

SUNCOOK VALLEY TRAILS MEETING

Epsom Central School

June 18, 2019 | 6:00 PM | 282 Black Hall Road

Meeting Summary

In attendance: **Tom Jameson**, Chichester Parks and Recreation Commission (walk, hike, x-country ski, snowmobile, mountain bike); **Zachary Boygian**, Chichester Parks and Recreation Commission (multi-use); **David Baril Jr**, Pembroke Conservation Commission (multi-use); **Ammy Heiser**, Pembroke Conservation Commission (conservation, hike, bike, rail); **Avis Rosenfeld**, Deerfield resident, NH Horse Council (NHHC) (multi-use); **Debbie Briscoe**, Brentwood resident, NH Horse Council (NHHC) (horse, hike); **Kevin Gagne**, Chichester, NH Trail Dawgs; **Bruce Blye**, Epsom, Fort Mountain Trailwinders (multi-use); **Louis Houle**, Pittsfield Community Development Committee (multi-use); **Ralph Odell**, Pittsfield Master Plan Committee (multi-use); **Tracy Gagnon**, Epsom resident (multi-use); **David Allen**, Barnstead Parks and Recreation Commission; **Glenn Horner**, Epsom Economic Development Committee and Trails Subcommittee. CNHRPC Staff **Craig Tufts** and **Stephanie Alexander**.

6:00 Epsom Rail Trail Walk- Epsom Central School to Odd Fellows Building

Led by Craig (CNHRPC), the walk was attended by Tom (Chichester), Bruce (Epsom), Ammy (Pembroke), David B (Pembroke), Louis (Pittsfield), and Debbie (NHHC). The group walked from the School to the Odd Fellows Building on the Town-owned rail trail, discussing the Town's rail trail, improvement options, the Suncook Valley Trails Plan, and implementation ideas. They noticed other people out enjoying the trail as well during the walk. The Town of Epsom owns the old Short Falls Depot Station on the railroad bed next to the Odd Fellows building. It was discussed that if the Fort Mountain Trailwinders or NH Trail Dawgs were to partner with the Town of Epsom for trail infrastructure improvements, the Depot could be rehabilitated to its historic condition and snowmobile and trail grooming equipment could be stored within. Publicizing the existence of the trail is important to ensure future support. The group returned to the School for commencement of the Reconvening Session.

7:00 Meeting- Welcome and Introduction

Craig led introductions and asked everyone to briefly introduce themselves. Multiple interests were represented around the table. Louis noted this Suncook Valley trails effort was the fifth time a group has attempted to develop a rail trail along the former Suncook Valley Railroad (SVR). Tracy (Epsom) heard an NPR story last week about rail trails in New Hampshire and saw the meeting flyer at the Epsom Public Library. David A (Barnstead) noted their Town is attempting to reconstruct the history of the SVR and wants to see a Suncook Valley Rail Trail continue through the CNHRPC region into Barnstead. After the Visioning Session in January, CNHRPC staff

organized and attended at least one meeting in every Town, listening to what we heard and adding the trail priorities to the maps.

Overview of the Suncook Valley Trails Plan Project

Craig recapped an overview of the project, stating the purpose of the draft Suncook Valley Trails Plan (SVT Plan) is to take a regional approach to trails planning. The interest of communities was gauged during the Town Trails Meetings and the feasibility of projects to establish a regional Suncook Valley Rail Trail was discussed. In other parts of the State, teams of people have partnered to develop rail trails. This area had not yet been approached, and CNHRPC thought it was a great idea to ask the lower Suncook Towns if they wanted a rail trail. A vision was developed for local trail systems, both along the former railbed and connecting to and around them in the communities. Overlapping interests of economic development, snowmobile trails, recreation, transportation, and historical preservation are beneficial to rail trail projects. The meetings have brought people from other Towns and trail user groups together, networking with one another. This project aims to foster inter-town and inter-organizational collaboration of ideas and resources. All of the potential projects identified set the stage for implementation of the easiest, lowest cost, and quickest trail projects within each community. With one successful trails project completed and publicized, it will be easier to obtain partnerships on additional trails projects, enabling more connections.

Local Trails Priority Areas of Interest and Potential Trails Projects

- ▶▶ Draft Suncook Valley Trails Plan 2019
- ▶▶ Trails Area of Interest Maps for Each Town

The draft SVT Plan released today includes the introduction, background, study area description and map, and a list of the nine public input events held to date. A brief history of the SVR is provided in the form of a timeline, as well as short histories and photographs of the five lower Suncook. The majority is what the community trail activities and priorities. For implementation of trails projects, requested resources were placed into the plan, such as Class A trails information, example trails user agreements, and maps.

Craig summarized the town by town findings from the local trails meetings and noted maps were developed for each of the five lower Suncook communities with the locations of trails priorities as identified by public input.

In **PEMBROKE**, biking, walking & snowmobile are common themes, and the Town wants to continue landowner conversations. Pembroke projects included (by priority):

- ✦ **#1. Develop Pembroke Rail Trail from Memorial Field to White Sands Recreation Area.**
- ✦ **#2. Extend Pembroke Rail Trail to Concord town line.**

- ✦ #3. Construct bridge from Pembroke Rail Trail over Suncook River and canals, connecting to Allenstown (shared with Allenstown as a priority).
- ✦ #4. Construct a bridge from Pembroke Rail Trail over Soucook River to Concord (currently working on by City of Concord from the Garvins Falls old abutments).
- ✦ #5. Manage Class VI Range Roads, and consider Class A trails designation (historic roads are in rough condition, preservation is important).
- ✦ #6. Develop local hiking trails on new Town conservation property (close to where people live, accessible trails).

In ALLENSTOWN, Bear Brook State Park has miles of trails available, but the Town recognizes the benefits of having unique rail trail options in Suncook Village. Allenstown projects included (by priority):

- ✦ #1. Develop China Mill Rail Trail in Suncook Village to extend to completed Hooksett Rail Trail.
- ✦ #2. Construct bridge over Suncook River to Pembroke, or reconnect to Pembroke via streets (shared with Pembroke as a priority).
- ✦ #3. Connect Bear Brook State Park into Epsom and using the old rail trail area or Black Hall Road.
- ✦ #4. Connect Bear Brook State Park to Suncook Village via River Road or other connection (on street connections possible for bicycles & pedestrians at this time).

In EPSOM, a guided walk was held along the Epsom Rail Trail walk prior to the meeting. This trail is a wonderful Town resource to enhance. The local snowmobile clubs have done a lot of work in this area. The old Short Falls Rail Depot building, also Town-owned, could be a historical draw as well as a place to store trail grooming equipment. Epsom projects included (by priority):

- ✦ #1. Promote and enhance the Town owned railroad bed and add a safe crossing of the Suncook River washout area and US 4/202. (Include a designated parking area, drainage, etc.)
- ✦ #2. Pursue a rail trail connection from Goboro Road onto the old Pittsfield railbed, which could be usable as a trail if private property easements are obtained (also identified as a priority by Chichester and Pittsfield).
- ✦ #3. Develop a trail system in the area between the Tarleton Town Forest trails and the Epsom Rail Trail.
- ✦ #4. Determine a trails route around Goboro Road and seek easements for connection to the rail trail.
- ✦ #5. Consider expanding Tarleton Town Forest Trails to the Bear Brook State Park trails.

In **CHICHESTER**, a common tri-Town goal was identified in the vicinity of Depot Road/Goboro Road. The entire Main Street area holds the potential for an interconnected trail system. Chichester projects included (by priority):

- ✦ **#1. Establish a Main Street Corridor Community trail system, which includes rebuilding the trails at Marsh Pond, constructing new trails at Carpenter Park, connecting the School and Library, and connecting to the Depot Street/Goboro Road rail trail (also identified as a priority by Epsom and Pittsfield).**
- ✦ **#2. Develop a trails link from Class VI Pound Road to Lynxfield Pond.**
- ✦ **#3. Develop trails in the Spaulding Town Forest and provide a scenic outlook.**
- ✦ **#4. Construct a Carpenter Memorial Park trail connection to Town property on Hilliard Road.**

In **PITTSFIELD**, the Town owns a section of the former railbed, but it not publicly accessible at the Wastewater Treatment Facility. Pittsfield projects included (by priority):

- ✦ **#1. Establish the Pittsfield Rail Trail from the Wastewater Treatment Plant southward, working with property owners for trails use easements. (also identified as a priority by Chichester and Epsom).**
- ✦ **#2. Connect the downtown railbed with Pittsfield Schools and the Tilton Hill Recreational Area**
- ✦ **#3. Develop downtown Pittsfield Community Trail connections.**
- ✦ **#4. Pursue easements for the rail trail from Tilton Hill Road into Barnstead**
- ✦ **#5. Connect conservation lands through a trail system to the BearPaw Regional Greenway conservation lands.**

Craig finished the presentation by noting several shared priority projects. He said upon meeting with the Suncook towns, CNHRPC was pleasantly surprised to learn there was both interest and potential feasibility to reconnect much of the old SVR bed as a multi-use trail system. An important long term strategy will be to secure long term easements, coordination with snowmobile clubs and ensuring multi-user group communication. He suggested constructing and publicizing an easy, low cost project for your community so the public can see success is possible. CNHRPC can help organize local trails groups, provide assistance, facilitate discussions, etc, but project leadership and administration must be a local, grassroots effort.

The floor was opened to comments and discussion.

A few copies of the SVT Plan were made available, one to each of the five lower Suncook communities. Stephanie (CNHRPC) noted CNHRPC will ensure the SVT Plan and Maps are posted on the website by the end of the week so anyone can download and/or print.

Debbie (NHHC) asked if the SVT Plan was still in draft form and if so, is there a period of input? Craig replied the Plan remains in draft form at this time and encouraged comments to inform us if we have not translated the Town trails meetings information correctly, and that all comments are welcome. Stephanie added the next steps for the draft SVT Plan are for CNHRPC's Transportation Advisory Committee (TAC) to review and approve it perhaps in early fall, then CNHRPC's Full Commission will consider the Plan's adoption as early as late fall, if no comments are received. The draft will move through its next stages at each of these Boards.

Kevin (Chichester) stated Bear Brook State Park is updating its Master Plan, which is timely since some of the trail infrastructure needs work and will be looking for grants. He said the NH Trail Dawgs informed BBSP representatives about this Suncook Valley Plan project and has a goal of reopening the old NH 28(?) railroad bridge. Avis (NHHC) confirmed BBPS says they are aware of this project and will request Chris Gamache to review the SVT Plan once it is online. She asked if parking locations had been identified in the Plan? Craig replied this SVT Plan is not intended to cover that level of detail. The local Trails Committees should meet and address these item once they decide to pursue a trails project. Avis said Chris Gamache of NH Bureau of Trails (NH BOT) is reviewing work that needs to be done on the Rockingham Trail. Craig clarified the State of New Hampshire owns that rail bed being reviewed by NHBOT, while the SVT Plan's projects consider trails on municipal or privately owned land ,except for discussions about connecting to Bear Brook State Park. The Suncook Valley Rail Trail would not be under NH BOT's jurisdiction except for where it crosses Bear Brook State Park. Craig reiterated the SVT Plan is a high level planning document and private landowners will need to voluntarily become partners for most projects to be successful.

Next Steps – Implementation

▶▶ Local Trails Committees and CNHRPC

The group's discussion quickly advanced into next steps and implementation.

David A asked how Barnstead could get involved with the SVT Plan and trails projects? He understood his town is in a different planning region. Stephanie suggested contacting Susan Slack of the Lakes Region Planning Commission (LRPC), who has been kept in the loop on this project, to express interest so the Town can more easily participate in multi-jurisdictional efforts led by CNHRPC. Should CNHRPC develop another Suncook Valley planning document, we might be able to partner with the LRPC to ensure Barnstead is specifically included as the sixth Suncook community. Bust most importantly, she suggested neighboring Towns invite one another to each other's Trails Committee meetings to pool resources and better ensure successful trails connection projects.

Tom said in applying for the NH Department of Transportation (NH DOT)'s 2020 Transportation Alternatives Program (TAP) grants (80% state/20% municipal), a regional rail trails project sponsored by several communities would stand a chance of being funded. He suggested now is a very good time to start thinking about what projects to apply for. Craig added the TAP grants are very competitive, and Trails Committees, trails groups, and Towns would need to be well organized. The first objective would be to lay the groundwork for a TAP grant. Stephanie suggested Tom send her NHDOT hyperlinks to add to the SVT Plan webpage.

Tom stated that with Chichester's Master Plan update, which is just beginning, trails will comprise an important component. Ammy (Pembroke) said Pembroke's Master Plan update, soon to be completed, rejuvenated interest in the Pembroke Rail Trail project. The rail trail is a high priority for the Town and is included in several chapters.

Debbie asked how many towns have a Trails Committee? Glenn (Epsom) said because the Epsom Economic Development Committee is interested in trails, a Trails Subcommittee was established with just a few members. None of the communities have an official Trails Committee. Chichester may establish a Trails Committee, but its membership would be the same as the Parks and Recreation Commission and/or Conservation Commission.

Debbie asked if Towns have considered a budget for trails? She said the Brentwood Trails Committee was organized under the Recreation Commission which had ability for a dedicated budget line item for trails. Craig said the Suncook communities will each decide how to proceed on trails projects. There are benefits of both municipal and non-profit organization when applying for and receiving grants, collecting donations, holding fundraisers, and working on projects. Both types should be involved, and assist each other, with trails projects for the best possible outcome.

Craig described, as an example, if the Allenstown/Pembroke Rail Trail connections and bridges were constructed, a key section of the existing Granite State Rail trail would be completed. Currently a large gap exists from Concord to the Manchester Airport. With a focus on Suncook Valley Trails, a group effort could obtain more grant funding because of its location and enable the rail trail as a local, regional and state economic development resource. The Towns will choose their priorities for a grassroots effort. A successful trails project requires local people to do the work.

Tracy (Epsom) asked how long would the constructed Suncook Valley Rail Trail be in total? Stephanie replied the old railbed covers 25-26 miles into Center Barnstead. Tracy asked if there would be any ADA (Americans with Disabilities Act) considerations? Craig replied yes, compacted stone dust can be used, and one of the primary intents of a rail trail is that it is more accessible than typical hiking or mountain bike trails or Class VI roads.

For publicity and outreach, Tracy suggested seeking out local wellness groups to help sponsor trail sections and to be members of Trails Committees. Ammy said Pembroke uses any affiliated Facebook pages and other social media outlets as important places to post notices and solicit volunteers. Social media use could encourage

people to attend meetings and could be used to find volunteers to establish a local or regional Trails Committee. Tracy said her runners group has meet ups on Saturday mornings, and people start to get attached to the locations where they run. She suggested something similar, asking for trails user groups to sponsor activities, on the rail trail segments to drum up support. People like to geocache, think about how to get people to your meetings or people to the trails to heighten their usage. Craig added community-based networking is key. An email blast can also work. Existing Town trails should be publicized to increase their use.

David B (Pembroke) said that because NH 28 in Allenstown to BBSP is on top of the rail trail, any possibility of placing a trail next to the highway instead of on the side of the highway, could alleviate anxiety associated with side by side riding along with vehicles. Trail users would be safer from traffic and more people would be willing to use the trail.

Tracy said designated parking areas would be necessary for protection of vehicles, adding the lack of secure facilities to park also deters people from using trails. Craig said if trail sections are constructed, other amenities would include trailheads, maps, parking lots, kiosks, and websites. Property owners may be agreeable with friends and neighbors informally using the trails on their land, but obtaining permission from landowners for certain trails uses would be necessary prior to trail usage or construction.

Zach (Chichester) noted New Hampshire has good state organizational capability to support snowmobile clubs, but does not have enough support for other types of user groups for some of these trails projects. The Bureau of Trails does not construct as many facilities for a range of users. There was discussion about the lack of State financial resources available for hikers and bikers to construct and maintain trails, unlike registration fees collected for recreational vehicles. The Grant in Aid program is available from the registration of snowmobiles, OHRVs, boats, but none for hikers, bikers, equestrians, kayakers, and others. Tom indicated the registration issue was discussed in the Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan (SCORP), concluding it would be unfair to underserved or low income people to charge a fee to walk in the woods or ride a rail trail. The SVT Plan is intended as a resource offering information, structure, support, and networking opportunities to begin consideration of these locally identified priority rail trail projects.

David B asked how have other municipalities developed trails? Craig said it starts like this, as we are doing tonight. Find people and talk to them, get them involved, network and share resources. CNHRPC will be here to help. The trails groups must be ready and organized to take advantage of potential grant opportunities. Bruce (Epsom) encouraged people to join their local snowmobile clubs; some members do not have snowmachines but have an interest in doing the projects. This is a great way to start meeting landowners and other people who already work on trails. Being part of a group provides constant connections. The snowmobile club projects are completed during the other three seasons, along with customer relations, rerouting trails, trail trimming, and grant work. Join as many clubs as possible for more opportunities. Kevin added their club received \$10,000 in grant funding this year, some of which is allocated for road repairs caused by damages from recreational vehicles other than snowmobiles. Sharing responsibility is the way to develop a trail system.

The group discussed the importance of four season multi-use trails within the Suncook communities, with hiking and snowmobiling work well together.

Craig said the Trails Committees or trails groups have to organize themselves to determine whether the nonprofit or municipal format works better and recommended moving forward in concert with snowmobile clubs. Permanent easements for trails usage should be sought to prevent annual renegotiations which could result in trails closure should one landowner change their mind. Municipal trails groups can learn from the snowmobile clubs. The Friends of the Concord to Lake Sunapee Rail Trail has had dozens of easements donated. Trails Committees should seek easy opportunities to establish easements on Town owned lands. For instance, on one Concord to Lake Sunapee Rail Trail easement obtained in Warner, the Town sold its land along the rail bed, but placed a permanent trails easement on the land prior to the sale which follows the property in perpetuity. Long-term time and effort are required to own or monitor easements and maintain trails and landowner agreements.

Stephanie suggested each community consider inviting their neighbors and the snowmobile clubs, other user groups. She asked the attendees to also consider assembling a five-community Suncook Valley Trails Committee. The group thought it would be a great ideas to meet annually in June and asked the CNHRPC to organize and facilitate. The purpose will be to reengage the entire group and share successes, and to hold another rail trail walk prior to the meeting. **The next Suncook Valley Trails all-groups meeting will be in June 2020, date location to be determined.**

The group discussed **developing a Suncook Valley Trails Facebook page where everyone could post information and successes, facilitated by CNHRPC.** Further details such as setting administrators from each Town and trails group will need to be determined.

Stephanie will send the group a wrap-up email and a reminder of the project materials - the draft Plan, Maps and meeting minutes - posted online.

The meeting adjourned at 8:40 PM.

Meeting Summary by Stephanie Alexander, CNHRPC | 603.226.6020 | salexander@cnhrpc.org