

CONSERVATION COMMISSION 2014 Annual Report

Composed of up to nine members, the commission has responsibilities regarding the natural resources of the municipality, and lands within the municipality which have historic, educational, cultural, scientific, architectural, or archaeological values in which the public has an interest. It may make recommendations regarding acquisition of land and receive appropriations, gifts (to include land or other property), and grants for the purposes of carrying out its responsibilities. It may assist other elements of town and regional government on matters affecting the local environment or the natural resources of the municipality. It may also prepare and distribute relevant information, and encourage through educational activities the public understanding of local natural resources and conservation needs.

Regarding administration of municipal lands, properties and other rights, the commission is charged with management of 793 acres of public land located adjacent to Scrag Mountain (Scrag Town Forest), alongside the Mad River (Wu Ledges Town Forest) and alongside Brook Road (Woliner parcel), plus easement monitoring on 10 acres behind the Valley Professional Center (Dowdell/Baked Beads).

Events have taken place regarding the Wu Ledges town forest. Based on a December, 2013 public forum and a written survey, the public stated its values for this land. Trails, natural beauty, and views were of prime importance, with much support for continuing to allow trail walking and other pedestrian activities, and lesser but still strong support for mountain biking and dog walking. Much concern was voiced for the need to improve public access. Based on these findings and other research already done, Kristen Sharpless of Sharpless Ecologic prepared a draft management plan. In June, a second public meeting was held, final revisions were made and the plan is on its way to the Selectboard for approval.

Sadly, in the early summer, part of the Wu Ledges rock overlook was defaced. The commission continues to seek methods to remove the paint involved and is offering a small reward for leads identifying the vandals.

As part of the Wu Ledges Forest, the Austin parcel (adjacent to the Lareau swim hole) presents a management problem. It is populated with non-native invasive species, such as knotweed and buckthorn. Thanks to

Friends of Mad River and the US Fish & Wildlife Service, analysis was done and a report has been prepared, but how to proceed, together with associated funding, remains an issue.

On Scrag, a trail design report for an expanded hiking trail system on the upper, west-facing portion of the Forest has been prepared by Sinuosity, a trail design and construction firm. The Conservation Commission is hosting a public meeting in January 2015 to present the report and to gain review and input. The commission will then consider further steps to enhance the hiking experience on Scrag.

The planned Scrag timber sale is in the contract process. Designed to harvest mature timber, improve wildlife habitat, and realize other objectives, this project is being coordinated with the Sinuosity plan so to enable achievement of the desired goals of both the harvest and the trail expansion proposal.

Very particular thanks to the EnTrust Foundation for its interest in planning for and encouraging public use of the Scrag and Wu Ledges properties; to Kristen Sharpless for her fine work on the Wu Ledges plan; to the Friends of Mad River; and to the Valley Reporter for providing publicity for our community endeavors.

And thanks to Peter Boynton for his very fine service on the commission. Appreciation of natural resource conservation is an integral part of our quality of life here in the Valley. We have a vacancy, and welcome those who share this outstanding value.