Minutes of December 4, 2019
Great Barrington Town Hall

Members present: Thomas Blauvelt, Lisa Bozzuto, Leigh Davis, Martha Fick, Jeremy Higa, Don Howe, Jim Mercer, Patricia Sharpe, and Karen W. Smith
Also present: Chris Rembold

Call to Order  5:30 PM by Chair Blauvelt

Administrative Items
Minutes from November 12 were not yet available.

Review of Step 2 Applications

Chair Blauvelt said tonight is a discussion of the open space and recreation project requests. Housing will be tomorrow night.

BNRC for Barbieri Trail Access

Narain Schroeder discussed the project. He said the BNRC has an option to purchase 242 acres for $500,000 a significant amount of scenic land, on the Tom Ball ridgeline and connect a hiking trail through this area. We have already raised those funds. He said this request is for funding for a trailhead parking area very similar to the CPA-funded project completed last year on State Road. He said the funds will also be used to stabilize the very steep first section of the trail. He said they have secured additional funding already as noted in the budget.

Bozzuto asked how far the trail would be from the pond. Schroeder said at least a half-mile.

Davis asked about access rights to drive on the road. Schroeder said Spruce Drive is private but as property owners we would have access. She asked about other trail easements. Schroeder said where the trail crosses private properties there are easements for the trail.

Town, for Lake Mansfield Road design

Rembold said this application is for funding to hire an engineering team to complete the final design, permitting, and bidding documents to implement the Selectboard’s decision to close the road to vehicular traffic, stabilize the lake edge, create a recreation path, and increase the vegetated buffer zone.

He said this project is the result of years of community input. This project continues previous CPA work, which funded baseline engineering and wetland delineation. That informed the Lake Mansfield Task Force and the Selectboard decision. This also continues 15 years of work in the area. He said in the Lake Mansfield area over the last 10 years the Town has invested almost $1 million in grant and town funds, and this CPA request represents just 17% of that total amount. He said in order to get grants for construction we need bid-ready plans, and this project request, if funded, would get us to that point. We don’t know what the construction price tag would be exactly, but we would be well positioned for grants.

Howe asked if this includes a new parking lot at the beach. Rembold said no, that is being designed with funding from another grant, from DEP, that we just received. That grant will get us far enough with parking lot designs to mesh it with the designs resulting from this CPA project.
Fick asked about vehicle access. Rembold said once this is constructed vehicle access to the boat launch will still be possible from the south, and vehicle access to the beach will still be possible from the north.

Town, for Old Route 7 Greenway Construction

Rembold summarized the application. He said it was a large request, but if they can get a grant, not all the CPA funds would be used. He said currently, using a previous CPA grant, we have preliminary designs and will be submit applications for Conservation Commission permits this winter. He said this trail improve pedestrian and bicycle safety along Stockbridge Road, link community centers (Berkshire South Community Center and the Community Health Programs), and complete the Fountain Pond / 3-Mile Hill trail system loop. He said engineers have developed a solution that avoids working directly in the wetlands, and it avoids need for a bridge.

Bozzuto said she has concerns that the area floods and buffer zones are very valuable. She’s concerned about permitting something in the buffer zone. Rembold said you have a highway embankment into the wetland now, and there is no net negative with this proposal. It simply builds up the bank to a level surface and putting a trail on it.

She asked about bus stops to CHP. Rembold said it is served by the bus already.

Davis asked about the old road bed, and what still needs to be built. Rembold said it can all be used for the trail. He said the southern end needs to be built, and that is the reason for work on the top of the bank outside of the guardrail.

Rembold added that there is a lot of community support for this. He said in fact it is the second highest priority of the Complete Streets plan. He said the first is Housatonic Main Street sidewalk, which got a grant and will be built this coming year. He said this was second, so we are trying to implement it with CPA and grant funds. He said Lake Mansfield Road is the third highest priority, so we will try to fund that as well through CPA. He said we are not picking these randomly – they all result from our community planning process.

He said the request is for $370,000. He said we need that funding in place in order to get reimbursement grants from Mass Trails. That would offset CPA but we won’t know that until the end of May, after Town Meeting. He said if we are funded with CPA this year, we can construct it this summer. Without funding this year, we would have to wait another year, until summer of 2021.

Town Conservation Commission, for McAlister Preserve

Jeff Cohen and Jess Toro, a consultant for the Commission, spoke about their request for continued work at McAlister. Davis recused herself because she works for Cohen.

Cohen said we have made a lot progress battling the invasive plants here and this application will help us continue that work. Toro said in fact is known as a birding hot spot. There are breeding pairs of bobolinks. She also said we are working with Greenagers to implement a forest management plan that was written with $10,000 in funding from the Mass DCR. She said CPA funding has helped us get state investment here, and it’s resulting in real ecological progress.

She said the overall goal is to protect and preserve all the unique areas at the preserve including the forests, the meadows, and the wetlands. These are rich environments and this work is preserving them. She said grant will continue our efforts by increasing the field area, improving a wet area and enhancing the forest.
Blauvelt and Smith expressed their satisfaction that the CPA funds are leveraging and helping secure other funds. Toro added that Greenagers costs are reduced and that is reflected in our budget. A typical laborer crew would cost us more, but because they get their own grants, they can charge us less.

Fick asked if there is a lot of work left to do. Toro said a lot of the major work, the big money lifts of $30,000 projects, will be completed soon and future years will transition into maintenance. Cohen said we are rescuing this property.

Town Conservation Commission for Land Conservation Fund

Jeff Cohen and Bill Boyer from the Commission spoke. Cohen said there is a possibility that properties that are on the market, or are coming out of the Chapter 61 program, are of conservation value to the town. He said there is a state law that Commissions can have a fund in order to help conserve these lands before they are sold for a different use.

Boyer said this $50,000 CPA request and a $250,000 request of town budget funds will fund a Conservation Fund as authorized by state law. He said the Commission controls the funds and acts on behalf of to the town to preserve open space, based on the open space and recreation priorities of the town. Having a fund allows the town to act quickly in the real estate market, without needing to wait for a Town Meeting.

Smith said she has a difficult time seeing the need for this now. She said a savings account is good but we have a lot of requests this year. Cohen said the property on Route 7 last year was in the $300,000 range. Even though we don’t have a specific property, if we have a good amount of funds, we have an opportunity to preserve property.

Cohen said the town could work with BNRC or other conservation partners, who often cannot come up with all the funds on their own either.

Fick said we don’t usually fund everything. We hold back money each year. She asked why you couldn’t come to us and then to Town Meeting if a worthy property is available.

Rembold said partnering with organizations is an important part of a funding package, of an offer to an owner. He also noted that if needed, a Town has 180 days to exercise a right of first refusal lien in the Chapter 61 program.

Blauvelt said the trust is a more nimble approach. Fick said yes but can’t put money aside and let it sit. Cohen said in real estate timing is everything. You lose opportunities if you cannot act quickly. Sellers will usually not wait around for the Town to act months down the road.

**Adjourned at 7:05 PM**

Minutes prepared by Christopher Rembold

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