

Mount Toby Meeting Land Use Committee Annual Report – September 10, 2017 MfB

The heart of the matter: Owning land, and wrestling with making decisions about it, is a spiritual privilege and discipline. If this ever ceases to be the case, and the land becomes largely a burden to be managed, we should seriously consider divesting ourselves of this burden.

1. Activities

We made progress on the goals we outlined in our report from July 2016:

- **Continued trail-marking and mapping.** An updated trail map was included in the Autumn 2016 Mount Toby Handbook. The trail to the overlook and the ‘Rabbit Hollow Trail’ have trail markers.
- **Kiosk behind meetinghouse & trail signs at key junctions.** We are slowly developing the content and locations for these waypoints. David Scott has offered to construct a kiosk and signs. We recently designated Ken Hoffman as a liaison to work with David on these projects.
- **More hikes!** In our continuing effort to encourage the Meeting community to become more engaged with our woods, we hosted hikes in October, November, January, April, and May. In addition to hiking trails on the Mount Toby land, we also: walked on water when the wetland behind the meetinghouse was nicely frozen; had a ‘sitting walk’ in which we walked in a short distance to the ‘Pine Tree Circle’ with chairs to offer an opportunity to those with limited mobility; hiked from the Mount Toby land to Mount Toby itself (as far as the asphalt road, not the tower); and hosted a vigorous hike from Bull Hill back to the Meetinghouse that included bushwhacking. We didn’t track attendance, but estimate that most hikes attracted 6-12 people, and that at least 25 Friends beyond this committee membership participated in one or more outing. We also hosted a discussion at the June 2017 Retreat that drew 5 Friends, none of whom had been part of the hikes.
- **An agreement with our neighbors that alleviates the issue of our trees falling on their land.** This occupied a substantial portion of our energy during the past year and is covered in the next section.

2. Improving Neighborly Relations

Background: Problems associated with trees falling onto the property and driveway of our neighbors Bob Strong and Micha Archer have been a recurring issue.

Summary: After attempting to negotiate a transfer of land along the boundary (see November 2016 MfB), we decided to have 3 pine trees cut down that could cause property damage if they fell (see July 2017 MfB).

At the 13 November 2016 MfB, the Land Use Committee recommended that the Meeting transfer the land west of the current woods road and adjacent to the Archer/Strong house & driveway to Archer/Strong. The Land Use Committee was clear that by transferring the land, the Meeting would gain a valuable buffer that reduces concerns about potential hazard trees along the boundary. Overall, the Meeting supported this transfer of ownership.

A proposal for land transfer was sent to Bob and Micha on 5 December 2016, with a response deadline of 31 May 2017 (Appendix A). Bob and Micha declined to move forward with the proposed transfer, and the offer has been withdrawn. We have therefore looked for other ways of keeping relations amicable:

- i. The MfB on 9 July 2017 approved spending up to \$1000 from the Mount Toby Capital Fund and contracting with The Whole Tree, in Leverett, to cut down three large pine trees on

Mount Toby land that could cause property damage if they fell toward Bob and Micha's home. To be clear, if these pines fell (at least in their current state of health), the Meeting would not be legally liable for any property damage, but we wish for smooth neighborly relations, in the spirit of 'good fences make good neighbors.'

- ii. If a tree from Mount Toby falls across Bob and Micha's driveway, Brad Archer has offered to clear the driveway. We are working on securing a back-up person who can do this in case Brad is unavailable.
- iii. Will Snyder will continue to be our designated contact person in case Bob, Micha, or others staying in their house need to contact the Meeting. Will can also reach out to touch base with them once a year.

3. Committee Name

We recommend changing out name from "Land Use Committee" to "Land Committee." This both reflects the simple naming utilized for most other Mount Toby committees (e.g. 'Meetinghouse,' 'Grounds') and acknowledges that the land has value that transcends its use. **(This name change requires Meeting approval)**

4. Long-term Forest Land Management

After discussions and learning more about Mount Toby's acquisition of the land and forest management over the past 45 years, we concluded that a long-standing intention of making money for the Meeting or that could be put toward 'good works' by managing some of the land for timber has not been realized. Although there are other reasons for timber management, we recognize that this is not a focus or passion for the Meeting. It also requires a great deal of energy every 10 years on the part of this Committee, most of whose members may lack the expertise to do the required analysis easily. Therefore, when the current Chapter 61 plan that covers 40 of our 119 acres is due for renewal in eight years, we expect to recommend that the Meeting place all of its land into Chapter 61B (current use tax for recreation forest; the tax rate is 25% of the assessed value). Most of the forested land is already in Chapter 61B, so the increase in our taxes would be fairly small. This designation does not preclude timber harvesting, but neither does it oblige us to harvest (as does Chapter 61).

(This is a recommendation that does not require action until our current 10-year Forest Stewardship Plan would need renewal, in about 8 years).

5. Goals for the coming year

- Continue to discern the long-term goals for the land. Part of this is to encourage the Meeting community to engage with the query, 'How is Mount Toby's spiritual life enriched by its forest land?' Another part of this is to explore alternatives to ownership such as selling or giving the land to a conservation or public organization with a conservation restriction.
- Continue to organize varied opportunities for Meeting members to engage with the land. In addition to hikes, we are contemplating offering other experiences such as a scavenger hunt or an accessible short walk to a place to sit in the forest.
- Continue to encourage ease of navigation by adding more trail markers, signs, and a kiosk with trail and natural history information about the land.
- Resolve the neighbor/tree issue
- Develop a 'land improvements wish list' so that when enthusiasm arises for a land-based activity/project, we can be ready with a list of excellent options.

Committee Members: Ken Hoffman, Roger Conant, Will Snyder, Audrey Barker-Plotkin (clerk)