

## MEMO

**To: Tunbridge Selectboard**

**From: Tunbridge Trails Committee**

**Re: Interim Report**

**Date: July 2, 2021**

The Trails Committee has held five meetings to date with steady attendance from the public. All minutes are available online for further review. Below is our understanding of what the Committee is empowered to do based on the April 11, 2021, letter from the Planning Commission to the Selectboard:

- *Understand seasonal issues and environmental impacts on the four trails*
- *Explore types and amount of current use of the four trails*
- *Develop communication strategies that support landowners and trail users (e.g., trail markers to keep users on trails and increasing pre-event dialogue/signage)*
- *Develop any trail re-routes that would ameliorate landowner and/or environmental impacts*
- *Identify sources of funding that can support recreational opportunities, including volunteer labor*
- *Work with trails experts who can assist in whatever way is appropriate for committee needs*
- *The Trails Committee will deliver an interim report to the Planning Commission no later than July 15, 2021 that will discuss work and findings to date, including next steps and opportunities*

Please note the Trails Committee is still seeking a member to replace Isaac Sacca, who resigned after the first meeting.

In addition to walking all the legal trails, we formed three subcommittees to focus on discovery. The subcommittees include Ecology, Trail Usage, and Community/Communication. The focus of each subcommittee is detailed below.

1. Ecology
  - a. Environment encompassing each legal trail, wildlife, plant life, human life, water soil
    - i. Current use and future use and related impact of increased use (by foot, by horse, by bicycle, e-bicycle). Data available?
    - ii. Input by trail experts to look at trails
2. Trail Usage Options
  - i. Research other towns (3-6?) about their trails
    1. Policies? No Policies?
    2. How is working? Not working?
    3. Process to get to this point? How did they reach this decision?
    4. Mixed Use Trails? Limited Use? Noting the areas of safety, agricultural impact and required management.
    5. Permits? What do they look like?
  - ii. Explore the Vermont Public Trails Network
    1. What is it?
    2. Benefits/Drawbacks?

### Does it fit Tunbridge?

3. Community: Legal trails a community recreation resource
  - a. What are reasonable limits for legal trails? Or no limits?
    - i. What does this mean for Tunbridge community as a whole? Any decision needs to be based on ecology, community fabric and the cost/benefit for each.
  - b. Landowners both abutting and beyond.
    - i. What kind of relationships does Tunbridge want with landowners? Adversarial? Collaborative?
    - ii. Is it possible to expand Tunbridge recreational resources in collaboration with landowners? Do we want to? If yes, then what do landowners need from Tunbridge-town/community?

### Initial Findings to report:

- Our trail visits showed that three of the trails (all but Falls Hill) potentially pass through wetland areas. We are exploring whether it makes sense to invite Vermont's Wetlands District Ecologist to visit the trails and whether there would be any fees for this review. John Echeverria commissioned Jeff Parsons to survey the wetlands around the Baptist Hill and Orchard Road trails. (This survey is on the website.) We are exploring whether to commission Parsons to survey the area around the Crossroad trail as well, and what that might cost.
- We talked to key personnel at ten neighboring towns to assess their history and current approach to Legal Trails. A summary of the findings is available. Legal Trails is a low priority for all of these towns and many consider this a non-issue. A couple of towns such as Norwich and Pomfret have utilized Ordinances for 10-20 years. The only example of a policy is the town forest policy in Randolph. Many refer to Legal Trails in their Town Plan or have a guideline governed by the Conservation Commission. There are good examples of trail usage beyond legal trails.
- Many residents of Tunbridge seem unaware of Legal Trails and the challenges surrounding them. We are continuing to brainstorm ways to connect with citizens who are online and those who are not. We are considering mailing a survey to get feedback from citizens who would not normally attend meetings or contact the committee directly. It would cost about \$250 to mail a survey to everyone in town.
- The required public format for the Trails Committee creates a challenging environment for frank discussions about the issues. The subcommittees are helpful to be able to focus on specific areas, but we need to have full group discussions and it is difficult to be open about these topics when in public view. This has hindered our progress toward creating a recommended course of action for Legal Trails.

### Next Steps and Opportunities:

- Subcommittees continue tasks and provide summaries for the larger Trails Committee
- Finalize survey questions for broader community communication
- Identify opportunities, challenges and roadblocks for trail development
- Submit proposed paths forward for Legal Trails for discussion within the larger group

### Requests for the Selectboard:

- Feedback on this progress report
- Adding an additional member to our committee
- Funding to mail our survey
- Possible funding for Project Review by ecologist and/or Crossroad trails survey by Jeff Parsons
- Suggested timeline for submitting final recommendations to the Selectboard