

NONMORTORIZED ADVISORY WORKGROUP (NAW) MEETING
MEETING MINUTES
May 7, 2020
MS TEAMS MEETING/TELECONFERENCE

ATTENDEES:

NAW MEMBERS

Andrea LaFontaine
John Morrison
Mary Bohling
Jim DuFresne
Kenny Wawsczyk
Kristen Wiltfang
Jason Jones
Lori Hauswirth

OTHERS:

Bob Wilson
Joe Bartlett
Steve Davis

DNR STAFF

Paul Yauk
Dakota Hewlett
Anna Centofanti
Greg Kinser
Ron Yesney
Scott Slavin
Jeff Kakuk
Jill Sell
Rob Katona
Paul Gaberdiel
Amy Swainston

WELCOME AND INTRODUCTIONS

Chairperson, Andrea LaFontaine, started meeting 10:05 a.m.

Andrea LaFontaine introduced herself as the newly appointed chairperson for the Nonmotorized Advisory Workgroup (NAW). She went over some housekeeping for the meeting and asked the members to give a brief introduction.

John Morrison – West Michigan Trails and Greenways Coalition
Mary Bohling – Water Trails, Sea Grant Educator
Jim DuFresne – Hiking, Michigan Trail Maps
Kenny Wawsczyk – Hiking, North Country Trail Regional Coordinator
Kristen Wiltfang- Nonmotorized Trails, Oakland County Planning
Jason Jones- Mountain Biking, Michigan Mountain Biking Association
Lori Hauswirth – Cross Country Nordic Skiing

BUSINESS ITEMS FOR DISCUSSION

Andrea LaFontaine asked the board members for approval of the February 21, 2020 meeting minutes, Jason Jones motioned to approve, John Morrison seconded, and all were in favor. Motion approved.

Andrea LaFontaine asked the board members for approval of the May 7, 2020 agenda. Mary Bohling motioned to approve, Kristen Wiltfang seconded, all were in favor. Motion approved.

Mary Bohling circled back to the February 21, 2020 meeting minutes and asked to remove “advocates” all water trails from her introduction. This motion to amend the minutes was approved by all board members.

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February 21-22 Meeting Recap

Andrea LaFontaine asked the committee if they could comment with a recap from the previous NAW meeting held back in February at the RAM Center. Dakota Hewlett, DNR, spoke up and said on Saturday morning Laura Underhill, from National Park Service Rivers, Trails, and Conservation Assistance Program, conducted an activity on why and how we use trails. Most of the five board committee members participated and worked together in groups. The groups were based on regional areas and were diverse, as they included all trail users. Dakota also mentioned the MTAC meeting was held in afternoon on Saturday. One highlight from the meeting, the members talked about forming a funding committee for nonmotorized trails.

COVID Impacts and Updates

Andrea LaFontaine reported that COVID19 pandemic has created a need to broadcast a lot of webinars statewide. Topics include best management practices for trail users along with social distancing. State and local community trails have been experiencing heavier than usual trail use. One circumstance to point out is there have been many events cancelled or postponed, which have affected funding.

John Morrison

John Morrison reported that the COVID19 pandemic has been the reason to cancel almost all 2020 events. John Morrison agrees with most of the concerns that Andrea LaFontaine has stated earlier.

Mary Bohling

Mary Bohling reported, saying the water trails have not seen an impact yet related to COVID19. Mary Bohling said when the motorized boating was restricted, there was an increase in nonmotorized water activity. Some invasive species management has been placed on hold due to grant funding freezes with the State. Workshops have been cancelled for the season; she is working on creating online education series to replace workshops. Mary Bohling is concerned that aquatic species may become an issue with these restrictions.

Jim DuFresne

Jim DuFresne expressed that he is worried about the small businesses that are struggling to receive supplies which are taking longer than usual, or companies that cannot open their doors to the public will not survive. There are many businesses that are vital to the outdoor recreation, that we appreciate, and he does not want to see an economic impact destroy them. Spring is the usual time to ramp up, and with the halt on conducting sales, he feels the whole summer will be lost. Andrea LaFontaine said she feels compassion with Jim's concerns and wishes all the best.

Kenny Wawsczyk

Kenny Wawsczyk is pleased with the increasing awareness through webinars directed at volunteers. This method has been communicating trail closures and work restrictions. He said to expect a major backlog of maintenance when restrictions are lifted. Events have also been cancelled. Dakota Hewlett asked if they are tracking what needs to be addressed or maintained when start up begins. Kenny replied yes, they are.

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Kristen Wiltfang

Kristen Wiltfang said that some Oakland County construction projects started back up this week. Trail management reports significant increase in trail usage. She has heard discussions surrounding being responsible while on the trail, social distancing, wearing masks, and other safety aspects. Polly Ann Trail reports increased usage and concerns over litter. There have been some small businesses that have received grant funding from Federal and State. She reiterates Jim's concerns over local small businesses and the impact that COVID19 has had on them.

Jason Jones

Jason Jones focus is with the natural surface single track trails. Pinckney Recreation Area, Potawatomi trails have seen heavy usage, and there are real concerns with the amount of traffic. Southeast Michigan: Island Lake, Metroparks, DTE, and linear trails heads are overcrowded. Parking lots at the DTE Trail were closed by DNR due to heavy use and social distancing concerns. Tippy Dam Recreation Area was also closed. The DTE trailheads have now been reopened. New users are now using the natural surface trails, bikers, runners, which is causing conflicts as these groups are not as familiar with trail etiquette. These circumstances call for additional resources and management to address the pressures of the new trail users, and an overall increase in use

Lori Hauswirth

Lori Hauswirth reported that the ski conditions were still in place in the UP until April 24/25. Summer trail use is now the focus. They are working on education with COVID19 safety and health concerns, pushing information through social media. There is increased activity trail usage. Events have been cancelled. Sponsorships has been affected, and she is hoping they will carry over to the following year. Volunteers are needed and will be trained on COVID19 safety. Any special use permits have been suspended because of current restrictions.

DNR UPDATE

Paul Yauk, DNR

Paul Yauk said it has been a whirlwind couple of months. Each day brings new changes with the Parks and Recreation Division. We continue to encourage users to recreate close to home, as the trails are open. Everyone is experiencing heavy use on trails. This is a new situation we are all dealing with and trying to do the best we can. All trail user groups have expressed concerns. We are communicating COVID19 safety concerns daily through press releases, social media, and public web pages. Bob Wilson, Chairperson for MTAC, asked Paul Yauk to elaborate on known impacts for the future budget cuts and spending freeze. Paul Yauk said the Governor will be addressing these budget cuts over the coming weeks. Paul said Parks and Recreation does a great job in generating funds and spending those dollars on maintaining and staffing parks. Some current projects have been placed on hold and are being reevaluated. Paul stated that this is a serious issue we are facing, and summer staffing may be affected.

Dakota Hewlett, DNR

Dakota Hewlett said there is a focus on projects that they can get going, however many projects are on hold and being prioritized. Volunteers will have more direction once projects are determined.

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DNR PARTNER CONCERNS

Jason Jones

Jason Jones said the natural surface single track trails draw the largest crowds at most park and recreation areas in Southern Michigan, and mountain bikers are the number one user on these trails. Jason Jones expressed that these trails fall into a gap and do not receive attention. Trail maintenance programs only address linear trails. He would like to see these trails included under the Trails Section as resources. It is positive thing that these mountain bike users are out there. He is suggesting moving natural surface trails under DNR Parks and Recreation Trails Section, and to be more comprehensive about representation. Dakota Hewlett asked what can the trails division do to provide additional support? Jason Jones replied that parks and recreation operations already has a tight budget, but these trails are not addressed as infrastructure, which there are parts of trails that are in need of help. Jason Jones wants the Trails Section to acknowledge these trails as part of the trails section and remove from parks and recreation operations. Paul Yauk said the Trails Section has come a long way in the past 10 years and we are still evolving, he does not have an answer right now, but will address this. Paul Yauk recognized that Island Lake Recreation Area has seen an increase in revenue likely due to mountain bikers. Andrea LaFontaine stated the next meeting is scheduled for August 6, 2020, and she wants to hear back from the DNR on Jason's request as to what action has taken place.

Kenny Wawsczyk

Kenny Wawsczyk brought up the DNR trail proposal process. He says that numerous projects have been submitted asking to reroute trails of the roads for at least 3 years. The process stalls, and he doesn't understand why this takes as long as it does. There have been no improvements made from communications that have taken place between the DNR and his group. Paul Yauk said he will look into this and fine out why. Dakota Hewlett said he is familiar with some of the projects Kenny is referring to and will find out the status. Dakota mentioned he has taken steps to improve this process. Paul Yauk and Dakota will talk about this offline to understand the situation better. Kenny recognized that some land managers are part of this puzzle and can play into the delayed process. Jason Jones said he has the same situations with the DTE Trail. Paul Yauk said often, land managers are protecting endangered species which can come into play. Andrea LaFontaine asked to circle back to this on August 6, at the next scheduled NAW meeting, with proposed improvements from the DNR.

Jason Jones

Jason Jones brought up that the Law Enforcement Division (LED) does not acknowledge ebikes and the issues stemming from trail users. There is a real need to educate ebike user etiquette and to provide guidelines. No signage is present out on trails for ebikes. He feels this type of clarity is not costly to address and should be handled. Andrea LaFontaine said this leads to a greater discussion, finding ways to coexist. We know what users exist, and trails are a resource for everyone. Trail education may be key here. Andrea LaFontaine asked the committee to start thinking about what coexisting looks like.

Jim DuFresne

Jim DuFresne stated he'd like to see a better relationship between private sector and the DNR. For example, lodging rates for State of Michigan employee's (SOM) is not extended to private sector when partnering with DNR at key events. Andrea LaFontaine said exclusive regulations may be behind this.

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Paul Yauk agrees partnerships are beneficial to everyone. Jim DuFresne asked that at the least, acknowledge that the private sector can attribute to economic stimulus.

SYSTEM GAPS

Kristen Wiltfang

Kristen Wiltfang talked about cross state trails and the gaps that exist. Some of these situations are related to lack of public support with communities or working with active railroad companies. Andrea LaFontaine asked what is key to connecting the gaps. Andrea LaFontaine suggested to identify and find others who have conquered the gaps to get ideas, resolutions, and feedback. Ron Yesney, DNR, has worked with right-of-way consultant companies. This approach has been successful in securing gaps. Ron Yesney knows the DNR has worked with 3 separate consultant companies in the Upper Peninsula and one company for Lower Peninsula. Ron Yesney said having these companies that do this on a day to day basis is an advantage. The second step is to identify the funding. Ron Yesney asked Kristen Wiltfang if she has used these services? Kristen Wiltfang responded with no, most areas fall into public ownership already, although the situations vary by community. The committee acknowledged Ron Yesney's comments as a great suggestion to look at in rural areas. Greg Kinser, DNR, asked if this is more of a funding gap, or ownership? Kristen replied saying it varies by community, sometimes it is local support, each is a little bit different. Greg Kinser suggested a trail champion can be key to working through these. Ron Yesney said community organizations can contribute seed money and be more impactful than a volunteer trail champion.

EASEMENT AGREEMENTS w/ PRIVATE LANDOWNERS

Kenny Wawsczyk

Kenny Wawsczyk reported he had seen a presentation from right-of-way consultants, and it was great to hear Ron Yesney talk about them. Kenny Wawsczyk said in his current position he does not have any experience with easement issues. Mr. Wawsczyk is not sure what the process, funding, and communication is for easement agreements. Dakota Hewlett will circle back with Mr. Wawsczyk on this item. Mr. Wawsczyk stated partners often are not versed on the real estate process. Ron Yesney suggested modifying the internal process for an external audience. Ron Yesney said these can be complicated, and they are never the same. Kenny Wawsczyk asked how the fee structure works? Ron Yesney said it can be different for each project, he can share a proposal with Mr. Wawsczyk.

DNR UPDATES

Greg Kinser, DNR

Greg Kinser reported due to COVID19, there has been a lot of usage on trails, along with concerns on budget and what that looks like going forward. Greg's staff has been impacted due to stay at home orders. Greg is seeing a lot of the same concerns as others have mentioned in this meeting. Greg said trail closures due to social distancing are not being adhered. Staff is in the process of developing start-up plans and wondering what the new reality will look like. Most projects are on hold at the moment, due to COVID-19 related State spending freeze.

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UPPER PENINSULA

Ron Yesney, DNR

Ron Yesney reported on the Gateway and Gogebic trails, stating that some phases have been completed and are working through the next segments. A consultant has been hired for portion of the Iron Belle Trail (IBT) (Wakefield and Ramsey). Houghton County rail trail has witnessed a complete state of disrepair and FEMA has been involved. Construction projects for 2021 will most likely not happen because of COVID19 budgetary restrictions. Over 200 wash outs have affected both nonmotorized and motorized trails, which will take time to sort out. There are improvements to Little Presque Isle in the works. A mountain bike proposal, Peek-a-Boo Trail in Cedarville is moving forward. Jason Jones asked Ron Yesney to please send contact information to him for Cedarville and Norway. Kewanee Trail system loop from Copper Harbor plans were to be updated this summer, however not sure if that will remain on track.

Paul Gaberdiel, DNR

Paul Gaberdiel, DNR, introduced himself to Jason Jones and stated that he is the East UP Trail Specialist, and is working on a mountain bike trail proposal in the East UP. He is looking forward to working with Mr. Jones.

MATAG CONFERENCE

John Morrison

John Morrison announced the August 18, 2020 conference for Mid-America Alliance Trails and Greenways (MATAG) will be a virtual conference. The next public gathering for the conference has been postponed to 2021.

2020 MEETING DATES

Andrea LaFontaine acknowledged the next meeting date is August 6, 2020, and she would like to see it be an in-person meeting. Possible location will be mid-state, maybe the RAM Center.

PUBLIC COMMENT

None

Andrea LaFontaine, chairperson, adjourned the meeting at 12:01 pm.