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Master Plan Ad Hoc Committee Minutes of the Meeting February 9, 2023

Call To Order, Pledge of Allegiance: William Connolly, Chairperson of the Warrington Township Master Plan Ad Hoc Committee, called the meeting to order at 7:00 pm. Mr. Connolly led those present in the Pledge of Allegiance.

Present were:

William Connolly, Chairperson, Warrington Township Master Plan Ad Hoc Committee
Eileen Albillar, Vice Chairperson, Warrington Township Master Plan Ad Hoc Committee
Lynn Laurelli, Secretary, Warrington Township Master Plan Ad Hoc Committee
Joanne Mancini, Member, Warrington Township Master Plan Ad Hoc Committee
Christian Jones, Member, Warrington Township Master Plan Ad Hoc Committee
Melissa Conte, Member, Warrington Township Master Plan Ad Hoc committee
Michael Parker, Member, Warrington Township Master Plan Ad Hoc Committee
Phillip Rittenhouse, Member, Warrington Township Master Plan Ad Hoc Committee
Patricia Tuberty, Member, Warrington Township Master Plan Ad Hoc Committee
Mary Roth, Alternate Member, Warrington Township Master Plan Ad Hoc Committee

Also present were Vincent Kelly, Ivy Ross, Barbara Brown, Ruth Schemm, and Mike Diorka, all members of the public. Two additional members of the public attended the meeting virtually.

PUBLIC COMMENT – none currently.

3. NEW BUSINESS

a. Consider January 12, 2023, Minutes for Approval.

Mr. Connolly asked if there were any comments or corrections to the January 12, 2023, Committee meeting minutes. There was one correction, the phrase, "Ms. Doyle asked Mr. Connolly if the Master Plan covers all three preserves, which it does." should be corrected to, "**Ms. Roth** asked Mr. Connolly if the Master Plan covers all three preserves, which it does." Ms. Albillar made a motion, seconded by Ms. Conte, to approve the Corrected January 12, 2023, meeting minutes. The Corrected January 12, 2023, meeting minutes were approved by the Committee members.

1. MEMBERS' COMMENTS:

Ms. Conte said she had emailed her comments. Ms. Conte asked, "How does the voting structure work? Mr. Jones has a vote, and Ms. Albillar has a vote." Mr. Connelly replied that the nine members have a vote. Ms. Albillar will vote here and at the Supervisor's meeting. We will vote on the advice from the Committee. We will try to pursue a consensus.

Ms. Conte asked if there are workshop meetings too. Is it possible to have a workshop? Mr. Connelly replied yes and there will be free participation.

Ms. Conte asked if the members could receive the agenda earlier. One day's notice is not enough time to review. Can it go to the members five to seven days before the meeting? Mr. Connelly said he totally agrees with that. The Committee can discuss what we would like to see on the agenda. The delay in sending out the agenda this time concerned the drone footage.

2. OLD BUSINESS:

a. Mill Creek Drone Footage Review

The drone footage was displayed for everyone in the room to view by Mr. Jones. There were two videos, and the file date was last winter.

b. Discussion of Open Space Misconception

Mr. Connelly commented regarding the bond issue that the voters had approved. A copy was in the email mailing. Regarding the Return on Environment Studies – there are three Return on Environment studies: The DVRPC study in 2011, the Montgomery County study which was very recent, and the Warrington Township Study which was done in 2017. The resolution authorized the bond issue. This is what the voters saw. The text read "improve and to preserve open....." in other words, improve the land we already own and acquire more land. Ms. Tuberty asked if these proposals will improve the open space or will they degrade the open space. Mr. Connelly stated that people voted to purchase and improve. Ms. Albillar said that money was used to purchase Mill Creek. Mr. Connelly said improving was part of what was approved. It does not say maintain. No one knew what those improvements would be.

Mr. Connelly stated that there are four ways to get money: Bond issue, open space fund from developers, capital fund, or capital spending in the annual budget. Where to get the money is the Board's function.

3. NEW BUSINESS:

a. Discussion of Habitat Disturbance Issues

Mr. Connelly said there are five points in Ms. Tuberty's document entitled "Identification and Listing of Issues with the Mill Creek Master Plan."

Ms. Tuberty asked if the installation of trails and boardwalks is improving that land. Bringing the public in will not improve the land. Regarding boardwalks – is this preserving and protecting space? Reforesting meadows?

Ms. Albillar stated that reforestation is beneficial. Regarding public access, this means having access to all the areas for township residents. The residents voted and paid for this. Professionals created the report. All residents own the Mill Creek space.

Ms. Conte asked if this is necessary for all the residents. The township has enough trails, and they are not busy. Let nature be. Focus on how this will disrupt the habitat. Tonight's discussion is the habitat issue.

Mr. Connelly said that the stem of the question is that the township's goal is not just preserve and protect. There is a PNDI report included in the Committee's packet because an environmental assessment was done based upon the property being used as a passive recreation area. Page 2 and 3 of the introduction included in the Mill Creek Property Environmental Assessment from February 2019 and the Pathways Document to our Future discuss the serious lack of passive recreational opportunities. There is plenty of active recreation but little passive recreation.

The Mill creek property is a gorgeous piece of property to enjoy. That was the intent from the beginning. Ms. Roth stated that she realized that was what the purchase was for. People wanted more passive recreation.

Pathways Document to our Future is located on the resource's website.

Mr. Parker talked about funding for trail linkages and trailhead expansion. The trail system does not enter Mill Creek but provides access to it from Lower State Road.

Ms. Tuberty stated that the residents' focus group responses said existing boundary trails should be enough. Habitat should be a priority.

Mr. Connelly said it is important to get people to pay attention to the issues.

Ms. Tuberty asked if this is going to be part of a tax increase. Mr. Connelly replied that no – money comes from non-tax sources and the maintenance costs will be small. The cost to the township of maintaining the sixty detention basins is what is expensive.

Ms. Conte said that she has questions regarding habitat disturbance. For example, point 1, What is the list of protected species? Mr. Connelly replied there are no protected species at Mill Creek. The PNDI (Pennsylvania Natural Diversity Inventory) report dated April 8, 2016, said there is no known impact to any threatened and endangered species and/or special concern species. The Great Blue Heron is a species of special review. The Pennsylvania Game Commission stated in its letter dated April 5, 2022, that no impact is anticipated. The heron nests in the quarry property not in Mill Creek property. The herons are there but they are neither protected nor endangered.

Mr. Connelly stated we would not disturb them.

Ms. Tuberty said inviting the public in without controls is a problem.

Ms. Albillar said that with trails the public is less likely to walk where they should not be. The impact of the disturbance has been vetted. This will give folks a place to go and enjoy open space without disrupting anything. Ms. Conte asked if people would stay on the trails.

Mr. Connelly said that there are no eagles at Mill Creek and the herons are happy in the quarry. A few people walking on the paths will not chase the herons away.

Ms. Tuberty said that wildlife is disappearing. The land is devoid of everything. Mr. Connelly said that the habitat loss is due to the development that was heavily promoted by the township from 1997 to 2015. They are now trying to control this. The experts have said it will not disturb the wildlife. We will get back to concerns about that.

Mr. Rittenhouse said that habitat loss is a fact. That is the point, trails in there will accelerate habitat loss. Ecotourism has opened wild areas to people, and this causes habitat loss. Overuse is a problem. Be careful about introducing humans into the area. Will paths disturb the wildlife and reduce the number of species there?

Ms. Albillar said she is not sure these interests are mutually exclusive. Wildlife habitat enhancement is part of the plan to balance everything.

Mr. Rittenhouse said there is not enough territory at Mill Creek for an eagle. Ms. Tuberty said there is no evidence there are eagles, but do you need to be back there?

Mr. Connelly said that the idea of fencing off the open space with no trespassing does not work well with a community. The experts who have been consulted do not see passive recreation as a problem. The emphasis is on passive recreation, and active recreation is not possible because of easement restrictions. The wetlands will be discussed at the next meeting.

i. Planting Meadows

Ms. Conte brought up the ideas of planting meadows and reforestation. She asked where the two meadows are to be located and what is the timeline for the meadow conversion.

Ms. Ross, a member of the public, was asked to speak about the meadow conversion. She stated that the conversion to meadows takes place on existing farm fields. Those fields must not be farmed anymore. If you look at Map 22 – you can see where the two meadows are (the green dotted areas). One meadow is off the Lingo property, and one is in front of the space along Lower State Road. The majority are mostly in front of Lower State Road. Regarding the time-line – we hope to do the installation this year because if we wait the farm field will be overrun with invasives. The township has a grant that covers installation that extends over five years – a qualified contractor will do the initial planting and they also will come back. They will use the best seed mix. The project is 50 percent funded by DCNR (\$124,000) and 50 percent funded by the township (\$124,000). The funding comes from the Township Open Space Fund. Regarding the process: the first step is to mow the field, then the cultivation and seeding of native species to create a wildflower meadow. Maintenance will involve hand picking the weeds. All of this is being done to improve water quality and enhance wildlife habitat.

Ms. Roth stated that the longer you wait the worse it gets because of invasives. The area must be mowed in the spring.

Ms. Tuberty asked who is supplying the seed mixes and she was told it is Ernst Seed.

ii. Reforestation

Ms. Brown, a member of the public, said that besides that meadow, there will be reforestation in the other area (the other side of the back) This will help to prevent soil erosion and assist with water purification. The meadow is important because right now we are losing 70 percent of the grassland birds. This meadow will also create more habitat for insects.

Mr. Rittenhouse said we should monitor the grasses and field birds. Cats are a huge issue. Meadows are proposed as are ideas for pursuing reforestation. There is some wetness that has been found in the soils that lie behind streams, but this can be assessed.

Mr. Connelly said you will have to mow until you convert to woodland. In the past there was not a tree in sight. We should all be encouraging the growth of trees.

Ms. Tuberty said due to the tree loss there should be some reforestation.

Ms. Ross said there is a great deal of streambank erosion near Pickertown Road. Live staking can be done to stabilize the streambank. There is an offer of trees through the Penn State Watershed Steward Program. On the fourth Wednesday of the Month the Penn State volunteers will come and eliminate the invasives at Lion's Pride Park. There is a significant erosion problem near Pickertown Road.

Mr. Rittenhouse said this has been an unusual couple of years because of the emerald ash borer. Hopefully, another tree pandemic or pest infestation will not occur. It is important for habitat enhancement to plant oaks.

Ms. Conte asked if reforestation is part of the plan. She was told that there is no immediate plan unless there is an offer of free trees.

Ms. Conte said that a lot of the trees that were planted in the basins did not make it and now they are not so great looking. What is our vision for this problem?

Ms. Ross said that they have been planting some trees to naturalize the basins as part of the MS4 program. There is a 20 percent mortality rate for these trees. There was also a problem when a vandal destroyed some of the trees in one of the basins. To look for examples of successful reforestation take a walk in John Paul Park or look at the plantings in the basin located at the corner of Pickertown and Folly Roads. The Bucks' Beautiful organization plants larger trees all over Bucks County. Larger trees are planned for the township. As far as the Mill Creek area goes, it is hard to get back there to mow and it takes a long time. But for now, the plan for reforestation is paused.

Ms. Conte stated we should reforest the open area in the front meadow. The hedgerow tree line is a small area marked for reforestation.

Ms. Tuberty asked if the township is going to work with homeowners whose property abuts the buffer. Ms. Conte asked if there is going to be a buffer instead of planting tall trees right next to the homeowner's lots. You do not want the trees falling into the yards. Ms. Conte also asked about maintenance and the methods for watering the trees after planting. The answer was the use of watering bags and with volunteers. Ms. Ross also stated that when we plant near homes we coordinate with homeowners. There will be some mortality of trees. For the Weisel preserve the contractor comes out as part of their maintenance plan. We will start small and work up.

Mr. Connelly stated that conservation easements were made. There is a conservation easement, and the holder is Natural Lands Trust. Technically, an easement is a property right. Their right is to make sure that this area is preserved. Natural Lands comes out and does a site survey and an annual report. The township cannot do things that are not in accordance with the original agreement. No active recreation

is allowed – this is restricted. Permits are obtained from the state agency. Permanent easements are made with qualified land trusts.

b. Discussion on Site Visit Planning

Ms. Jones said the proposed field trip to Mill Creek Preserve should take about two hours. He will send out an email to the committee members asking which Saturday morning from 10 a.m. to noon is best. There are several potential dates. Ms. Ross made the recommendation to wear jeans, boots, and gloves.

4. ADDITIONAL BUSINESS:

After a brief discussion, it was decided that the following issues should be placed on future agendas:

- Wetland Preservation Issues for the March 9 meeting
 - Field Trip Discussion for the March 9 meeting
 - Safety Issues for the April 13 meeting
- Input should be obtained from the Police Department and Fire Company and Director of Emergency Services for the April 13 meeting.

ADJOURNMENT

A motion was made by Mr. Jones, seconded by Ms. Albillar, to adjourn the meeting. The meeting was adjourned at 8:50 p.m.

The next meeting will be Thursday evening, March 9, 2023, at 7 p.m. in the Township Building.

Respectfully Submitted,

Lynn Laurelli

Master Plan Ad Hoc Committee Secretary