

## Essex County Natural Resources Conservation District Board Meeting

December 3rd, 2024

Meeting was called to order at 12:36 PM

Board attendance: Tim White, Chris von Alt, Bill Manning, Ursula Johnson

District staff: Sam Mayne, Clara Fernandez Odell

Public: Dave Blodgett (NRCS)

### Opening remarks

Bill gave no opening remarks.

### Approval of meeting minutes:

Chris moved to accept the October meeting minutes. Tim seconded, and the motion passed unanimously.

### Financials

- Sam presented the October financial reports without any comment from the board.
  - Bill remarked on the minimal gains to the Alliance Bernstein investment account
  - Ursula noted the strong bank balance and all agreed it would be beneficial to move the money into a Money Market account to improve interest rates
- Sam presented financial projections for Calendar Year 2025. He noted that approximately 3 full-time positions worth of funding had been secured for staff expenses, which sets ECNRCD up well to hire a new staff member in early 2025 when Sam returns from leave. Board members expressed their appreciation for the forward planning.
- Chart of Accounts Update
  - Sam presented minor changes to the Chart of Accounts
  - Ursula moved to accept the new Chart of Accounts as presented. Tim seconded, and the motion passed unanimously.

### Accomplishments/Updates:

- NRCS Updates (Dave Blodgett)
  - NRCS is working on getting Clara's computer and the associated Unfunded Cooperative Agreement in place. This agreement will commit NRCS to providing equipment and tech support to the district and the district will provide NRCS program outreach.
  - Sam said he would share the agreement with the board if there are any unexpected components, but expects it to be straightforward and will sign once it is complete.
- Sam updated the board on submitted, awarded, and in progress grant applications.
  - We were invited to submit a full application for a Tillotson Large Grant for invasive species management and training. We received positive feedback from our grant reviewer and will make some minor adjustments before it goes to the full review committee. A final decision is expected in January.
  - A decision is expected this month on the statewide NACD TA grant to fund NRCS program outreach, application development, and the Locally Led Conservation Delivery System. This grant includes Essex and would be held by VACD.
  - Two Trees for Streams applications were funded after revisions to the budget.

- Funds were awarded for developing restoration designs for two small wetlands projects.
- Three applications are in progress for replacing culverts identified in the Maidstone Lake Watershed Action Plan. WUV Enhancement Design & Implementation Block Grant (EDIBG), NRCC EDIBG, and the Land and Water Conservation Fund through VT Forests Parks & Recreation
- The Nulhegan Basin Conte Refuge has asked whether ECNRCD would be interested in holding a cooperative agreement to do road repair and upgrades on the Conte Refuge property in the area. Work would include improvements to roads to ensure resilience to flooding, reduced water quality impacts, and aquatic organism passage. All agreed that it would be a valuable project and were happy to provide assistance to the Refuge.
- Nursery update (Clara)
  - Clara will be getting seeds for starting about 1000 starts this winter. Ordered about 1000 additional starts from Intervale and may order more from NH State Tree Nursery.
  - Tim mentioned that he has a Vandana seeder that he no longer uses and may be helpful in the future. Clara agreed and said she'd look into it. Clara said she planned to spend some time this winter researching equipment that would improve efficiency at the nursery.
- Agricultural Programs update
  - Clara is working to get plans completed for all NRCS projects in the area by Christmas to give NRCS staff time to enter these projects into the NRCS database by the January deadline.
  - Clara is also continuing to work on creating a survey and organizing at least one meeting to collect feedback from local producers on the priority natural resource concerns in the county. This will feed into a Natural Resources Assessment and Conservation Action Plan, which can be used to create a Local Fund Pool of NRCS funds specific to Essex County needs. She asked board members to help spread the word when the time is right to make sure their networks hear about the opportunity to provide input.
  - Clara has also continued providing general technical assistance to producers enrolling in State programs like Farm Agronomic Practices and Best Management Practices. She will be taking a course on Nutrient Management Planning over the winter to assist in updating farms' NMPs.
  - There are three upcoming public meetings organized by NOFA VT to discuss food system resiliency in the Northeast Kingdom. One will be hosted at the Conte Refuge in coordination with ECNRCD on Monday 12/9/24. Attendees can receive \$75 for joining, and there are additional funds available for completing a resiliency project if one is identified. Ursula suggested posting it in the Colebrook Chronicle, and Clara said she would do that.
  - Chris expressed his appreciation for the newsletter Clara put out earlier this week, and the rest of the board echoed his appreciation. All felt it was engaging and provided helpful information. Clara asked that they send photos and topics of interest to her for inclusion in future newsletters.

### **Meeting Topic(s)**

- Sam requested a pay increase from \$24/hr to \$25/hr. He explained that all budgets provided to the board since September have assumed a DM pay rate at \$55/hr, and it still works within the current billable rate and existing grants.
  - Tim moved to increase Sam's pay to \$25/hr, retroactively to the date that would be Sam's 2-year anniversary in the position. Ursula seconded, and the motion passed unanimously. Sam expressed his appreciation for the unexpected retroactive payment.
- Sam presented a request for dues from the National Association of Conservation Districts
  - Tim moved that ECNRCD pay \$102 in dues to NACD. Chris seconded, and the motion passed unanimously.

- Sam asked for clarification on whether ECNRCD reimburses for lodging expenses associated with meetings. He stayed overnight at the VACD Annual Meeting and was not sure whether he should be reimbursed for that or not. All agreed this should be reimbursed.
- Sam presented the guidance document he made for Clara and the board while he is on paternity leave. All said it was clear and were supportive of it.
  - All agreed that unless there was necessary action, it would make sense to skip the January and March ECNRCD board meetings when Sam would be out.
- Sam and Clara reviewed the results of VACD Annual Meeting
  - Chris and Sam attended Day 1. The consultants examining the VACD/NRCC/NRCD relationship presented results from the survey they had circulated and then facilitated 4 rotating small-group discussions to collect additional information to inform their results. The next stage will be consolidating all of the feedback they've gotten, sharing it out and providing recommendations. Survey results showed a clear desire for more defined mission, roles, governance, and effective service of all entities, as well as an appreciation for the greatly increased funding and work being completed through VACD, the support to districts it currently provides, and the success of advocacy efforts in the legislature.
  - On Day 2, there was a VACD board meeting, and a separate track for staff
    - Sam was not aware of minutes for the board meeting, but from memory noted the most contentious topic was the renewal of the Action Circles contract. The contract was approved, with concern from some districts that Action Circles limited their ability to speak freely to legislators.
    - Clara described the staff track, which included discussions about key topics in NRCDs' work and opportunities to network with others from around the state, which she found valuable. Sam also appreciated the networking opportunities and side conversations.

### **Other Business**

- Ursula moved to reappoint Tim White to the Board of Supervisors for a new term when his term expires at the end of December. Bill seconded, and the motion passed unanimously.
  - Board members noted the other vacancy on the board.

### **Next Meeting**

The next meeting will be held on Wednesday, November 20th, 2024 – In-Person at the Silvio O. Conte Refuge Welcome Center in Brunswick, scheduled for 12:30 PM.

Chris made the motion to adjourn at 3:23 PM. Tim seconded. Motion carried unanimously.