

Musconetcong River Management Council

Minutes of a Member Meeting, February 20, 2024

Attendees: Nancy Lawler
Bill Leavens
Charlie Finneran
Albert Crouse
Steve Rattner
Pam Bailey
William McQuaide
Dwight Pederson
Peter Dlugos
Robert Delpizzo
Robbie-Lynn Mwangi
Paul Tarlowe
Casey Ezyske
Sharon Petzinger
Steven Gransky
Paul Kenney
Tom Dallessio
Bill Millette
Paul Muir
Christa Reeves

The meeting was brought to order by Chairman Finneran at 7:02 P.M. A quorum was achieved. There were no visitors. Notice of this meeting was published in the Star Ledger and the Express Times in accordance with the NJ Open Public Meeting Act. This was a hybrid meeting with participants at the MWA headquarters in Asbury and on Zoom.

The minutes of the December 2023 were approved with grammatical corrections. Bob Delpizzo moved to approve the minutes and Nancy Lawler gave second. The minutes were approved with five abstentions.

Alan announced that this was his last meeting as River Administrator. Charlie congratulated Alan for the effort he put into the Council. His work in reaching out to Congress has been a very significant contribution to us. His departure is a loss for us but a wonderful addition to the National Park Service. Alan said that Council participation has been one of his favorite parts of working on the river.

Charlie then asked who the new River Administrator will be. Tom Dallessio announced that MWA is now advertising for a Policy Manager who will be undertaking that role. Tom will be Interim Administrator until that person has been added. The Council

appoints that Administrator. Bill Leavens made a motion to appoint Mr. Dallessio, Nancy Lawler gave second. There was unanimous approval.

2024 Spring events. Steven Gransky discussed the pending activities. The Mill dinner will be Thursday, February 29 at Hawk Pointe. The river cleanup will be on April 13. Run for the River in Asbury is Sunday, May 5. The MWA Native Plant Sale will be may 11. The MWA annual meeting is Thursday, June 6. Charlie noted that the Delaware River Sojourn will be for a one week period in June. There is a good opportunity for groups to engage in this activity and the Council to showcase what we do and what we stand for. Alan will put Charlie in touch with the Sojourn Steering Committee. There are about 100 people per day who engage in the Sojourn activities.

The next agenda item was a revision of the Bylaws. Alan has spoken with Chief Mann to see if the Ramapough Culture and Land Foundation would be willing to join as a member. This requires a vote. Steve Rattner made the motion, Nancy gave second. There was a unanimous roll call approval of the measure.

The Musconetcong Vision Plan was then introduced by Mr. Dallessio. This would be for the entire watershed, not just the Wild and Scenic portions. This is the first effort to establish a mission and goals. The plan started in October 2023 with Flow workshops to advance the 319 (h) timeline. A draft Plan will be circulated in March. We are looking for approval in June. Please join the announced meetings.

Why undertake a Vision Plan? People are concerned about preserving the rural quality of the area. How can issues be resolved holistically? The first part of the plan has been identified in the MWA Vision Plan. Consider the goals that are presented and please comment on the Vision Statement that will be posted on the MWA website. From goals, we can develop strategies and tactics to preserve the river and the land that surrounds it. Where are the most critical areas? A good plan will reduce conflict as to the use of land.

How can we be engaged? MWA staff member, Stephanie McMoran, is leading the effort, working with Mr. Dallessio. On March 25 from noon to 3:00, mayors in the watershed will be invited to review and comment on the Plan at the RRC. The Highlands Council and the State Planning Commission will be also be invited to review and comment. MRMC Members should be prepared to discuss the Plan with their County and municipal leaders and invite them to become engaged in the process.

Watershed Implementation Plan update: Christa Reeves noted that we are in draft for the Plan. The Flow workshops have provided public comment. The Technical Advisory Committees have been meeting to evaluate the river from Hampton to Bloomsbury. The Plan has nine elements that identify pollution and develop techniques and procedures to the implement means to correct those identified impaired conditions. This work will lead to a plan for the entire watershed after completion of the plan for the lower river segment.

Asbury Village Vibrant Places: In January, Tom Dallessio brought Rutgers University researchers to Asbury who spoke with an engaged audience of about 60 people at the Asbury Presbyterian Church. Major concern was expressed about speeding in the village but there was a positive response to the rest of the presentation. Franklin Township officials were present and look to be further engaged. Warren County has recently become engaged in town planning and this may positively influence that effort.

Beatty's Mill floodplain restoration: Tom reported that Anni Polkowski from MWA has been leading that effort. MWA has been working with NFWF to remove two dams on Mine Brook in Mount Olive. These dams are tall, high-hazard dams that were owned by Hackettstown MUA as public reservoirs. They don't have the volume of Warren Glen, but they will be challenging. The new landowner has been working with MWA and The Nature Conservancy. Over 2 million dollars has been spent for preliminary study. Our intent is to remove these in the next two years. We will be applying for additional support – we need non-Federal match to pursue this.

Alan asked Casey Ezyske if the Highlands Council could provide funding. That is possible. They cannot pay for boots on the ground, but they can provide funds for planning and subsequent monitoring. MWA is hiring a new watershed management staff member who will be advancing these projects. Bob Delpizzo will reach out to his municipal officials.

Hampton Haberman Alan discussed the affordable housing site. Currently MWA won in court on the issue of the flood hazard applicability issues. The court ruled in favor of MWA and NJDEP has opted for a new public notice to redo the Flood Hazard Area Applicability Determination. With over 200 public comments and two expert engineering reports, Princeton Hydro for MWA and Ripple Waters Engineering for Friends of the Musconetcong, NJDEP found it is likely the drainage area is over 50 acres and the water feature's regulated status cannot be confirmed without a Flood Hazard Area Verification. Thus, the property owner will need drainage area to be resurveyed to evaluate whether or not the site is appropriate for the proposed development. This will likely not be appealed as it would add delay for the property owner. DEP has not indicated if the pending Water Quality Management Plan will be delayed until the Flood Hazard Area Verification is completed.

Charlie asked if this was going in the right direction? Yes, because it will require a more thorough inventory of the water features on the subject property. All public comments will have to be re-submitted on the project. It is in the Council's interest to resubmit all of our previous comments. Field assessment would be effective to examine surface/ground water connections.

Charlie also asked if access to the site would be permitted for evaluation by private parties. No, it is private property. Pam Bailey noted that because it borders on a County road, it can be seen from that road. The waterway on the property shows up well with all of the snow on the ground right now. Charlie asked if anyone has done any assessment to verify what the owner has presented. If there is a groundwater

sewer connection on the identified karst substrate, there are potential problems. There is surface water that drains directly into the river and there is evidence of erosion. However, the owner does not want further assessment.

Charlie noted that NJDEP has purchased property downstream of the site. Do they have an interest in protecting their own property? Public notice has been provided to NJDEP, but because of internal mail protocols, the notice may not be going to the DEP land manager so they may not have an opportunity to provide comment. Hunterdon County has identified the property for acquisition for open space acquisition. However, Hampton would have to designate another parcel for affordable housing. The state cannot take away the only property that might qualify for affordable housing. Hampton would have to identify a site and amend their master plan. Originally, the site selected was on the southern side of Valley Road, but that is now in Highlands Preservation.

Charlie asked if the Highlands Preservation zone may not have been based on a scientific evaluation. A few steps would have to happen. The Highlands would have to identify an alternative site using their criteria for evaluation. Hampton previously withdrew their application for conformance to the Highlands Regional Master Plan due to a successful lawsuit by the property developer. Conformance does have its benefits.

Nancy Lawler asked if there has been any update on the Bloomsbury dam removal. It will be going out for bid this year for deconstruction next year.

The River Administrator then gave his report. The river counselor orientation report was completed. There was favorable response from the participants. This should be specified in every future year.

The Watershed-wide Interpretive Plan: This is now on the MRMC webpage on the MWA site for Council Member review. It has been completed and printed. It does not assess recreational access. Alan showed a very graphic-rich online brochure. There is a link to water quality data and a map of river access points.. Kindly share this with your town and beyond.

Musconetcong Educational Trail: The graphics for the trail signs are being completed for installation this Spring. The trail will not be completed on the Hunterdon side of the river due to objections from the state about public access through a Wildlife Management Area. There are translations on the signs to the Munsee language with a QR code access to a site that gives pronunciation of the language. Cairns will be encouraged for future identification of the trail as these had been used by native Americans.

Asbury Mill Exhibit Planning: Interpretive planning was discussed at a meeting recently. A number of stakeholders were led in discussion by Hunter Research. The intent is to provide a showcase for the nature and culture of the larger community. Charlie reported that the planning concept was interesting and will play an important role in the future of the Mill. Paul Kenney was impressed with the planning elements that were presented.

Paul Kenney then gave the NPS report. There is no budget from Washington yet this year. If there is no agreement by mid-March, there may be a small cut in funding. MWA has led the effort to increase funding and he is not so concerned about funding for the Musconetcong. He wants to develop a checklist for construction on Wild and Scenic rivers.

Alan noted that MWA has provided information for anti-degradation standards that would help to regulate surface water discharges to the river. New discharges would only be allowed if there would be no new degradation.

On the Asbury Mill, Mr. Kenney noted that the idea of a stairway/platform escalator would work to provide internal access to the second floor without requiring construction of the elevator tower. Further he looks forward to working with Alan in his new role.

Committee reports: The Recreation Committee will be adding the River Sojourn to their calendar.

Peter Dlugos mentioned that the Byram Environmental Commission, with the support of the MWA staff, is looking forward to learning more about the contamination (e coli?) hotspot in the upper watershed, and is trying to address the planning and goal-setting that he learned about this in the Flow Together Phase II meeting.

Pam Bailey has been giving out the NPS brochures and folks love them.

Tom Dallessio reported that NJDEP has identified a contractor to finish an engineering survey on the Musconetcong Gorge dam. MWA will present NJDEP Commissioner with a check to help fund that work on February 29 at 11:00 at the RRC.

Nancy reported that Corey Tierney is pursuing a Certified Wildlife Habitat for Warren County. She suggested that he be invited to present to the Council on the program. Al Krouse will reach out to Corey to coordinate a presentation on his effort.

There being no further business to discuss, the meeting was adjourned at 8:58 with multiple motions and seconds.

Respectfully submitted,

Bill Leavens

