

Acton
Land Stewardship Committee (LSC) Meeting Minutes
Tuesday, March 18, 2025, 7 P.M., Hybrid

Attendees (in bold)

Full (voting) members: **Bettina Abe, Jon Campbell** (Vice-Chair), **Dale Chayes, Aaron Moore, Bruce Rachman, John Watlington, Joe Will** (Minutes), **Tom Wolf** (Chair)

Associate (nonvoting) members: Ken Appel, Josh Haines, **Jody Harris, Rebecca Harvey, Everett Kenerson, Mel Lima, Bob Mackin, Adam Nolde, David Pinsky, Jim Salem, Bill Smith, Jason Temple, Todd Tsakiris, Bob Walton**

Others: **Ian Bergemann** (Community Conservation Specialist)

Tom opened the meeting at 7 p.m. It was noted that, per the State of Massachusetts, hybrid meetings like this can continue for at least another two years.

Review & acceptance of February 18 Minutes

Minutes were approved as distributed.

Concerns from the public

None.

Invasive plants, March 2025

Garlic mustard — Much of the information John shared can be found on the Acton Invasives Wiki garlic mustard page: http://ec2-44-218-8-154.compute-1.amazonaws.com/aiw/index.php?title=Garlic_Mustard

Brought here by early English settlers and kept in their gardens, garlic mustard is one of the first plants to come up in the Spring. Right now, mature plants are starting to grow leaves. Sometime over the next month the first-year plants will come out. Garlic mustard is very invasive and takes over. When it does, it tends to change the soil chemistry so that it really is the only thing that can grow in its place. The best way to identify garlic mustard is to grab a leaf and crush it. It produces a very distinctive garlic smell (that you'll hate after you've picked a lot of it).

A garlic mustard plant takes 2 years to mature and produce seeds. Its leaf and plant forms are very different from the first year to the second. See the Wiki page for pictures of first-year leaves and the second-year leaves, which can appear late in the first year. Over the next month or so (this year), a second-year plant will sprout a stem, very distinctive deltoid leaves, and flowers. When seed pods finally come out, they look like stems — dead stems almost. Break open a dried mature seed pod and you'll find a great number of small seeds — a point you don't want to reach as most garlic mustard spreads by seed.

If you attack the roots and you don't get all of them, then you are really attacking the same plants year after year . . . forever! Garlic mustard can develop a very "involved" root structure. If you pull up roots and you see a broken-off root stem, try to find and pull out the side lobe. Otherwise, it will sprout up as a mature plant next year, or even later this year, and go to seed. Roots of first-year plants and some second-year plants have an S shape right below the ground. This protects the roots. They break off at the S. You'll have a handful of stem, and the plant will regrow that stem later this summer and still try to go to seed. The checks to make sure that you have pulled garlic mustard is the garlic smell that you can't escape, and the S-shaped root stem.

This is one of the few invasives that you should not compost in place. Bag the plants you pull and put the bags in the trash.

Boardwalk Design Guide project

A link to the “Boardwalk Design Guide Revision Project” (that Bob is keeping current, i.e., its contents reflect actions that occur after this meeting):

<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1vqgZpeE5wAlpT0Fd2Fy7jKuWsIBtPfjM1gZYLssWVOc/edit?usp=sharing>

Bob suggests that the LSC have a special meeting on this, encouraging attendance at it particularly by stewards who have had experience with boardwalks, including Bruce Rachman, John, Jon, Dale, Bettina, Tom, and Ken Appel. It could be an abbreviated standard LSC meeting with limited time spent on other agenda items and major time on this topic. An overall goal would be a first draft that covers technical stuff, and then a second draft that is aimed at the scouts, likely with footnotes re any variations.

Discussion points:

- Dale cautions that we need to be careful not to cast decisions for the Design Guide “in stone” as we need to maintain some level of flexibility about what we choose to do in a particular place, and how we choose to do it.
- For such a special meeting, we need a “very solid” agenda because we've had guidelines for a long time that have worked really well. What are the questions? What is the problem or problems that we're trying to solve? What are we specifically looking to change? And why? And what is the goal, so that we stay on task. We should follow such an agenda so that we are not all over the place, and make sure we proceed in a logical manner.
- On the web page you can find something called “Boardwalk and Bridge Issues”. That's basically the agenda re the Guide.
- We should have a document that just says this is how we build the things we build and if something in there would be too complicated for a particular Eagle Scout project, a scouting service project, or anybody else, then that's not what we should be building. The alternative makes the document much more complex.

The Boardwalk Design Guide project will be the main part of the April agenda.

Great Hill Encroachment

John shared with the LSC his concern about the principal(s) at 187 Main Street encroaching on Great Hill Conservation Land. He presented this:

Motion: The LSC request that the Conservation Commission

- Construct a barrier across the property line to prevent further use of Town Conservation Land as a parking lot. Ideally, this barrier would be a rock wall and not just several large rocks.
- Plant saplings and native shrubs in this area to speed its restoration.

and provided this background using several visuals:

At this location there is a house with a shop in the backyard where there are also trucks, trailers and pieces of cars, many of which are in a Great Hill wetlands area as shown in a satellite photo with the property line superimposed. This has been going on for at least 10 years.

2007 (before John took notice): Satellite photos show clear incursion. Natural Resources (NR) Dept. visited the site and talked with the landowner.

2015: In May, John brought this to the attention of NR. The landowner removed the vehicles.

2017: John pointed out to NR that vehicles really hadn't been removed. They had been moved while NR was watching. NR talked to them again. They again reported that the vehicles have been removed.

2020: John reported it again, but this was right after COVID hit. He was told that NR would contact the landowner, but during this time of confusion, it was not clear what the Town did.

2025: Today it's worse than ever. The person living at 187 Main Street is associated with two different endeavors, an auto body shop and an excavation business. They are profiting from this use of Town Conservation Land as a parking lot for their businesses.

As best John can tell, this continues to occur because the Town, after telling them to move their vehicles, doesn't regularly monitor it. And, if there actually is no consequence for this use of Conservation Land, why monitor it? John believes that this needs to go to the Cons Comm, thus the proposed motion. Why a rock wall in the motion? It would provide a clear line, not easily moved by an excavation company, that could not be crossed for mowing, snowplowing, or parking. Why plant saplings and native shrubs? This would be a start of the land restoring itself, something that will take another 10-20 years.

Bettina seconded John's motion. (Dale third-ed it!) Discussion points:

- Could the landowner(s) "rent" the encroached conservation land? No, not legal.
- Somehow, they should pay over a period of years enough money to restore the area without anyone trying to enforce any rules.
- Both businesses are located elsewhere. The first time this was brought up, the Town thought it might be a zoning violation as well.
- The Cons Comm owns our conservation land, including Great Hill (which was created as both conservation and recreation land and deeded to the Cons Comm). It deals with things like this all the time. It's an infraction, it's an encroachment, and it is punishable and enforceable by the Cons Comm. John's correct — they should put in a rock wall and a line of trees. The Cons Comm often requests, or orders, such.
- The encroachment and wetland violation gives the Cons Comm two fronts on the issue.
- Do we have any insight into why there was no action on this issue earlier? Natural Resources (at the time responsible for what are now three separate Town Departments: Conservation, Cemetery, and Recreation) may have tried to deal with it on a personal level and it very likely never made it to the Cons Comm. There was also the pandemic.

Per Ian: If the LSC approves John's motion, Ian and Tom will work together on a letter to the Cons Comm. On a roll call vote, the motion passed unanimously. (Clerk's note: "187 Main Street – Encroachment on Town Land" was on the Cons Comm's April 16 and May 21 meeting agenda. Minutes not available yet.)

Bench Donation Policy

We discussed this last month. Since then, Ian has sent the relevant documents for all to review. Bettina helped update them. Any questions?

- The policy is for conservation land, with the provision that it also applies to recreation land at Great Hill. What about Morrison Farm? Ice House Pond? The Assabet River Blu and Green Trail? They are not conservation lands, so they are not under the jurisdiction of Cons Comm or the LSC, so the policy would not apply to them.
- Could the Bench Policy extend to those sites? If the Town Manager's office and/or the Select Board say "yes" because they are municipal properties. It's likely that both would be okay with this.
- The Policy refers to the Natural Resources Department. Does it still exist? No, now there is a Conservation Division. Ian can make the appropriate edits to the Policy.

The following was moved and seconded:

The LSC adopt the bench policy with the suggested edits just brought up.

On a roll call vote, the motion passed unanimously.

Procedurally, this will now go to the Cons Comm for its consideration.

Ian's updates

- Scoutland: Ian had a phone conversation with Bill Klauer, not about Scoutland, but just to break the ice. Ian and Bill will work together to do a history of the Conservation Lands in Acton. Possibly their conversations may turn to Scoutland.
- Land Steward Check Ins: Jody and Ian did their first one and it went “really well”. Bob’s check-in on Monday had to be cancelled. If a steward has not yet scheduled a check-in with Ian, use Ian’s on-line sign-up system, or email Ian with times that don’t work. Ian would like to do these Spring and Fall (probably not possible) but, ideally, once a year. Basically, they are a joint walk-around of your parcel. Ian will have a map on which to mark down project sites, either yours or one that would be fit for a Scout.
- Land Steward Logs: Ian has not had time to tally up this past month’s hours, but keep sending them. If you’re confused with this, reach out to Ian. Some stewards give really good examples of what to email Ian.
- Upcoming programs & volunteer opportunities: 9:30 to 12:30 on Thursday, April 17, is the Acton Boxborough Regional High School Senior Community Service Day. Let Ian know if you want to have a group registered to work with you. It can be any number of students. Whereas in general we don’t have lots of tools available, an appropriate project might be one that can be done by hand . . . clearing a space of wood for example . . . or pulling garlic mustard, as John may have a group doing. Anyone interested in hosting a student volunteer group should email Ian. He will send you the appropriate form. Bettina already has the form and will get a group — like maybe 15 — to pick garlic mustard at the Arboretum where John has cleared so much space.
- Ian expects to be doing a lot during April. It is going to be Invasive Species Month during which there will be education campaigns and volunteer opportunities re invasive species. John will be giving a lecture at the Library. Ian will have all program dates available for our April 15 meeting. By next week, everything should be posted on social media and in flyers around town.
- Pitch Pine Management: A short while ago Ian was in contact with the ecologist who helped write and get grants for the pitch pine management program at Mass Audubon’s Flat Rock Sanctuary in Fitchburg. He provided some good details about his grant work. Ian expects to work more closely with him and possibly apply for a habitat management grant this Fall to help with the Pratts Brook pitch pine population.
- Supplies: Ian is taking on a greater role with managing the budget for the Conservation Division. The Town is getting close to budget closing in July. John will be getting chainsaw gear. If anybody else needs up-to-date chainsaw gear for personal injury protection (PPE), or if there any supplies that stewards think they’re definitely going to need, let Ian know so he can start filling out purchase orders. Right now, the budget strictly for the Land Stewards is a little more than \$3,500, but there is also a materials budget that Ian will be using (e.g., for the PPE equipment).
- Other: Property on Triangle Farm Lane, visible from Camp Acton, has been purchased by a private party. The site shows evidence of clear cutting and construction. Ian may meet on site with Bruce Rachman and/or Acton’s Conservation Agent to see if there could be any issue with the Wetlands Protection Act, in which case the owners would have to meet with the Cons Comm.

Other Parcel Issues

- Morrison Farm: John expressed concern about the condition of the old shed in the paddock (east of the LSC shed). It’s a wooden structure built on top of a concrete block foundation that has toppled over on one side. It lost its tin roof about three years ago. It’s a dangerous structure and should be broken down. This comes up about once a year and the Town has to do something about it . . . at a minimum, put tape around it and post some sort of “Keep Out” sign.

Ian will ask the DPW about this.

Re the DPW: It has some farm equipment parked behind the Morrison Farm barn. The equipment hasn’t been moved in two years and now is underneath Asian bittersweet. If the DPW would move the equipment,

then the DPW could mow space, or John would mow it . . . as well as take care of half a tree that is down in the same place.

- Wills Hole/Town Forest: Its steward, Associate member Stuart Amir Lynn, has resigned. Bob walks Wills Hole occasionally and is willing to walk it more until it has a new steward.
- Great Hill: Bob has a potential candidate for Great Hill steward, but he would probably only do walking and reporting. Bob can probably convince him to carry a pruning saw and do small stuff.
- General: There have been a lot of trees damaged and down recently. So, when you walk your parcel, instead of looking down, look up to check for leaners, hangers, etc.

Other Updates

- Emails: There was discussion on whether stewards are seeing all emails, particularly the emails that go to their acton-ma.gov account. Per Ian, there are some stewards who are using their personal accounts instead, such accounts pre-dating the availability of acton-ma.gov accounts.
- Membership: Ian is considering a new approach to filling Land Steward positions, particularly the currently vacant positions for Wills Hole and Great Hill. He will make a flyer and possibly a small brochure that would be targeted at some of the expectations for a land steward (more than just going out once a month, walking, and being passive). He will send it to current stewards for their review before he posts it. In the meantime, if you have someone you think would be a good candidate for steward, have them contact Ian and he will set up a meeting with them. In searching for a land steward for a parcel, it could be helpful to look for one who lives near the parcel — for instance near Wills Hole are the Avalon and Nagog Woods developments; also the Sachem Way and Quarry Road housing.

Next month's (04/15/25) agenda

Continue with the Boardwalk Design Guide project. Buzz through all our usual things more quickly than usual, then spend the bulk of the meeting on that project.

Evaluate meeting

Great meeting!

Adjournment

At 8 pm.

The next meeting is tentatively scheduled for Tuesday, April 15, 2025, at 7 p.m.