

Mount Toby Meeting Land Use Committee
Report – June 2015

At its June 2014 meeting for business, the Meeting approved continuing to maintain 44 acres of our land under forest management under Massachusetts Chapter 61, with the remainder of our land classified as recreational under Chapter 61B. The Meeting asked the Land Use Committee to facilitate further education and discussion about use of the land, specifically including Young Friends. This is our report on that activity.

In August, our forester provided us with a 10 year forest management plan for the 41 acres east of the power lines that have been under “active management” and were harvested in early 2014.

No harvest is recommended as part of this ten year plan (2014-24). While the plan can be changed with some effort, we are not expecting to change it before the end of this 10 year period.

This arrangement allows us to maintain the status quo, with 70 acres classified as recreation land (Chapter 61B), and 41 acres classified as actively managed (Chapter 61), but with no harvest recommended or required in this ten year period. Because the management plan was finished after the official June 30 deadline, we placed the 41 acres in Chapter 61A for this year and expect to file for 10 year Chapter 61 status this month.

This arrangement provides us with an opportunity for reflection and planning without time pressure.

During this winter and spring, we provided several opportunities for input:

A fellowship lunch discussion in April drew more than 30 people. The conversation and accompanying collection of maps was more an opportunity for the committee to share information than for informed input. A group of Young Friends hiked to the top of Mount Toby that morning and were planning to return in time to participate, but they were not back in time.

We arranged a walk with our forester to and around the actively managed portion of our land in early May. This was attended by 10 people. Two themes emerged from this conversation: the long term vision required for forest management, and the emphasis that the harvest had placed on increasing the species and age diversity of the 40 acres under management.

We scored an 11:40 hour session for late May, which we structured as two rounds of worship sharing in response to the questions:

* What has been your experience of the land? What does it mean to you?

* What are your ideas about the future of this land and our relationship to it?

This provided space for a rich sharing of many of the perspectives we have heard in recent years. More than 30 people participated. However, there was no participation by Young Friends. Notes are attached.

Our reflection on the 11:40 hour sharing, and questions and comments from our fellowship lunch and forest walk, provide the basis for our recommendations below.

In other activity this year, YFs have led two walks this spring to the top of Mt Toby, and YFs informally assessed the potential for a renovated or reconstructed bridge across the stream. The committee had hoped that conversations about land use could be a way to tap a new perspective and to deepen Young Friends' connection to the meeting, but this has not happened.

Committee activity this spring has raised somewhat the level of awareness about this land in the meeting. In every conversation, we have heard a sense of affinity for the land. There is a desire to do right by it and with it. At the same time – for most of us, most of the time – the land is still out of sight and out of mind.

While we have heard proposals from individuals – for example to give the land away, turn its management over to a land trust, or to offer it as a site for green burial in Franklin County – we have not sensed a spiritual groundswell in the meeting for any such change, yet.

We have also heard a wide range of ideas on what good stewardship means in practice. In some cases, differences are based on differences in scientific knowledge of the consequences of our action and/or inaction on the land. In some cases, differences stem from different senses of ethical responsibilities to individual living things on the land, and to the land community as a whole and the human communities that depend on it. We believe our practices on the land should be informed by the best science available, and that educating ourselves about this should be a high priority for us as a community.

We have also heard a questioning of the meanings and responsibilities of “ownership”, including questions about how the land was taken from native inhabitants.

In all these cases, we hear the Meeting saying that our practical stewardship of this land is and should be a spiritual endeavor. Decisions that require us to know the land and its history – and each other’s sensibilities – will provide an important grounding spiritual opportunity for our community as we enter a time of accelerating climate change.

The next ten years of “status quo” with respect to our official forest management plan are an opportunity for the meeting to get to know the land and each other, and to allow any potential spiritual groundswell to emerge.

We see an important role for this committee in facilitating deeper engagement that will enable the meeting to develop a plan that we all understand and are committed to.

In our facilitator role this year, we plan to:

- Lead guided walks looking at the land from different stewardship perspectives
- Provide maps and other printed information to spur interest and exploration
- Expand the visibility of our current display of maps outside the Champney room
- Expand our recent web page on the Mt Toby web site
- Post signs that clearly mark our access to the land via our road bridge right of way
- Designate parking for 2 or 3 cars at the trailhead on the other side of the wetland
- Erect a trailhead kiosk for posting maps and notices at the gate at the southwest corner of the play area
- Discuss changing the name of the Committee, perhaps to something like Land Stewardship Committee

To help implement these plans we request that the Committee be expanded by the addition of at least two new members, perhaps including a Young Friend or two.

Committee Members: Audrey Barker-Plotkin, Ken Hoffman, Sally Shaw, Will Snyder (clerk)