

Mount Toby Meeting Land Committee Annual Report – June 2019

We continued our focus on bringing opportunities for the Mount Toby community to experience the land, and on strengthening connections with neighbors and the larger community. We developed an official charge for this committee, and began to make progress on permitting and a construction plan for a new footbridge across the river, so that trails from the Meetinghouse to the woods remain entirely on Meeting-owned land.

1. Land Committee Charge and Revised Handbook Description

At long last, we are responding to the minute of 1972.11.08.11 in which the newly formed Land-use Committee was asked to develop its charge. This is our official charge, and is also an updated Committee description for the Handbook.

Audrey Barker Plotkin & Will Snyder presented this to the MfB on 8 September 2018. Much discussion ensued, in our view highlighting the value of the primary purpose we articulate for this committee, to serve as ‘the steward of questions about the Meeting’s relationship to its land.’ We then revised the charge. The revised charge was discussed and approved, with 2 minor revisions at MfB 13 January 2019. Here is the final text:

Land Committee

The Land Use Committee was created 11/1972 when the Meeting took on title to 119 acres of land in Leverett and Sunderland that was formerly part of Ethel DuBois’s Long Plain Nature Center. At the time of European Contact, it was part of the land under the care of the Nipmuc people. The committee name changed to the “Land Committee” in 9/2017. Broadly, the Land Committee is the steward of questions about the Meeting’s relationship to this land. We use the word “land” in the sense of Aldo Leopold: “Land is not merely soil, it is a fountain of energy flowing through a circuit of soils, plants and animals.” Specifically, the Land Committee’s duties include:

- Encourage and facilitate the Mt. Toby community’s spiritual and physical relationship with the land
- Serve as point of contact for questions regarding the Meeting’s land outside of the fenced areas (these are the purview of the Grounds and Burial committees)
- Liaison with abutting land owners and parties who have a right-of-way on Meeting lands
- Consult with the Meeting regarding leadings about potential uses and activities for the land that are healthy for people and the land.
- Manage the human uses of the Meeting's forest and farmland.
- Assist the Treasurer to prepare current-use (Chapter 61/61B) tax documents for the towns of Leverett and Sunderland, due each September.

One or two members should have experience in conservation and/or forest management. See also **Land History and Uses** (page 59).

Revised by the Land Committee, November 2018.

2. Bridge Planning

We collaborated with Brad Archer to develop a plan to construct a new footbridge across the stream, so that trails from the Meetinghouse to the woods remain entirely on Meeting-owned land. The basic plan is to use two, 32-foot locust logs (very rot-resistant and available to Brad) to span the river, and to level the two ends using re-purposed concrete parking barriers (formerly used in the Meetinghouse parking lot). We would need to purchase or procure 4’ long decking and hardware for the project.

The permitting process proved non-trivial, as the bridge (by definition) location is in an area regulated by the Massachusetts Wetlands Protection Act. We filed a ‘Request for Determination of Applicability’ (RDA) with the Leverett Conservation Commission. After a site visit and public hearing (6/3), the Commission determined that a Notice of Intent is not required, but that there are a few conditions to the project. These conditions should be do-

able with some advice from the Leverett Conservation Commission and will not be expensive. We also discovered that since the bridge site is in an area identified as Priority Habitat (for a state-listed wildlife species), that we need to file a MESA form (Massachusetts Endangered Species Act) with MA Natural Heritage and Endangered Species Program (NHESP). Fortunately because of the small size of this project, NHESP personnel conducted their review based on our RDA and waived the MESA filing and fee requirement. NHESP determined that the bridge will not adversely affect the Resource Area Habitat of state-protected rare wildlife species.

3. Trail access to the broader community

We continued to work with Rattlesnake Gutter Trust (RGT) to better document our trails, and to add our main walking trails to the RGT maps of trails in Leverett, with public parking designated at the Meetinghouse. Building the bridge will avoid walking across Brad Archer's fields, an important consideration when making the Meeting trails more accessible/known. We also considered that part of the trail is along a woods road that forms a shared boundary between Mt. Toby and Strong/Archer, and reached out to our Strong/Archer neighbors to discuss.

Roger Conant was our committee liaison with RGT. With Roger's recent passing, we need to designate a new liaison and reach out to Eva, his main contact.

4. Continue to organize varied opportunities for Meeting members to engage with the land.

We led 3 walks this past year

- a. An early fall (9/16) hike to explore possible new trail to overlook (8 humans; 1 dog)
- b. Thanksgiving hike to Mount Toby (the mountain) 11/23/18
- c. A summer stroll on 6/30/19

5. Continuing & new goals

- 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?' Continue to explore alternatives to ownership such as selling or giving the land to a conservation or public organization with a conservation restriction (the idea of a conservation easement first appeared in Meeting minute 1974.06.09.15).
- Continue to organize varied opportunities for Meeting members to engage with the land.
- Build a new bridge
- Continue to consider ways to engage the wider community by working with Rattlesnake Gutter Land Trust to add our trails to town-wide trail maps.
- Populate the kiosk with trail and natural history information about the land.
- A new goal is to explore opportunities for outdoor worship, such as outdoor seated worship near the Meetinghouse, and walking worship.

Here is our '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.

- Add trail markers to the 'red' trail
- Add signs at trail junctions
- Develop seating & a 4-season vista at the overlook
- Revive trail connecting overlook and Rabbit Hollow Trail
- Naming special places on the land

Committee Members: Roger Conant, Emi Link (joined September 2018), Will Snyder, Audrey Barker-Plotkin (clerk). We note with appreciation the long service of Ken Hoffman, who rotated off this committee in August 2018, and Roger Conant, whose contributions we will greatly miss.