



VERMONT URBAN AND COMMUNITY FORESTRY COUNCIL

VT Urban & Community Forestry Program

1 National Life Drive, Davis 2
Montpelier, VT 05620-3801

Elise Schadler, Program Manager
elise.schadler@vermont.gov
vtcommunityforestry.org

Vermont Urban & Community Forestry Council Meeting

June 10, 2020

GoToMeeting

MINUTES

Attending: Richard Amore, Jane Brown, Cecilia Danks, Danielle Fitzko, Kate Forrer, Joanne Garton, Steve Handfield, Ann Hazelrigg, Bill Jewell, Gwen Kozlowski, Lee Krohn, Jenny Lauer, Melissa Levy, Bob McCullough, Nick Meyer, Ginger Nickerson, Sara Packer, John Parry (USFS), Tim Parsons, Dave Schneider, Warren Spinner, Bonnie Waninger

Welcome and Council Business

- **Review/Approve Minutes:** The minutes from the March 11, 2020 council meeting were reviewed and approved (Bill Jewell moved, and Warren Spinner seconded).

USFS Update

John Parry provided an update on regional and national impacts on UCF due to COVID-19.

- Most staff are still working from home.
- Updates to grants are being worked on (including extensions and required reporting) to offer flexibility due to COVID-19.
- Many conferences nationwide are being cancelled. Some are cancelled completely; others are going virtual (such as the ISA fall meeting). No word yet on the national UCF conference scheduled for Louisville, KY in November.
- A tree-risk manual is being designed.
- One silver lining: time is available to view valuable webinars.
- John would like to hear stories of any UCF work that is being done.

COVID-19 and Urban & Community Forestry in Vermont

To understand how UCF programming will change moving forward, several Council members spoke on current and future impacts of COVID-19.

- **Richard Amore, Agency of Commerce and Community Development**
 - Better Places - COVID-19 Recovery:
 - Better Places will advance local recovery efforts by providing the necessary supplies, grants, and resources to restore consumer confidence, rebuild local economies, boost local capacity, and reconnect Vermonters to one another – critical elements that help communities recover quickly.

- This innovative program will help cities and towns find new ways to use streets, parking areas, and public spaces in downtowns and villages to help rebuild their economy and revive community life.
 - Reclaiming public space for people (not just cars) can include new walking and cycling paths, turning pavement into plazas and asphalt into art, providing pop-up parklets, expanding outdoor dining, and using street closures to make more room for pedestrians, retailers, and farmers markets, all of which helps to meet social distancing requirements.
 - These COVID mitigation measures will support immediate community needs and test and build the case for more permanent changes in the future.
- Interim Guidelines for Use of Public Highways for Outdoor Eating, Retail, and Public Gathering Spaces
 - This document (compiled by ACCD and VTrans) provides guidance on how a portion of a state or town public highway can be used on a temporary basis for outdoor eating, retail activities, and social gatherings to help achieve the physical distancing recommendations intended to stop the spread of the Coronavirus. For this guidance, these areas are referred to collectively as “temporary public gathering spaces”.
 - The guidelines describe the options available, issues that need to be considered, the municipal and state approval processes, and provides links to resources with additional information.
- **Bonnie Waninger, Central Vermont Regional Planning Commission**
 - Downsides of COVID-19 for municipalities:
 - Municipal Capacity Down: many town employees are/have been furloughed. Some road crews were not able to do spring work. Staff reductions are expected.
 - Tax Revenue Shortfalls: now and in the future. Property taxes delayed, and some may not come in. Example: during the Great Recession, the Town of Warren (which has many second homes) saw a 30% drop in payment of property taxes. This time around, many towns may see 10-15% drop at least. This will also impact the future match potential for grants.
 - Town Budget Unknowns: Many towns are looking at the budget that passed at Town Meeting as a “max” spending plan (do not go over that amount). They are realistically figuring 10% or more cuts as probable. In addition, the state has not set the school tax rate yet. Any gap between missing property taxes and extra school funding mandated by the state will have to be covered by the towns. Currently, approximately 75% of most towns’ budgets is school funding.

Possible Upsides:

- Volunteer Opportunities: more people may want to get out in the woods to social distance. They could assist with tree inventories, etc.
- Interim Zoning: changes can last two years; does this lead to lasting improvements?
- Street Tree Opportunities: Energy saving trees--as people work from home more, they may see the need.
- Conferences: can be moved to a series of webinars. This could attract people who could never attend in person.
- Gardening: is taking off. Could forest-based gardening be a tie-in?

- **Dave Schneider, Rutland City Forester**

The City of Rutland furloughed their foresters for 5 weeks this spring. Below is an example of how one municipality was/is being impacted:

- Stump grinding of ash removals came to a halt, with over 75 stumps remaining untreated.
- Underground utility location work for spring tree planting has been delayed.
- Construction season activities by the DPW were halted until May 4th. Tree pruning and right-of-way vegetation management for water, sewer, and paving projects were delayed.
- Budgets for the current fiscal year have been frozen and next year's budget allocations have been rumored to have cuts/reductions across the board.
- Due to the closure of the public-school system, our close relationship with Stafford Technical Center's Forestry program has been impacted – students typically assist in tree planting projects and nursery operations. Arbor Day tree plantings were cancelled this year.
- One large corporate sponsor had to withdraw their donation pledge for the Rutland Blooms project.
- Timber management activities in our watershed properties located in Mendon, Vermont have been delayed – economic impacts on stumpage values from Covid-19 have significantly reduced prices paid and demand for standing timber in this region.

To summarize, the pandemic response has placed major delays on planned efforts, accelerated necessary operations to prepare for typical construction season activities, and reduced the volunteer labor inputs we have become accustomed to receiving from students and other businesses/clubs in our spring tree planting efforts. All this with limited access to existing budget monies and the specter of reduced funding for the next fiscal year(s).

Program Conversation

- Arbor Day: a possible fall event is not happening. Instead, this year's Arbor Day was turned into a series of webinars. These webinars drew 40-50 people each. They were all recorded and are available online.
- Town Forest Planning: Kate Forrer turned this into a series of webinars, which have been drawing 50-60 people each.
- Backyard Woods: running May & June online this year (instead of in the fall). The limit is 100, and 75 people had already signed up as of June 10. May offer this again in the fall.
- Agroforestry Grant: Urban Agroforestry Proposal--Case Studies of Best Practices for Integrating Fruit Trees into School Gardens
 - Ginger Nickerson is applying for a grant, which would bring in approx. \$30,000 if received
 - Notification in July, with funding dispersed in August
 - Three phases of grant:
 - Phase 1: Needs assessment with school gardens and urban tree stewards; identify challenges
 - Phase 2: Interviews with established "food forests" in New England; how do they address challenges?
 - Phase 3: Produce three case studies of best practices and a video/webinar
 - If UCF receives this grant, it could be a stepping-stone to other agroforestry funding opportunities.

Council suggestions:

- Permaculture tie-ins? Many people/orgs doing permaculture in Vermont and New England. BrightBlue EcoMedia of Montpelier was mentioned as a possible collaborator.
- BMPs: any agroforestry project needs to be sustainable, especially as students and volunteers come and go. Best Management Practices need to be developed.
- Existing projects to look at: Boston urban orchards program could provide links to how they did their projects.

Tree Warden Statute Update

Danielle Fitzko updated the Council on the “wild ride” of the attempted amendment to the Tree Warden Statute in the Vermont State Legislature. Since the last Council meeting, there has been push-back from the Vermont League of Cities & Towns as well as private property rights legislators. Compromises were made. It has just passed out of the House. The potential for further movement this session is not known.

Meeting Adjourned

Next Meeting: September 9, 2020

Location and details TBD by COVID-19

