

Tim Puopolo, Chair  
Erik DeAvila, Vice Chair  
Stephanie Radner, Clerk  
Nathan Gauthier, Associate  
Leigh Hafrey, Associate  
Meredith LaBelle, Agent



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## TOWN OF DEDHAM

### CONSERVATION COMMISSION

#### Minutes of March 21, 2024

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic and given the current prohibitions on gatherings imposed by Governor Baker's March 23, 2020 "Order Assuring Continued Operation of Essential Services in the Commonwealth, Closing Workplaces, and Prohibiting Gatherings of More than 10 People," this public hearing was conducted virtually, as allowed by Governor Baker's March 12, 2020 "Order Suspending Certain Provisions of the Open Meeting Law," G.L. c. 30A, §20.

#### The following Commissioners were present:

Tim Puopolo, Chair  
Erik DeAvila, Vice Chair  
Stephanie Radner, Clerk  
Nathan Gauthier, Associate

#### The following Commissioners were absent:

Leigh Hafrey, Associate

#### The following Staff were present:

Meredith LaBelle, Conservation Agent

Commissioner Puopolo called the meeting to order at 7:03 pm in accordance with the Wetlands Protection Act, M.G.L. Chapter 131, Section 40, the Dedham Wetlands Bylaw, and the Dedham Stormwater Management Bylaw.

#### 1. Public Comment

Commissioner Puopolo opened the floor for general comments from members of the public. He received no responses.

#### 2. Minutes

**Commissioner DeAvila motioned to approve the minutes from March 7th as drafted.** Commissioner Radner seconded. Commissioner Puopolo led a roll call vote. All attending commissioners voted "aye." The motion carried 4-0.

#### 3. Open Space Sub-Committee Updates

Agent LaBelle shared details with the Commission from her discussion with Nancy Baker, Assistant Town Manager about the process for posting and filling positions on the newly designated Open Space Sub-Committee as well as reappointing existing Open Space Committee members. She stated that a subcommittee vacancy notice would be posted that lists all Open Space Sub-Committee positions,

including the two at-large members, two Conservation Commission designee positions, and the designees from other boards. She clarified that current Open Space members' seats would be posted as vacancies and that they would need to be reappointed by the board responsible for filling each seat, respectively. She stated that the Commission would be responsible for appointing two members at their discretion, as well as appointing the two at-large seats from a pool of any potential applicants for those seats. Agent LaBelle acknowledged that this process could be confusing to work through and stated that the existing members of Open Space would very likely be able to keep their positions after going through the reinstatement process.

Commissioner Puopolo asked Agent LaBelle to confirm if any Conservation Commission Resource Associate members would be qualified to be appointed as Conservation Commission designees to the Open Space Sub-Committee. Agent LaBelle confirmed that the Conservation Commission would be free to appoint Resource Associate members to Open Space.

Commissioner DeAvila then asked Commissioner Radner if Open Space would be required to have a professional engineer as a member. Commissioner Radner explained that, while this was required in the past, there is no longer any requirement that a member of the Open Space Sub-Committee be an engineer.

Agent LaBelle stated that, until the Open Space appointment and reappointment process was completed, Open Space would continue operating as it had in the past, with Commissioner DeAvila providing updates from each Open Space meeting in his capacity as the Conservation Commission representative on Open Space. She explained that, following the appointments, Open Space would formally begin operating as a Sub-Committee of the Conservation Commission.

Agent LaBelle then explained that, with regards to the selection of Conservation Commission Resource Associate members, the positions would have to be posted by Assistant Town Manager Nancy Baker as a vacancy and that the Commissioners would then be free to interview and select these members from amongst any applicants. She further explained that Resource Associate members would be non-voting members who could participate in Commission deliberations and serve as potential candidates for filling Conservation Commission appointee positions on other boards and committees.

Agent LaBelle explained that the two current Conservation Commission vacancies would be filled based on the Select Board's choice of the three candidates currently applying, and a third vacancy would be posted shortly.

Agent LaBelle then offered the Commissioners the opportunity to decide how many of the three Resource Associate member positions they would like to post. Commissioner Radner then stated that it would be preferable to have all three Resource Associate positions posted at once. Commissioner Radner then asked what the process for filling any remaining Resource Associate seats would work if they were not all filled following the initial vacancy posting.

Agent LaBelle stated that she believes that the Commissioners would be allowed to post any Resource Advisory vacancies in the future at their discretion.

Commissioner Puopolo then stated that he didn't see any downside to posting all three Resource Advisory positions simultaneously. Agent LaBelle concluded that she would inform Nancy Baker of the Commission's intent to post all three positions and that the commissioners would be free to choose less than three Resource Associate members once the posting is up.

#### **4. Vernal Pool Discussion**

Agent LaBelle began the discussion by providing updates on Conservation's social media vernal pool public outreach efforts. She stated that a post including photos and audio clips of amphibian species associated with vernal pools garnered significant engagement on Dedham's social media channels including Facebook and Instagram. Positive comments on the social media post included a user who described it as "nerdtastic", which Agent LaBelle characterized as an indication that this style of posting may be generating more public engagement than more procedural posts like meeting announcements. She explained that an informative vernal pool flyer created by Commissioner Puopolo would be posted on Dedham's social media feeds within the next week. She went on to explain that the Conservation webpage was being updated to include informational resources, which would include the materials created for the vernal pool outreach efforts.

Commissioner Radner then shared updates from her work on vernal pool certification efforts. Commissioner Radner has maintained a list of potential vernal pools in Dedham for several years, including potential vernal pools from a state aerial survey as well as those that she and members of the public have observed personally. She explained that a lack of public access to pools located partially or wholly on private property could complicate efforts by the Commission to get the public involved in certifying potential vernal pools. Commissioner Radner stated that she, Agent LaBelle, and Environmental Specialist Chris Reardon had discussed which pools would be good candidates for potential certification, which resulted in a list of roughly 10 sites. These sites include sites in the Town Forest, sites on town land at Stoney Lee, sites at Fowl Meadow, and sites adjacent to Wilson Mountain Reservation. She explained that the certification process would require documentation of obligate vernal pool species such as Wood Frogs and that only documentation recorded in the last 3 years would be accepted by NHESP as grounds for certification. Commissioner Radner stated that she would like to move ahead with the process of certifying potential vernal pools, starting with putting together documentation and collecting it in a spreadsheet that would be made available soon. She informed the Commission that NHESP guidelines encourage those seeking to certify vernal pools to send courtesy letters informing any property owners adjacent to a given vernal pool of their intent to apply for certification of the pool. She explained that homeowners could be opposed to the certification of a nearby vernal pool because, under Dedham's Wetland Bylaws and the MA Wetland Protection Act, there are additional restrictions on development in the vicinity of NHESP Certified Vernal Pools compared with the restrictions around potential vernal pools. With regard to properties on private property, Commissioner Radner stated that a request to landowners for access could be an effective option.

Agent LaBelle shared that she could reach out to other Conservation Agents to see if they had a standard procedure for notifying abutters to town land with certified vernal pools. She went on to share that she would like to check with the Town's legal counsel before sending out notifications to properties abutting these town-owned resource areas.

Commissioner Radner offered that local land trusts and the Mass Department of Conservation and Recreation would be ready and willing to assist with the certification process.

Commissioner DeAvila asked if there were any differences between the protections afforded to wetlands generally and vernal pool protections. Commissioner Puopolo answered that vernal pools are protected with an additional 25 feet of Undisturbed Buffer Area protection compared with the Undisturbed Buffer surrounding wetlands. He explained that the reasoning behind this greater level of protection includes the sensitivity of breeding amphibians to pollutants in the environment.

Commissioner DeAvila asked if any protections would be afforded to a constructed wetland or rain garden that functions as a vernal pool. Commissioner Puopolo answered that, given the presence of vernal pool obligate species, it would be possible for a rain garden or constructed wetland to become certified as a vernal pool. Commissioner Radner added that, given the unique habitat conditions found at vernal pools, it was unlikely that vernal pool obligate species would be found in the majority of constructed wetlands or rain gardens.

The Commissioners went on to share some of their own experiences with vernal pools in the area, including discussion of the benefits of healthy vernal pool habitats in terms of mosquito mitigation and overall ecosystem health.

Commissioner Puopolo shared with the Commission the vernal pool flyer he created and the Commissioners discussed the potential usefulness of iNaturalist engagement stemming from the Dedham Vernal Pools project link on the flyer.

Commissioner Puopolo proposed the idea of hosting Dedham “urban nature walks” sponsored by Dedham Conservation to provide an opportunity for the public to engage with local biodiversity.

Commissioner Radner proposed the idea of curating and distributing a list of confirmed vernal pools for community members to visit and learn more about vernal pool ecology.

## **5. BioBlitz Event Discussion**

Commissioner DeAvila stated that he would introduce the BioBlitz event to the Open Space Committee.

Agent LaBelle shared that it might be beneficial to wait to hold a formal BioBlitz event and instead plan a smaller-scale biodiversity focused event for Conservation Commission and Open Space Committee to attend. She outlined a plan to first hold an informal nature walk with Conservation and Open Space in spring 2024, followed by an official “Dedham Biodiversity Day” event that would be open to the public later in the spring or summer. She suggested that, based on her conversation with Commissioner Radner, a BioBlitz event could still be held, but that waiting until 2025 to hold the event would allow the Commission time to fully plan this event, recruit scientists to assist, and ensure that the proper town facilities were available.

Agent LaBelle then shared the results of a survey sent to the Commissioners for the purpose of choosing a location and time for a Conservation and Open Space meetup. The survey had three responses, and it was found that Wilson Mountain and Dedham Town Forest were both good potential locations and that Saturday mornings may be a good time to meet. Agent LaBelle stated that a next step would be to send the survey to Open Space Committee members and use the results to coordinate a time and place that would work for an initial meetup. Commissioner Radner proposed the street in the Manor neighborhood along the edge of Fowl Meadow as a good location to observe Dedham biodiversity. Commissioner Radner stated that participating in a broader iNaturalist challenge such as the Boston City Nature project could be another option for engaging with the public.

Agent LaBelle said that one question to address for the initial meetup event would be whether to invite members of the public to join. She went on to propose that another question to address is what activities could be part of a potential event, as well as whether it would be beneficial to have giveaway items at a future event.

The Commissioners discussed ideas for different resources to provide at a public event. Commissioner Radner stated that an initial event could be held with only the Commissioners and Open Space members present without having to do a large amount of planning and coordination.

Commissioner Puopolo shared his view that the event series could adapt over time based on feedback on the experiences of participants.

Agent LaBelle stated that it could be useful to have this topic as an agenda item for the next Commission meeting to continue working on event planning. She said that she would send a revised survey to the

members of Open Space and that the details could be worth discussing at the following Commission meeting.

## **6. Agent's Report**

To begin her report, Agent LaBelle asked for the input of the Commissioners about a proposed invasive Smartweed mitigation effort as part of an ongoing project being carried out by MassDOT on Rustcraft Road. Agent LaBelle shared the background that the applicants are seeking a Certificate of Compliance for the project, but that invasive Smartweed found at the site was likely introduced during construction. She stated that the Commission was requiring that the applicants mitigate this invasive species before a COC could be issued. The proposed mitigation outlines an herbicide treatment at the site. Agent LaBelle stated that she would tell the applicant they are free to begin the mitigation work once the Commissioners had stated their support for the work.

Commissioner DeAvila shared that he would like to see work over two years to ensure effective mitigation, as well as a requirement that the work eliminates an acceptable percentage of the infestation rather than a requirement for complete removal from the site. Commissioner Puopolo concurred with both suggestions. Commissioner Radner stated she agrees with the other Commissioners and suggested that this project could extend over multiple years. Commissioner Radner also outlined that she did not have chance to review the proposal ahead of the meeting, and would let Agent LaBelle know if she had additional comments about the proposed work. Agent LaBelle stated that she would also inform the relevant municipal agencies who would be responsible for future maintenance of the invasive species issues at the site of the details discussed by the Commission.

Commissioner DeAvila thanked Agent LaBelle and Commissioner Puopolo for their presentation at the Town Summit.

The meeting was adjourned at 8:35 p.m.