

## VHCB Conservation Issues Committee

Wednesday, August 5, 2020

### Meeting Minutes

Present on Zoom call:

Board: David Marvin, Neil Mickenberg, Billy Coster, Marie Audet, Tom Yahn

Staff: Bill Dell'Isola, Ethan Parke, Ela Chapin, Elizabeth Egan, Gus Seelig, Jen Hollar, Karen Freeman, Mark Martin, Nancy Everhart

Partners and Guests: Nick Richardson, Maggie Donin, Tracy Zschau, Britt Haselton, VLT; Ian McSweeney, Agrarian Trust; Kate Wanner, Trust for Public Land; Becca Washburn, Gannon Osborne, VT FPR; Jane Lazorchak, VT F& W; Megan Chapman, Upper Valley Land Trust; Hayden Smith, Lake Champlain Land Trust

David Marvin called the meeting to order at 11:00 am.

Farmland Access and new Farmland ownership models – Nick Richardson and Maggie Donin of VLT provided updates on VLT's work to increase the pace of farmland access projects, including the Farmland Futures Fund to provide capital needed for this effort. Ian McSweeney of the Agrarian Trust discussed the Agrarian Commons model, which seeks to address inequities and affordability issues in land access by separating the land ownership from that of buildings and operation, similar to the community land trust housing model. This model is just launching in Vermont, focused on an upcoming VHCB project in Chittenden County (Auclair farm).

VHCB Outdoor Recreation Policy – Bill Dell'Isola gave an overview of the proposed revisions for the VHCB Funding of Public Outdoor Recreation policy and summarized the partner feedback. Updates to the Policy revolve around incorporating new guidelines and standards relating to outdoor recreation and natural resources, emphasizing community benefits, inclusion and diversity, and economic principles. An overarching goal of the Policy is to produce projects that balance natural resource and outdoor recreation values to support smart planning for recreational lands and enrich the lives of all Vermonters. Partner feedback that will be addressed before adopting the Policy includes providing more clarity, detail, and collaboration on stewardship, commercial uses, fees, and criteria and process for ecological assessments. Staff and board agreed to extend the timeline to adopt the updated policy so that staff can continue to collaborate and appropriately incorporate feedback from partners. The goal is to have the Policy adopted at the December 11, 2020, VHCB board meeting instead of the September 16, 2020 Board meeting. In the meantime, VHCB staff will continue to engage partners regarding their feedback, including a full partner meeting/discussion in mid-September.

Farmland Conservation Project Funding Caps – Nancy Everhart summarized the recommended changes to the Appendix of VHCB's Conservation of Agricultural Lands policy pertaining to per project and per acre caps and proposed changes in the criteria for waiving the caps. These proposed changes will increase the caps which have been the same for the past ten years and streamline the policy so that the

same criteria will be utilized for both the per project and per acre caps. Staff is recommending revised criteria for waiving the caps and raising the per cap from \$3,500/acre to \$4,200/acre and increasing the project cap from \$500,000 to \$550,000. Billy made a motion, seconded by Neil, to recommend the Board adopt the revisions to the farmland conservation project funding caps. The motion carried unanimously.

Landowner Stewardship Contribution for farm projects – Nancy Everhart noted that farmers have been required to contribute to the easement stewardship endowment since 2013, as part of a broader effort to contain the costs of farmland conservation projects. But since then, and particularly with the added economic challenges for farmers due to COVID-19, a majority of landowners qualify for the exemptions to the requirement. Along with the administrative costs for the payments received, the landowner's contribution to the stewardship endowment is no longer an effective mechanism to achieve that goal. Staff recommends that VHCB drop this requirement from the program. Tom made a motion, seconded by Marie, to support the staff recommendation. The motion carried unanimously.

Neil Mickenberg left the call.

Retro OPAV Policy – Mark Martin summarized the proposed revision to VHCB's Option to Purchase at Agricultural Value Acquisition Program Policy. The proposed revision allows VHCB to grant an extension to the 12 month application deadline in situations where VHCB may not have funding resources available to purchase retro-OPAV's on conserved farms and also defines criteria to determine when VHCB would want to be a co-holder, or have other legal standing, on a farm previously conserved without VHCB funding, in addition to the retro-OPAV. Motion by Billy, seconded by Tom, to recommend the Board adopt the revisions to the OPAV policy as proposed. The motion carried unanimously.

Public Comment and Other Business- Tracy Zschau expressed her appreciation for the policy work and the service this brings to Vermont landowners and communities.

Meeting was adjourned at 1:10.