



Minutes for the January 26, 2021 Meeting

RSC Representatives present: Anne Slugg, Chair (Sudbury), Emma Lord (NPS), Larry Buell (Lincoln), Amber Carr (SVT), Ron Chick (Framingham-Alt), Christine Dugan (Lincoln-Alt), Bill Fadden (Framingham), Alison Field-Juma (OARS), Ralph Hammond (Bedford), Marlies Henderson (Billerica), Linh Phu (USFWS), Trek Reef (Billerica-Alt), Tom Sciacca (Wayland), David Witherbee (Concord).

Guests from Mass Audubon: Robin Stuart, Jennifer Feller, Melissa Hansen, Paul Kelley

RSC Representatives absent: Mary Antes (Wayland-Alt), Joseph Piantedosi (Bedford-Alt)

Location: Zoom Video Call

7:05 pm

Ms. Slugg opened the meeting and introduced the team from Mass Audubon.

7:10 pm Partner Grant Presentation, Mass Audubon

Ms. Wilkinson explained that she had previously given a half-year report to the RSC so the evening's presentation would focus on Riverschools activities from September 2020 through January 2021. She introduced Jennifer Feller, Mass Audubon's Statewide Education Manager; Melissa Hansen, the School Group Coordinator; and Education and Concord River specialist Paul Kelley. Ms. Wilkinson spoke about the changing teaching methods necessitated by the pandemic over the past 5 months. The Riverschools team worked remotely with classes from Happy Hollow and Curtis Middle School. The schools themselves were forced to alternate between all in-person learning, all remote learning, and hybrid learning as COVID infection rates varied in their towns.

In the fall Mass Audubon spoke with teachers about what they would be able to do in their classrooms and at the river because of COVID precautions. These new limitations necessitated numerous hours of extra planning. Mass Audubon itself experienced many organizational and staffing changes in a short time. These shake ups then required substantial additional hours of planning. Ms. Wilkinson reminded the RSC that Riverschools is a model for key programs focused on the MetroWest area, that it brings students to see the river, has them study the watershed and climate change, and motivates students to take action.

The Riverschools team was able to interact with classroom presentations by joining remotely. In this way they were able to interact with students, encourage questions, and help guide students with hands-on work. Due to the pandemic, only 50% of the usual number of students

could be in a classroom at one time, necessitating twice as many classroom appearances by the Riverschools team. Happy Hollow students were able to walk to the Sudbury River in April and May. Curtis Middle School students carried out assignments at Hop Brook, which is located behind the school and is a tributary of the Sudbury River. Mass Audubon's presentation included slides showing Mr. Kelley appearing on a screen in a classroom while facilitating a hands-on project working with simple watershed models. The class explored runoff and contamination. The students first theorized on the path the water would take when the models were sprayed with water, they then spritzed the models and observed the results, noting the run off patterns and absorption capacity of the sponges representing wetlands. The students discussed ways to mitigate contamination and prevent it from entering their watershed. Mr. Kelly and the classroom teachers helped students brainstorm ways in which they could help protect the watershed by using conservation measures in their own homes.

Ms. Phu expressed an interest in possibly arranging a video conference between the USFWS, Mass Audubon, and other like-minded groups to share their ideas on the adjustments they have needed to make in trying to reach an audience during a pandemic. She said that the USFWS is committed to diversity, equity, and inclusion. It has an active Urban Wildlife Partnership with the town of Lowell and working with the Lowell Parks & Conservation Trust. She was interested in knowing more about Mass Audubon's efforts at addressing the barriers to diversity, equity and inclusion. Ms. Feller said that the Riverschools team would like to add a class from a South Framingham school during the 2021-2022 school year. Ms. Hansen had briefly worked on a Riverschools project in that school. If this new partnership can be added then the team will be working with a school from a lower economic demographic than the ones they have worked with recently. Mass Audubon will invest 3 years training those teachers.

Mr. Sciacca asked about specific faculty members that Riverschools worked with in Wayland and asked for a list of those teachers. He said he worked with Maureen Devlin, 5th grade teacher at Happy Hollow, in the past and hopes to work with other teachers in the future.

Ms. Henderson asked about the amount each school contributed financially towards Riverschools programs. Ms. Hansen said that the schools paid for all the teachers' time, for their professional development time, and their planning time. Teacher development time is not provided for in their salaries. Ms. Henderson asked about the possibility of Riverschools working with Billerica students. Ms. Wilkinson said that Riverschools would be very happy to work with a Billerica school if Ms. Henderson could help them find a teacher to spearhead the effort. Ms. Wilkinson said that previous experience has taught her that at least one teacher from a school must have great enthusiasm for the project in order for it to be successful because the program is quite in-depth. Mr. Sciacca noted that teachers are already working maximum hours just to complete current curriculum requirements and that it is rare to find a teacher interested in adding environmental education. Ms. Henderson said that she would investigate finding at least one teacher who would like to bring the Riverschools program to a Billerica school.

Ms. Slugg asked what was the best age group for Riverschools. Ms. Wilkerson said that middle school is the sweet spot, with 5th to 7th grades being optimal. Riverschools fits well with Curtis Middle School's ecology curriculum and Happy Hollow's water and civic engagement curriculum. Ms. Carr has been helpful by passing on her connections to the South Framingham school that Mass Audubon would like to work with next year.

Ms. Phu wondered about replicating the Riverschools programming as a turnkey kit that could be delivered to more schools with less effort. Ms. Wilkinson said that was a goal and would need scaling up. RSC funding would be necessary to package the Riverschools programming. The Riverschools team has had discussions with teachers about the pieces that would be the most helpful to allow classroom teachers to carry out this programming independently of Mass Audubon's presence. That feedback is important to properly scaling Riverschools statewide. Mr. Sciacca said that RSC members don't look at Riverschools as only an educational endeavor but as community outreach as well.

7:46 pm

Larry Buell was introduced as the new Lincoln representative.

7:55 pm Minutes

Mr. Chick, Mr. Sciacca, and Ms. Henderson offered edits to the December 2020 minutes. Ms. Slugg motioned to approve the minutes with those amendments, Ms. Henderson seconded, and the motion passed unanimously.

8:00 pm Internal Projects discussion

Ms. Slugg said the night's work would entail a discussion on our budget, work planned, and internal projects. Ms. Lord said that in December the federal budget for FY 2021 passed with a small increase for WSR's. The SuAsCo can expect to receive between \$150,000 and \$165,000 next September. Ms. Slugg said that some extensions on work have been granted. Less those, all money except for money to study the river has been allocated. Mr. Chick asked how that money is allocated. Ms. Slugg explained that two-thirds of our funds went to partners while the rest is spent for items in storage, for website maintenance, and for Riverfest events.

Ms. Carr wondered about MOU's we didn't use and which ones need an extension. Ms. Lord said that individual MOU's for community grants and partner grants are for one year. Ms. Slugg said any money not set aside this year must be used by September 2022 or we risk being given less money in future years.

Ms. Henderson asked if completing work on a partially completed boardwalk in Billerica could be considered as an internal need. If completed it would provide connectivity between Great Meadows and Billerica. She said the project started in 2008 and local volunteers from Billerica and Bedford are newly interested in completing it. Ms. Slugg asked how much the boardwalk would cost and if another source could help with the funding. Ms. Phu said that there are

multiple players involved in this project. USFWS was originally involved but stopped at the boundary, were sued by the adjacent landowner, and didn't have the resources to fight the lawsuit. USFWS has a multi-year process for environmental assessment and local permitting. Ms. Phu thinks this will be a 3-to-5-year process and a heavy lift for the USFWS, given their limited staff and other priorities. The USFWS has the funding internally for these kinds of projects, just not the capacity to move forward at this time. Ms. Field-Juma wondered if this would be more suitable for a community grant and if we could pursue regional funding.

Ms. Slugg said that we kept one-third of our budget for internal spending this year. We set aside some money for in-river work, tributaries, and culverts. Ms. Lord said that Missisquoi and Trout Rivers in VT created a specific infrastructure grant program so that all WSR's could apply for grants for instream infrastructure such as culverts. Ms. Slugg spoke about a possible community grant in Sudbury to remove organic matter near Hop Brook that is responsible for a spike in mercury in dragonfly larvae. Ms. Phu said that culverts can be costly, referencing one in Mashpee which cost \$800,000. She wondered about perhaps creating an app instead. Ms. Slugg suggested that we could look to improve trails along the river, noted that Wayland wanted more money for signs, and thought we could work with SVT for better interpretive signs. She said that our focus should be on how to spend money to best support our mission and strategic plan.

Mr. Chick proposed an idea for work near Cochituate Brook. There are invasive species to be cleared and the area could benefit from interpretive panels. It is a tributary of the Sudbury River and includes 2 bridges where water flows under the Cochituate Rail Trail (CRT). One panel could focus on where the water is coming from and going to and another could depict the entire watershed. He suggested RSC funding of at least half the cost of the work with the remaining amount to be obtained from a Framingham nonprofit or from a Framingham CPA grant. He proposed a simple observation area, such as a granite block suitable for resting, located about 15 feet from the river and estimated that the signs might cost between \$3,500-\$7,000. Mr. Sciacca said that the Carol Getchell trail referenced by Mr. Chick is in bad shape, and because it is the primary way visitors can enjoy the river in that area, cleaning up that trail would be a good use of RSC funds. Ms. Slugg said that permits should be obtained by Sept. 22nd to secure a community grant. Ms. Carr agreed that this a good viewing spot along the river, that it has a secluded feeling even though it is in an urban area, and added that a large pollinator meadow was installed nearby last fall.

Ms. Lord said that internal projects should be balanced with community grants. The RSC could fund Mr. Chick's proposed CRT work because while it is appropriate for a community grant, it could also be considered for an internal needs project. Ms. Field-Juma thought this line of thought might be crossing into a gray area. Mr. Sciacca agreed, saying that projects located within a specific town should be funded with community grant money and that the RSC should be funding more watershed-wide projects like our flow study. He said it had been a long time since we prioritized a fundamental science project involving our partners, noting that Ms. Blatt would be interested in coordinating a study. A PFAS study or one focusing on the toxin present in car tires that was recently found in road runoff and mentioned at the December RSC meeting

would be possible subjects. Ms. Slugg said that it would be difficult to have a defined scope and budget amount for one of these projects by our September 2022 deadline. She suggested either having two types of community grants, one of which could fund projects like the CRT improvements or increasing the annual budget for community grants.

Ms. Field-Juma said that we could consider funding a community grant focused on our strategic goal for increasing justice and inclusion. We could add in our community grants RFP that projects increasing access to public lands along a municipality's river would be considered. She said that funding signage in different languages would help us progress on our diversity and inclusion goals. Mr. Sciacca said that we are overdue to consider the history component of strategic goals. Ms. Slugg suggested that we revisit these topics towards the end of next summer.

Ms. Phu referenced an earlier, enthusiastic RSC discussion on possible website updates, such as building up internal communication and expanding our education and outreach efforts. She thought this would be a good internal needs project. She suggested contracting to have a website health assessment as a first step and then deciding which ideas to pursue. She said that MMNHP spent about \$20,000 for this process.

Ms. Lord said she had been considering internal projects that would support the outreach and education sections of our strategic plan, focusing particularly on increasing visitation, paddling, and walking to our rivers. She proposed hiring a summer river steward to rotate among our busiest boat launches to educate visitors on the WSR in general, but also on other river issues such as invasive species. She thought we might have the funds for this if we hired a college/high school student. Mr. Sciacca liked this idea, commenting that he often stops by the Route 20 boat launch to talk with paddlers and hand out flyers. He said that even people who have paddled from that site before often do not know much about the river. Ms. Phu said that USFWS interns receive a stipend of \$400-\$500 but that there are also administrative expenses. She thought we could find a part-time person for \$7,000-\$10,000. Ms. Field-Juma was also in favor of this idea, saying that when she talks to paddlers at that river they often did not know even where the river started or where it went.

Mr. Chick noted that a QR code could be added to the existing Route 20 interpretive sign and that the device could also provide an audio experience for visitors. Ms. Henderson said that different QR codes could be tailored for different sites. Mr. Chick said multiple QR codes could be assigned to each sign, noting that one SVT sign had perhaps 7 different QR codes, all giving different information.

Ms. Slugg said that our February meeting would concentrate on partner proposals and internal projects including Riverfest and a discussion about updating our website. Ms. Lord offered to write up a short summary of what would be involved if we hired a summer river steward.

8:30

Ms. Henderson motioned to adjourn, Ms. Slugg seconded, and the motion passed unanimously.

Minutes respectfully submitted by Christine Dugan