

Essex County Natural Resources Conservation District Board Meeting

February 19th, 2025

Meeting was called to order at 2:07 PM

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

District staff: Sam Mayne, Clara Fernandez Odell

Public: None

Opening remarks

Bill gave no opening remarks.

Approval of meeting minutes:

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

Financials

- Sam presented the October financial reports.
 - The board discussed the District's existing assets and the ability for them to cover District expenses in the event that grant funding is reduced due to federal budget changes.
 - The board also noted the large amount in Accounts Receivable, which Sam explained was an invoice to US Fish & Wildlife Service for a BIL-funded grant that has been frozen by the current administration. The grant in question is designated for 3 culvert replacements in the county, including a major culvert in Lunenburg. Sam explained that it is unlikely that the funds will be frozen indefinitely, and that the District has the current cash flow to wait for unfreezing on April 20th after the 90 day pause expires. Most other BIL-funded grants have already been unfrozen, and it's possible the grant will be unfrozen sooner.
- Sam presented financial projections for Calendar Year 2025. He noted that approximately 4 full-time positions worth of funding had been secured for staff expenses.
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Accomplishments/Updates:

- Sam updated the board on submitted, awarded, and in progress grant applications.
 - Upcoming grant applications: Submission in March to WUV for Wallace Pond lakeshore project implementation. Potential grant for assisting the Nulhegan Refuge with road repairs from the flooding, pending federal budget changes.
 - Grants submitted and pending: None
 - Grants awarded: Tillotson fund for invasive species management, including significant staff time. NACD TA grant has been awarded to VACD, and subawards to districts are expected soon. NRCC awarded funds for 6 lakeshore project implementations this year, 4 lakeshore designs, and matching funds for replacing culverts on Maidstone State Park.
- Agricultural Programs update
 - Clara has continued working through the NRCS Locally Led Conservation Initiative
 - There will be a public meeting on March 20th at the Guild Hall in Guildhall to collect local input on natural resource concerns, community needs, and strategies for meeting these. Clara would

like board members to spread the word about this meeting, help facilitate conversations at it, and lend their knowledge in ensuring good attendance. The board expressed their excitement for the event and discussed strategies to make it successful, including the desire for additional meetings around the county.

- Clara also discussed a survey to solicit similar feedback for those who can't make the event, which would also be good to share.
 - Clara described her work on a draft Natural Resources Assessment that summarizes the state of natural resources needs and how that can inform District offerings.
 - All of these initiatives can be used to inform NRCS spending in the county in addition to the Districts more general offerings.
- Nursery update (Clara)
 - Clara will be starting indoor starts next week, and OCNRCDD plans to buy the majority of our current stock.

Meeting Topic(s)

- Sam updated the board on his plan for additional parental leave, which includes the month of March and several days the rest of the spring when he does not have childcare.
- Sam requested clarification on whether leave should be claimed on holidays and whether the District would withhold and match IRA contributions for employees on leave. The board decided leave should not be claimed for holidays, and the District would pay employees their full wage on all holidays. They decided existing systems were sufficient for ensuring IRA contributions could be completed.
- Sam asked if the board would be open to adjusting District procurement policies to allow sole source procurement from contractors who assist in grant applications. They were supportive of changes to allow this in cases where the contractor is specifically listed in the grant application, and asked Sam to draft a change to the policy.
- The board discussed how changes to federal funding priorities would affect District operations and the planned addition of another staff member.
 - There was a consensus that it would be prudent to wait for several months before posting the position to evaluate the funding landscape and whether the position would be sustainable.
 - There was also consensus that the District should be evaluating methods of continuing its work without such heavy reliance on grant funding. Potential ideas included private foundation/donor funding, assisting directly with municipal infrastructure needs, and appealing to our federal legislators for continued funding, creating a Conservation District center on the District land, and leaning into educational programming.
 - There was some concern that existing grant contracts would not be honored. Chris encouraged Sam to bill for all grants he can now in case of this and read all grant contracts to determine if there are clauses stating payments would only be made if funding is available from granting agencies.
 - There was consensus that there are many unknowns that can't be accounted for at this point, and it would be premature to abandon current operations

Other Business

- None

Next Meeting

The next meeting will likely be held following the Locally Led Conservation meeting at 13 Courthouse Dr., Guildhall, VT at 1:30 PM on March 20th.

Ursula made the motion to adjourn at 4:09 PM. Tim seconded. Motion carried unanimously.