

Minutes: RTM Environment Committee – Wednesday, April 17, 2024, at 6:00 PM - Town Hall Rm. 309

Committee Members Present: Ellen Lautenberg, Chair; Matt Mandel, Claudia Shaum, Kristin Schneeman, Julie Whamond

Town Employees Present: Colin Kelly, Director of Conservation Department

Others Present: Tree Board members – Sarah Adair, Dick Stein, Ed Picard; members of the public

Agenda:

1. To review the Conservation Department budget.

Discussion: Colin Kelly presented an overview of the Conservation Department budget. He pointed out a few miscellaneous items that would be one-time expenses in the 2024-25 budget. Otherwise, the budget was pretty consistent with last year's.

In addition, we discussed the need to have a full-time soil and erosion expert that would be shared with the Planning and Zoning Department. The position is NOT in the current budget. They are looking for such a person but they are hard to find as it involves very specific experience.

Colin also mentioned they have been trying to upgrade the information available on their webpage and working with the new Acela software which is still getting up to speed. He mentioned that the GIS system has a wealth of data, particularly for realtors and home buyers. He is also trying to increase "deconstruction awareness".

2. Discuss environmental impact of the proposed Parker Harding/Jesup plan, in particular, open space and trees.
We will have a member of the tree board joining us.

Discussion: Ellen mentioned that some concern had been expressed about the fact that the meeting was scheduled during the school break which did not allow for some members of the public or members of the administration to attend. However, due to the following week's schedule being very tight there were no good alternatives. In addition, no vote was being taken nor was a recommendation on the appropriation being stated – the goal of the discussion was simply to get some of the issues and questions on the table.

Ellen mentioned that the appropriation request had already been reviewed by all of the other appropriate bodies prior to coming to the RTM, including the Board of Finance, Planning and Zoning Commission, Conservation, and the Flood and Erosion Control Board. However, it was noted by Colin Kelly that Conservation can only weigh in on the area of the project that is specified within the Water Protection Line Ordinance (WPLO) and does not go beyond that. They are required to look at the impact of a project on the river and other waterways.

Ellen invited members of the Tree Board to give their views on the proposal for Jesup and potential impact on trees. The comments were fairly consistent among them and included:

- Tall, mature trees take a lot of time to grow
- Current trees seem pretty healthy but are not maintained well
- There are other tall, mature trees coming down around town in addition to the ones proposed to be removed or moved here – this limits where Birds of Prey can land for hunting. You must have large trees to hold their weight
- Even less attractive trees provide landing spots for large birds; even trees that look dead provide important habitat for birds, other animals and insects
- In Westport, large trees are often viewed as liabilities vs assets
- Trees provide shade and absorb moisture

Committee members asked questions and expressed concern about the trees. One member of the public stated they thought there was a lack of a wholistic view of the river front and a lack of appreciation for trees

Meeting adjourned at 8:15. Submitted by Ellen Lautenberg