Chronology of Cornwall Trails Committee

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**Summary and Overview:** The development of recreational trails in Cornwall has long been of interest to town residents. In the Spring 2017, a Trails Committee was formed, made up of members of the Conservation Commission, the Planning Commission, the Recreation Committee and interested Cornwall residents. This committee explored numerous trail options in detail, including the creation of a trail around the Town-owned Douglas Pond, the usage of Class 4 roads, the creation of trails in the Cornwall Swamp, the Ledges off Route 125, and the Vermont Fish and Wildlife easements off of West Street. A list of more than twenty desirable criteria for trails in town was developed. The Committee submitted a technical planning grant application to the Vermont Urban and Community Forestry Program, but the grant was not awarded. The details of the work of the Committee are outlined below. Ultimately, two publicly accessible trails were identified, both on Vermont Fish and Wildlife easements off of West Street, and the initiative concluded by pursuing walks and outings, rather than developing trails. Although not a part of the work of the Trails Committee, a link to the 2005 *Town of Cornwall Bicycle and Pedestrian Planning and Feasibility Study* is provided in the last section of this report (Sources). The link to this report is included because it is relevant to renewed interest by residents in bicycle and pedestrian access (most recently expressed by residents at the August 2022 Planning Commission Public Information Meeting). This 2005 study evaluated several options, including the preferred alternative located adjacent to Route 30 and consisting of a 10’ wide shared use pathway along Route 30 from Route 74 to the Middlebury Town Line. In 2010, working with ACRPC and VTRANS, Cornwall received an enhancement grant and successfully added three-foot shoulders to Route 30 between Middlebury and Cornwall Village.

**Consistency with Town Plan.** In the current Cornwall Town Plan, one of the sections of Plan Implementation (page 117) states that the 2011 survey of residents “indicated that residents seek increased opportunities to recreate in Cornwall but are challenged by not knowing what is available and what lands are accessible. Of particular interest were: bike shoulders on Routes 74 and 125, possible use of the VAST trail. Network for summer hiking and horseback riding, trail connectivity into Middlebury…” Additionally, the implementation section of the draft 2022-2030 Town Plan states “More recently, the Select Board has identified the creation of multi-use trails as one idea in several to receive American Rescue Plan Act funding.” (Page 141, Draft Cornwall Town Plan, 2022-2030.)

**Formation of Trails Committee.** On December 13, 2016 two members of the Cornwall Conservation Commission, Mary Dodge and Bethany Barry, met with another interested Cornwall resident, Katherine Branch, to discuss mutual interest in developing a recreational trails network that would be accessible to residents. They decided to begin working toward this larger vision of greater public access by focusing on walking trails, identifying existing trails and natural areas that are currently frequented by the public. At this meeting, the group drew up a list of potentially interested Cornwall residents, and made plans to contact the Cornwall Recreation Committee. In addition, they decided to contact the Agency of Natural Resources to find out details about the Fish and Wildlife easements along West Street, trails accessing the Swamp, and any other areas of interest in the town. They also committed to contacting the Middlebury Area Land Trust (MALT) about using trails in the Ledges, the proximity of the Trail Around Middlebury (TAM) trail to Cornwall and accessing the Jackson property from the TAM.

**Solicitation of Committee Members.** At Town Meeting, March 6, 2017 Bethany Barry made an announcement about forming the Trails Committee and encouraged interested residents to join the Committee. The announcement at Town Meeting was followed up by emails to some town residents who were known to be interested in trails, or who had a trails background. These emails stated that the Trails Committee was “a group of residents who are interested in helping to establish a series of publicly-accessible walking trails in Cornwall”. The Town Clerk also sent out an email about the formation of the Committee.

**Trails Committee meetings.** Two meetings of the Trails Committee were held (April 13 and June 22, 2017), with smaller subgroups meeting informally through the first eight months of 2017. Twelve people attended the first meeting with representation from the Conservation Commission (Mary Dodge and Bethany Barry), the Recreation Committee (Annie Wilson) and the Planning Commission (Bobbie Carnwath). The full list of attendees on April 13th is as follows: Katherine Branch, Mary Dodge, Bethany Barry, Bobbie Carnwath, Rich Isenberg, Annie Wilson, Heather Workman, Jean Raymond, Conor Stinson, David Black, Miles Peterle, and Larry Clark. And attendees at the June 22nd meeting were: Bethany Menkart, Katherine Branch, Jean Raymond, Rich Isenberg, Abi Sessions, Bobbie Carnwath, and Lisa Calitri.

**Desirable criteria for trails.** At this April 13th meeting, a list of criteria for potential trails was developed, based on ideas from all meeting attendees, but not in priority order:

* Easy-to-follow
* Well-marked
* Take into account that wet areas will not be passable at times
* Consider edges of fields as possible trails/portions of trails
* Link trails to canoe put-ins
* Be sure the trail(s) are posted re acceptable & non-acceptable uses
* Need an oversight body to enforce acceptable trail use
* Quiet areas for trails
* Consider initiating trails in stages, rather than all at once, so there is an early success & don’t bite off more than we can chew
* Need to consider parking
* Don’t infringe on landowner privacy
* Consider trail loops, networks, collections, or connections
* Connect to TAM
* Consider trails that already are in existence or are already broken-in
* Don’t disturb existing ecosystems
* Consider a variety of trails and types of trails and their uses: all-season; seasonal; wheelchair accessible; special purpose; ski; snowshoe; horse; bike; good variety of types of trails
* Need to have landowners who are willing to have trails traverse their property
* Trails should facilitate wildlife sightings
* Types of trails: interpretative, both ecology and history
* Good mix of topography for a trail: some forested, some open parts, some hilly, some flat
* Posted usage and oversight mechanism
* Considerations of liability, extrication and insurance

**Trail location options explored:** Also at the April 13, 2017 meeting, the group began to explore the following options for trail locations:

* *Douglas Pond.* 7 acres; is the only town-owned property. Mary Dodge, Rich Isenberg and Abi Sessions will explore possibility of a trail around or near Douglas Pond
* *Class 4 roads*, including the old road between the church and N. Bingham. Richard Isenberg said he would research old Cornwall maps to identify Class 4 roads and will determine what the status of Class 4 roads are in terms of public access
* *Ledges south of 125*. There is a MALT conservation easement currently on part of the property, which does not include a trail easement. As part of the Recreation Committee’s work, Annie Wilson will research the feasibility of a public trail in this area.
* *Will and Caroline Jackson property*
* *Potential trail to Ann Story monument*; it is thought that the monument is currently only reachable via water route, but this is uncertain
* *Robbins Road.* This road is under consideration for discontinuation by the Cornwall Select Board
* *Old road between T. Tall and Gary Margolis* property

**Identification of Douglas Pond as site for trail.** After the April 13th meeting, Mary Dodge, Rich Isenberg and Abi Sessions began exploring the possibility of a trail around Douglas Pond. Their background work, including a scouting walk around Douglas Pond, formed the foundation for an application to the Vermont Urban and Community Forestry Program (VUCFP) for a technical planning assistance grant. In addition to walking Douglas Pond, the small group also contacted all adjacent landowners. During the spring of 2017, both the Select Board and the Planning Commission had Douglas Pond as an agenda items at several of their meetings. In order to give a fuller picture of this initiative, direct quotes from the grant application, excerpts from the minutes of Select Board and Planning Commission meetings and relevant emails are appended below.

*Description of the Douglas Pond Project*. From the VUCFP grant application: “The Trails Committee volunteers to take a leadership role in this project, in cooperation with other stakeholders, including adjacent landowners, and with the help of a planning grant from the VT Urban and Community Forestry Program (VT UCF). In this effort, we have the support of the Select Board (SB), Planning Commission (PC), the Conservation Commission (CC), and the Recreation Committee (RC). Douglas Pond and Woodland is the only public recreational area in Cornwall. Triangular in shape, bounded on one side by Douglas Road, it totals 7 acres. The Pond itself is but one acre in size, woods and wetlands occupy the rest of the area. Fed by two streams and a spring, the outflow of water is dammed where it flows under Douglas Road. Potential flooding is controlled by a large culvert situated below the height of the dam.”

*Presentation of Planning Grant to Select Board, May 2, 2017*. From minutes of the meeting: “Hiking Trails Planning Grant [sic; actual name of group is Cornwall Trails Committee]—[Mary, Katherine] Mary recapped a bit of background surrounding the evolution of the ad hoc citizens' Hiking Trails Group. The 7-acre parcel in question was purchased by a group of town residents who raised the necessary funds to secure the land for the Town as a recreational resource. The group was officially recognized as the Cornwall Conservation Committee, organized for the purpose of this purchase. The Trails group is newly formed and is separate from the CCC. Members are drawn from the community and include some who are on other committees such as the CCC, the PC, and the DRB. At their first meeting, they divided into sub-groups to focus on individual issues. The Douglas Pond group consists of Mary, Rich Isenberg, Abi Sessions. Katherine has extensive experience with the TAM group and has made herself available as a resource for the Douglas Pond group which is seeking to apply for the planning grant. The grant focus matches well with that of the Douglas group, the funding is to assist them in setting up trails and resolving impacts on and from water issues. Both the Douglas group and the grant focus on recreational use, technical assistance, and collaboration among community members. There are no actual money awards, and no matching funds required. To-date, the group's efforts have been to reach out to property owners in the pond's area, and to send out the proposal for creating the system to interested parties. The PC has been informally apprised of the plan, Mary expects to send them more detailed information pending the feedback received from the SB. The Board advised that a visit to the Planning Commission is particularly important as the PC is beginning work on its update of the Zoning By Laws and it is important that they and the Douglas Pond group be on the same page. The PC is the group specifically needed to approve of this project as they are charged with oversight of planning and land use throughout Cornwall. The SB itself is generally in favor of the trails project. When asked what the group will do if the grant fails to materialize, Mary indicated that they will continue as best they can with their efforts to create trails in the Douglas Pond area, but issues related to water impacts will have to be set aside. She noted that the area around the pond (i.e. the 7-acre parcel) is the easiest place to start as it is public land. Other areas they would like to include in the trail system require easements with each landowner involved and are thus more time and effort consuming. Mary will approach the PC about presenting at their next meeting.”

*Followup May 7th email from Mary Dodge to Trails Committee*. From May 7 Mary Dodge email: “the Select Board said at last week's meeting that they wanted to be sure that the Planning Commission supports our technical planning assistance application before they gave their support. In communication with Holly and Jamie, Planning Commission chairs, they have asked that us to send them a "copy of the application, any project description, maps and any written response from the surrounding landowners."

*Contact with abutting landowners indicated support.* May 11, 2017 Mary Dodge email to Planning Commission members Holly Noordsy, Jamie McKenna and Ben Marks (SB): “I wanted to let you know that Abi Session will be contacting the Douglas Pond abutting landowners on Saturday to ask for their written support for the technical planning application (they have already given verbal approval.)  As well as indicating their feelings about the project's desirability, she will also offer them an opportunity to express any concerns in writing. I will send them the application (2nd Draft: just a few changes.)  In the proposal is a description of the project, very briefly stated.  I also have a map which I can send to them. In communication with Holly and Jamie, Planning Commission chairs, they have asked that us to send them a "copy of the application, any project description, maps and any written response from the surrounding landowners."

Email from Abi Sessions to Mary Dodge, May 15, 2017. “Today I delivered hard copy of a letter from the Mortensens to Ben, along with hard copy of our letter. The Calzinis were not sure they would be able to get a statement written, but are generally supportive of the project.”

*Select Board vote to write letter of support for planning grant*, May 16, 2017: From minutes of the meeting: “Douglas Pond (Hiking Trails) Planning Grant—[Rich, Katherine] Review of the grant process to date, and discussion about letters received from the pond’s surrounding property owners. Letter from the Calzinis had particular concerns with issues of increased traffic, and the types of behavior and activities that often occur at parking access pull-offs. The Board expressed their feeling that the whole process has been too rushed and they question how deep the support for the project is, and how many Cornwall residents are actually aware of the plan at all, as there appears to have been little outreach involved. They favor slowing down the process in order to pursue more community involvement. Ben M MOVED, John SECONDED, that a letter indicating the Select Board’s support of technical assistance with the a [sic] planning study of the Douglas Pond area be written and that the planning process ensure that the needs and concerns of all Cornwall residents—Douglas Pond abutters as well as those living elsewhere in Town—be fully addressed. Motion passed—4 in favor, 0 opposed.” At this meeting, a letter from Albert Calzini was submitted which contradicted his earlier verbal support: “For all these reasons, I do not support the town seeking grant money to develop the Douglas Pond for recreation.” Nonetheless, as shown in the minutes, at that meeting the Select Board agreed to write a letter of support to submit with the grant proposal.

*Discussion at Planning Commission meeting, with Douglas Pond abutting landowners present*. May 17, 2017 Planning Commission meeting. A comprehensive discussion regarding the grant application took place at this meeting, with at least two residents who live near the pond in attendance (Eric Mortensen and Al Calzini). Issues discussed included: leaving the woodlands west of the Pond undisturbed, mitigating any possible undesirable activities, that any projects be small-scale, uncertainty whether trails could be developed on wetland areas, educational uses of the Pond and proximity of a potential small parking area to one residence. According to the minutes of this meeting, “The PC then determined that they feel it is worth exploring the potentials, but will not commit to supporting a final project, only the initial planning phase”.

*Grant not received.* At their July 19, 2017 meeting, the Planning Commission was informed that the grant was not received.

*Further communication with the Planning Commission.* In response to an inquiry from Mary Dodge about next steps since the grant was not received and about whether it would be possible to take some hand tools and clear a basic path around Douglas Pond, the October 2, 2017 email response from Holly Noordsy (Planning Commission chair) said: “I guess from my perspective, the Planning Commission's position on the grant would still hold here.  We'd want a member of the PC on the planning group, all the neighbors included (or given the chance to be) in the planning process and any plan brought to the PC before moving forward.  Also, since it is Town Land, we felt it was important for any meetings discussing/planning to be noticed and open to the public.”

On February 7, 2018, Mary Dodge corresponded again with Holly Noordsy via email proposing “a footpath and modest viewing area on the northern side of Douglas Pond,” with a process involving two volunteer Trails Committee members considering options for trail placement, determining how to maintain the footpath, contacting immediate neighbors, and sharing information at Town Meeting, as well as posting the proposed design on the Town website. On February 12th, Holly responded with criteria that the Planning Commission would require “to pursue any efforts at Douglas Pond”. In summary, “as Town owned land, any meetings would need to be warned and open to the public (with an agenda and minutes). ..Hosting a public forum and posting designs on the website (and in the newsletter and at Town Hall) for comments are important steps as well….Secondly, any planning group should contain a member of the planning commission to insure that the plans conform to town planning goals….We do not want to find ourselves in a situation where we might be competing for the same grant or town funds if we have another project we feel is a higher priority….Also, the neighbors need to be included from the very beginning of the project. They should be a part of any discussion to identify and map a possible trail.  They know the area and their concerns need to be addressed/incorporated from the beginning stages of planning”. Although the Planning Commission agreed to have further discussion of this project placed on its March 2018 meeting, the two volunteer Trail Committee members decided not to pursue the project, given the criteria proposed by the Planning Commission.

**Cornwall Swamp as location for trails.** The Trails Committee explored the possibility of the Cornwall Swamp as a location for trails, since much of the Swamp is publicly-owned land or conserved land. Mary Dodge made contact with Amy Alfieri, Vermont Agency of Natural Resources, who works out of the Dead Creek Wildlife Refuge. In a June 8, 2017 email to Mary Dodge, Amy Alfieri wrote that trails do not match the mission or goals for Fish and Wildlife land: “I was informed that the Middlebury Trails Committee is interested in developing trails at Cornwall Swamp WMA. Unfortunately, the Fish and Wildlife Department does not typically create trails because we promote *dispersed*, wildlife-based recreation such as birding, hunting, fishing, and wildlife photography. Most of the lands managed by the department have been purchased using funds from the Federal Aid for Wildlife Restoration which is a pool of money we get from the sale of firearms and ammunition. Hunters, birders, anglers, and others who participate in wildlife-based recreation are the constituents we serve, and our mission is conserve and protect fish and wildlife. In that manner, trails do not match our mission or goals for the lands we manage. As far as our mission and goals, developing trails poses changes to habitat and promotes concentrated recreation. Unfortunately, trails also promote uses that we do not allow on our lands such as mountain biking. In some cases, old logging roads may serve as helpful access points to WMAs, but at this time there is no harvest planned for Cornwall Swamp. Also, as a general rule, we don’t maintain those roads. You can find our Public Use Rules for State Lands on our website which outlines our policies.”

Mary Dodge wrote Amy Alfieri again, asking for further clarification and received a similar reply on June 26, 2017: “The [Fish and Wildlife] department is certainly interested in promoting wildlife-based recreation such as hunting, birdwatching, and wildlife photography, but a trail at Cornwall Swamp just isn’t fitting with our goals for the place and leads to conflict of use, enforcement issues, maintenance issues, soil compaction, trash, and other management challenges. There is improved parking at the WMA, and we invite people to walk through the woods.

**Class 4 Roads as possible trails.** The notes from the June 22, 2017 meeting show this summary from Rich Isenberg’s investigation, which showed that all Class 4 roads have reverted to private owners: “Class 4 roads as possible trails. All Town of Cornwall Class 4 roads were “thrown up” i.e. all roads given back to private owners.

* 1. Road from the church to Beaver Brook to North Bingham. Landowners include Van Vleck, Denton, Borden, Row & Pomieter.
  2. Other possible: Tully Road to where Mitchells used to live. MALT owns one of the properties. Dirt Capital properties & 2 other owners (town road to Ringeys then overgrown & Fritz). Bordeau Road to Tulley Road. Neither possibility has numerous landowners which is an advantage. We’re not sure how old the roads are therefore how much of a road base there still is.
  3. Other possibilities are really too short and don’t go anywhere.”

**West Street** **Fish & Wildlife publicly accessible easements.** There are two paths that branch off of West Street that are publicly accessible, as is clear from this March 14, 2016 to Katherine Branch from Jane Lazorchak, Land Acquisition Coordinator, Vermont Fish and Wildlife Department.  This email, quoted next, makes it clear that public access is permitted on the Fish and Wildlife easements along West Street: “Thanks for your interest in the Lemon Fair. Yes, we’ve closed on the Gorton property and you are free to access it down the dirt access road. At some point there will be signage but that tends to take some time with us. The Bonner acquisition also includes a lease to develop a parking area and a kiosk up by the road near the red barn. For now, yes, you are welcome to access through there and leave a car up by the road. Let me know if you need more details.”

**Other Possible Trail Locations,** At the June 22, 2017 Trails Committee meeting, there was further brainstorming about possible trail locations. Excerpts from the notes of this meeting are below:

a. *Churchill Franklin property. “*Bobbie said that Jim Duclos said that Churchill Franklin said he would like trails on his property to be used. It would be on his property along Ridge Road, might connect to informal trails along the Ledges. This seemed to be along the lines of “giving permission for your neighbors to enjoy a community resource”. Bobbie will follow up with Churchill. Churchill has also bought some of the Bingham property. Approach to landowners, including to Churchill, would have to be sensitive and take their needs and concerns into account.”

1. *Lemon Fair River area.* “Another possibility along Lemon Fair & perhaps the State has an easement along it. There is a small parking area on 125 for 4-5 cars.”

**Follow-up activities focus on walks and outings.** A March 21, 2018 email to the Trails Committee from Mary Dodge proposed shifting the focus of the Trails Committee to walks and outings, excerpt following: “…discussions about changing the focus of the Trails Committee to that of a Walking or Outing Club. The idea is something that came out of a conversation between Bethany [Barry] and Rich [Isenberg] as they reflected on the challenges we face in making headway with trails in Cornwall….” Subsequently the Conservation Commission sponsored several walks in Cornwall including an amphibian walk on May 18th, 2019 lead by herpetologist Jim Andrews and a walk at the Cornwall Orchards B&B property with field biologist Craig Zondag leading on November 2nd, 2019. According to a town-wide email from Sue Johnson sent on May 3rd, 2017, the Cornwall Recreation Committee planned to hold part II of the MALT Trail hike, off from the Foote Farm property, on May 13th at 10am, meeting at the access site at the end of Hamlin Road.

**Source material:**

Select Board meetings:

May 2nd, 2017. https://cornwallvt.com/minutes/select/050217final.pdf

May 16th, 2017. <https://cornwallvt.com/minutes/select/051617final.pdf>

Planning Commission meetings

May 17, 2017. <https://cornwallvt.com/minutes/planning/051717final.pdf>

Cornwall Town Plan: <https://cornwallvt.com/pdf/town_plan_2013-2017.pdf>

Relevant emails are cited within the text with the sender, recipient(s) and date

Grant application to the Vermont Urban and Community Forestry Program (VUCFP) for a technical planning assistance grant, Spring 2017. Document available upon request from Mary Dodge, mdodge@middlebury.edu

Town of Cornwall Bicycle and Pedestrian Planning and Feasibility Study, 2005:

<https://acrpc.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Middlebury2Cornwall_BikePed_20060418.pdf>