chase motioned, Sam Seconded, all voted in favor

Brief RCC and RTC Reports as related to ACFC:

- **RCC**: UVM Climate Study in Richmond - looking for “task force” with members of various committees to help guide designing the class/what should the focus be in Richmond. Related files can be found here:
<https://www.richmondvt.gov/calendar/meeting/conservation-commission-12-10-24>. Sam will be the ACFC point of contact.
- **RTC**: Migrating to Trail Forks for trail statuses. Ideally AFC trails will be integrated to use this system as well, and be embedded on the town website. Example here:
<https://www.fotwheel.org/trails>

No public comments were made during the public comment period.

Report from those present at Select Board meeting February 18th:

Minutes from selectboard meeting:

“Rosenberg stated that the ACF Committee wanted to know if the Selectboard is interested in receiving a trails plan, that they would vote on which would then allow the Trails Committee to move forward or if the Selectboard would prefer to have an entire management plan submitted by ACF Committee for approval, where the trails plan would be included. Hill asked how such a plan would be presented to the Selectboard, because prior management plans included distinct parts of the whole which supported each other where the trails plan was included. Rosenberg replied that a trails plan would make an impact on other parts of the management plan, and the trails plan is contentious at this time. Miller suggested going from a general overview of a plan to the specifics of a plan. Presently the ACF committee is divided on how to get started by putting together an entire management plan. Rosenberg thinks the trails plan should be created first. Hill believes the ACF is an ecosystem, and all parts of a management plan are important, such as the wildlife stewardship plan, a preservation plan, forestry management plan, as well as the

trails plan, each part affects the other. Preston believes they are making progress on an entire management plan that would drive the trails plan, and he reiterated that they do have a current management plan. Elliott stated that any new trails cannot be approved unless the entire management plan is revised and approved; he added that the wildlife plan is only a concept. He feels that a new management plan should drive a trail concept plan. Wood said he understands why the Trails committee is frustrated because the trails plan still isn't completed after more than 6 years. Hill concurs and understands that a deadline might help move things along, balancing everyone's interests is important. Wood suggested revisiting this with the ACF committee to present a draft plan at the June 2 Selectboard. Pratt asked if all ACF committees should make their comments before the June 2 meeting. Wolaver cautioned that the management plan spans over 20 pages and will take time to go through."

The selectboard had a number of questions for ACFC asking for clarity so they could give proper guidance. The response from the selectboard was just vague enough that different members of ACFC interpreted the SB's response differently.

After some discussion, ACFC decided that clearer information should be presented to the selectboard when soliciting their feedback, and it may be helpful to vote on those items as well, so the selectboard can be better informed to make their recommendations.

It was also noted that at the last ACFC meeting before 6/2, the committee should vote to approve the current draft of the management plan to present to the selectboard.

Consideration of motion by Chase concerning the trails plan:

Motion: *"The ACF committee will propose to the select board a trail plan within the management plan, to build one multi-use trail to the top of the ridge connecting to Jericho trails, and to maintain and improve existing lower trails to ensure increased accessibility. All trail building and improvements will be done in accordance with the easement and most current best management practices."*

Chase motioned, Jim seconded.

Discussion:

Brad had concerns about naming a destination for a trail before putting parameters in place to guide trail use in the forest. Also concerned about not having guarantees from adjoining landowners about having trails and mountain bikes on their properties.

Jim suggested we consider having language in the MP that talks about trails, that they're not necessarily for forever, that they're reviewed and may change. A trail is never considered permanent. Trails would "melt away" into the forest if left alone for a season. Things can be modified if necessary.

Chase noted the trail specifies a destination but not a route. The choice made for the trail would be whatever is the least impactful to the landscape and wildlife. Chase imagines this instead of the forest roads. One durable trail instead of multiple forest roads listed as trails. This would leave most of the forest closed (aside from dispersed use) and focusing traffic where we want it. Chase spoke with David Sunshine, who is interested in writing up some sort of language for access from ACF, typically a ten year act of good faith.

Sam agreed with Brad that parameters need to be in place prior to trail building, and suggested trying to get those parameters in place in the management plan ahead of the June deadline for presenting the management plan to the selectboard. He also noted that in choosing a destination, there's a (potentially false) assumption that a responsible path to that destination exists, which would be confirmation bias. There's also the increased cost to put trails deeper within the forest on steeper slopes, which requires engineering site and E&S plans, and goes against the recommendations made by the zoning administrator. He also noted that the timing is not ideal considering the recent progress on the management plan.

Ian believed that the plan is premature and has concerns that the trail specified is multi-use, which could present issues with the selectboard.

Julian believed that to say this is premature undermines the work that the committee has been doing. The committee has expert information that can be used for guidance, and has had it for some time now. The committee can adapt to concerns based on the expert guidance (wildlife being more active in spring, etc). He noted that the committee cannot account for future adjoining landowners and can only work with the existing ones. Monitoring and trail closures will help with accountability and what's best for the forest. Trails might not disappear immediately, but if people are kept off the trails, the wildlife will come back. Ultimately the committee has plenty of information and is going to have to vote and stick by the decision.

Melissa had concerns with one multi-use trail and believed that presenting the trail to the selectboard would be dead on arrival. One bi-directional multi-use trail over steep terrain is likely to create liability issues that the town does not want to take on.

Brad agreed on liability. Noted the committee has the information and needs to integrate it into the plan. That way the committee isn't picking and choosing which information is looked to for guidance. Need to start with the general and work to the specific.

Sam agreed on the multi-use trail problem. Took issue with the argument that the committee continues to face the same problem every month, noting the progress that's been made on the management plan, and suggested deferring a few months and discussing once the management plan draft is complete.

Ian noted that the vote was a chance to break the "log jam". Also noted that the motion does not recognize the public input and the desire for accessibility. The complexity and difficulty of getting a trail up to the ridge would also be a challenge.

Chase thought that the committee would vote on the same issue down the road and that voting in favor of the trail would be an act of good faith. Believes that ultimately any negative impacts due to the trail would be minor. Asked if members think that the trail is viable down the road, to trust in the process and vote in favor of the trail now rather than waiting.

Julian mentioned that the multi-use trail in question doesn't preclude having a pedestrian only trail. He also noted he did not mean to imply the committee isn't making good progress, but rather that the committee has the information it needs to make the decision now. He disagreed about liability being a dealbreaker, considering many trails are on steeper grades. Agreed that the committee should be aware of liability though.

Melissa reiterated that the motion was for one, multi use trail. Disagreed and thought it will be an issue for SB because it is a single, multi-use trail with bidirectional traffic.

Jim was curious about people in the room who use the long trail, and whether or not that trail violates precious ecosystems. Believed that there's always going to be some impact, but that impact is outweighed by the sheer positivity of the experience. ACFC can offset that impact by being good stewards of the land.

Nancy brought perspective from out West and how communities there have been struggling with conservation vs recreation and especially around mountain biking due to its popularity. Places like Vermont should heed the warnings of their western neighbors and take a more careful approach. Mentioned that the mountain biking lifestyle can be oversold. Noting that trail development needs a guiding management that includes not just vague assurances of doing the right thing and depending on nature's resilience.

Discussion ended, and a vote was called:

Motion failed, with four voting against and three voting in favor,

Brad - no

Chase - yes

James - yes

Julian - yes

Sam - no

Stokes - no

Melissa - no

Revisions of Management Plan:

Continuation of consideration of comments added to MP draft:

- Made it to section 2.9 last time
- Moved on to section 2.10
- Issues with line 40: strike out as it's committee business and doesn't belong in the plan
- Circle back to lines 35-41 with Wright. Should we strike those out as conjecture?

- Is MWF actively using the forest now? Jim wondered if there are erosion concerns with cattle using trails
- 2.11 Font size is confusing, perhaps should be increased
- Circle back with Wright on: 2.11, 2.11.1, 2.11.4
- Section 3 - move credits to an appendix? Or remove outright

Identify priorities for review of other sections at future meetings:

Should designate most of the next meeting for management plan work, and focus on wildlife and recreation sections since they will be the most contentious and require the most work.

Reminder about Vacancies on ACFC: Consider an announcement by us on FPF:

Discussed posting open seats on Front Porch Forum. Sam agreed to post (and later published the post on 3/12).

Consideration of recruiting a professional Management Plan writer, via RFP:

Discussed briefly but ran out of time. 50-100 hours? \$100/hour? \$5-\$10k? Seems it would be beneficial to have an editor look at the plan after the committee is finished with its work in a few months. Topic needs to be discussed further in a future meeting.

Update about our input to Town plan (Sam, Brad):

Suggested we add mission and vision as its own section. Waiting to hear back from Virginia

RCC Chair informed us of FEMC Recreation and Forest Ecosystems Webinar

Wednesday, March 19, at noon about products developed by FEMC concerning risks recreational activity pose to forest ecosystems.

Brad agreed to email details out for those who would like to attend, which he emailed out after the meeting.

Topics for next meeting:

Committee seemed to agree not to make more comments on the management plan.

Any existing comments written in margins of the management plan must be written up as suggested text within the document so the committee can work on it efficiently. General comments make it challenging for the committee to do efficient work.

Closure

Confirmed future meetings: March 24th and April 28th at 6pm
Meeting was adjourned.