



MP3 COG Board
Tuesday, October 29, 2024
6:00 PM
Reading City Hall Council Chambers

Members: –L. Olsen (County), L. Kelleher (Reading) – in person and J. Baez, Jr. (Reading), K. Barnhardt (County), A. Sellers (Lower Alsace) - virtually

Members absent: K. Mallatratt (Alsace), J. Moore (Alsace Twp), B. Petrov (Mt. Penn), T. Goodman (Mt. Penn), D. Pottiger (Lower Alsace)

Others attending: K. Boyd and R. Tralies (Natural Lands), L. Lloyd (Berks Nature), C. Wegener and L. Falk (County Parks) – in person and K. Zeiber, M. Smith, L. Kissinger (City), B. Burkovich D. Hain (County Planning) - virtually

CALL TO ORDER

Ms. Kelleher called the meeting to order and stated that this meeting was scheduled for a presentation on the Trail and Forest Stewardship Plan, prepared by Natural Lands. She stated that Ms. Boyd and Mr. Tralies have been working on this plan for over a year with a committee composed of all the project partners.

Final Trail and Forest Stewardship Plan

Ms. Boyd described the process she and Mr. Tralies used to study and assess this 1000+ acre property. She noted that due to the size of the property and other factors the final draft is still being prepared. She explained that the plan can be used to support grant applications. She stated that they will review their top recommendations and prioritizations at tonight's meeting. She added that they will still accept comment and input about the plan until the document is completed near the end of this year.

- **Forest**

Conservation priorities critical to manage:

1. Forest Sustainability
 - Abundant and diverse natural plants allowing natural regeneration
 - Low pressure from stressors
 - Support wildlife
 - Lower maintenance needs
2. Compatible Recreation Opportunities
 - Public access through passive recreation
 - Plan and maintain infrastructure to protect natural areas and sensitive areas
 - Highlight resources through the location of trails and signage

- **Preserve-wide recommendations**

1. Improve safety
 - Expand ranger program
 - Increase volunteer activities
 - Organize additional clean-ups
 - Hazard tree management – remove standing dead trees and those affected by the emerald ash borer
 - Improved wayfinding signage with consistent naming
 - Improve stormwater management

Mr. Tralies stated that the one overriding complaint they received was the need to reduce the number of trails on Mt. Penn and improve the wayfinding signage. He suggested retaining a sign making consultant. He noted the need for consistency in the branding, typeface, tagline and color of all signs marking gateways, parking lots, landmarks, trails, etc. He added the need to identify trail types and the difficulty levels, like the signage at ski resorts.

Mr. Tralies recognized the work of volunteers to maintain various areas and he suggested a new focus on stormwater management to remove water from trails and properly directing where the water travels. Currently stormwater is wreaking havoc on the forest and damaging trails.

- **Trail Recommendations**

Mr. Tralies displayed a map of existing major trails and suggested connecting some of the smaller trail segments. He stressed the need to reduce the overabundance of trails on Mt. Penn and coordinating the trail names to lessen the likelihood of hikers and bikers getting lost. He stated that the map needs additional work and when this portion of the plan is implemented, the new system must be elevated/communicated on trail maps that are available at multiple locations on and off Mt. Penn.

Mr. Tralies stated that he walked approximately 38 miles of trails and dropped a geo-referenced photo into a map to capture the overabundant existing trail system with six broad categories of problems:

1. Obstacles to access
2. Braiding trails
3. Eroding trails
4. Hazardous trails
5. Steep slope or fall-line trails
6. Wet areas

Mr. Tralies noted that while there are too many trails they, overall, are not in terrible shape. Trails with problems can be eliminated or rerouted. Braided trails are trails with some problem that causes users to go around the problem area creating additional treads which expands the trail footprint and increases erosion problems. He displayed a photo of the gravity trail coming off Angora Road with extreme erosion caused by severe rainstorms due to insufficient stormwater management. He stated that this is one of the trails that should be rerouted with stormwater management techniques installed, such as raingardens and/or planting beds.

Mr. Tralies next displayed a photo of a trail with stone steps (located to the north of the List Road overlook area). He stated that as not everyone wants to bike or walk the steps, a workaround should be installed. He noted that there are places where trails dead-end into walls, these too require a workaround. He added that the final version of the plan will include recommendations for rerouting and workarounds.

Mr. Tralies noted the need for an arborist to perform an assessment and removal of hazard trees every two to three years. Hazard trees are trees leaning or hanging over trails or having vines intertwined in the canopies, which creates additional hazard trees. He noted that other issues that can create hazard trees such as wrapping a pad around a tree trunk.

- **Forest Stewardship Recommendations**

Ms. Boyd stated that the forest is composed of mostly oak trees with an open understory. Other areas have mixed hardwoods with a greater diversity of native trees with a good understory. However, there are areas where the understory is clogged with invasive species (mostly in areas adjacent to residential areas where people dump yard waste). This list of recommendations was developed:

1. Deer management
2. Invasive plant management
3. Exotic pests and diseases
4. Climate change
5. Wildlife habitat
6. Forest diversity
7. Water Quality
8. Hazard trees

Ms. Boyd stressed the need to continue using the USDA deer management program and consider expanding the program to additional publicly owned land, to help regenerate the forest. She suggested considering occasionally asking the Game Commission to allow sharpshooters to enter the forest and take out a larger number of deer. She noted that at some public meetings there were a few who objected to the deer management program, however, there were more who supported the program. She noted that there have been no safety or other issues caused by the program. Instead, she has seen an improvement in the undergrowth of saplings and other native plant life.

Ms. Boyd noted the need to start an invasive plant management program across the preserve and establishing a prevention program after the invasives are removed.

Ms. Boyd stated that new pests and diseases on the horizon are oak wilt, a pathogen that can cause the mortality of oak trees, which is a concern due to the large number of oak trees on the property, and beech leaf another pathogen causing the mortality of beech trees (more of a concern for Antietam). She noted the need for the arborist to keep abreast about the new pests and diseases and to research solutions.

Ms. Boyd noted the need to consider adding more resilient trees to protect the future canopy of Mt. Penn due to climate change stressors and to improve the habitat for wildlife.

- **Management Units**

Ms. Boyd stated that 22 management units were created across the preserve, prioritized and divided by condition, location and need. Twenty-one were created for Antietam. The potential stressors are identified with management strategies. An appendix will be included to offer techniques to address the problems identified such as climate change, invasive plants and their type, etc.

- **Implementation**

Ms. Boyd stated that Natural Lands staff collaborated to create the following implementation recommendations:

- Collaboration with various organizations on cross-boundary projects
- Share specialized knowledge
- Hold group workdays for pre-selected projects
- Create a User Council
- Create volunteer ambassadors

Ms. Boyd explained that a User Council would bring together those who currently use the preserve such as BAMBA, Berks Trail Works, Pretzel City Sports, etc. and others to share schedules, recruit volunteers for projects and events, and resolve conflicts.

Ms. Boyd stated that the plan will also identify various funding resources to assist with the plan implementation. She added that funding partnerships will be beneficial. For example, Berks Nature will be eligible for funding that the municipality and county are not eligible for. She stated that applying for grants through the MP3 will also be helpful as grant funders love to see applications where working partnerships are in place.

Mr. Tralies stressed the need to begin with the implementation of the following four recommendations:

1. Expand the ranger program to improve the perception of safety
2. Continue and consider expanding the deer management program
3. Create the Users Council
4. Improve signage and wayfinding with emphasis on major trails and landmarks.

Mr. Tralies noted the benefits that could occur through meetings of Mt. Penn Preserve users and the importance of talk to resolve conflicts.

- **Final Steps**

Mr. Tralies thanked everyone involved for their patience, as the plan was to be complete before the end of summer, but the size of the property coupled with the demands of health and family issues created delays. He stated that some additional time is needed to complete some of the maps, technical documents and conceptual plans. Those items should be completed by the end of the year.

Mr. Baez thanked Ms. Boyd and Mr. Tralies for the presentation. He questioned how injured users are assisted while on the trail system. Mr. Tralies stated that is dependent on the location

of the user and the first responder's ability to access that area. He noted the need for a discussion with the EMS Deputy Chief.

Mr. Baez suggested incorporating first-aid kits at locations in the trail system. Mr. Tralies stated that while that can be considered, that is something that would require constant management and something that would be exposed to vandalism.

Mr. Zeiber inquired if parking areas were considered. Mr. Tralies stated that the need to expand parking was identified on the BAMBA lot, adding parking on the northern side of Skyline Drive, and adding a new more visible parking area at Egelman's Park.

Ms. Sellers noted the need for improved pedestrian access for the adjoining municipalities to reduce the need for cars on the preserve. Mr. Tralies agreed and stated that he would reexamine the availability of a solution that would connect with or create a looped trail.

Ms. Sellers inquired about how the Gravity Trail would be rerouted. Mr. Tralies stated that the grade would be softened, and features like vegetation buffers, raingardens and tree saplings should be added to help get the water off the trail.

Mr. Kissinger and Ms. Kelleher thanked Ms. Boyd and Mr. Tralies for their work to complete this very comprehensive plan.

Respectfully submitted by Linda A. Kelleher, MP3 Secretary