

**WARREN COUNTY
BOARD OF RECREATION COMMISSIONERS**

500 Mt. Pisgah Avenue, PO Box 179
Oxford, NJ 07863

**September 12, 2023
Meeting Minutes**

CALL TO ORDER:

Mr. Fineran opened the meeting at 5:01 pm.

PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE

ROLL CALL:

Members Present: Charles Fineran, John Trontis (left at 6pm), William Hann Jr., Ray Tobaygo, John Halmi

Members Not Present: Mike Helbing

Staff: Corey Tierney, Kim Barnes, Elizabeth Roy, Jennifer Correa-Kruegel

Public (per sign-in sheet): Robert Moss, Doreen Gramling, Sarah Hare, Elizabeth MacKinnon, Clairanne Arcaro, Tim Roth, Paul Tarlowe, Beth Hehn, Tom Lizzi, Dave Detrick, Jim Lee III, Jim Lee Jr, Pete Lynah, Matt Polsky, Judy Keith, Kerry Kirk Pflugh

INTRODUCTORY STATEMENT: Mr. Fineran read the Open Public Meeting Notice.

MINUTES: The August 8, 2023 minutes were reviewed. Mr. Trontis motioned to approve the minutes and also thanked Ms. Correa-Kruegel for doing a great job recording the meeting minutes the past couple years. Mr. Hann seconded. All in favor, motion carried.

PUBLIC COMMENT: Ms. Sarah Hare, a Hope Twp resident, spoke of her concern of the logging of approx. 65 acres at Merrill Creek in Harmony Twp. Ms. Hare is a member of the following groups: Hope Environmental Commission, Support Roaring Rock Park, and Citizens for Sustainable Development. Ms. Hare is aware it is privately owned property, but it is Highlands Preservation land and is home to barred owls, bog turtles, Indiana bats, etc. Along with the loss of animal habitat, she stated the removal of trees would also create more unobstructed storm water runoff and contribute to growth of invasive species. Ms. Hare also stated they are making hiking less accessible by closing sections of the Warren Highlands Trail which is forcing hikers to walk onto Harmony-Brass Castle Rd which has very little to no shoulder. Mr. Fineran and Mr. Trontis thanked Ms. Hare for speaking and stated the Board of Recreation Commissioners is aware of what has been going on and has discussed it at more than one meeting. The BORC has no authority on it, but shares her concerns. Mr. Trontis said he mentioned it at the last meeting in his Warren Highlands Trail report. Mr. Tierney stated that the County does not have authority over the property, but suggested the Board's concerns could be raised at the next Warren Highlands Trail Committee meeting. The next Warren Highlands Trail Committee meeting is 10/27 and Mr. Trontis stated he will bring it up to the Merrill Creek representative.

Mr. Robert Moss, an Essex County resident and the first chair of the Highlands Trail Committee for the NY/NJ Trail Conference, wanted to share that there are legal aspects to the trail closures, but note that he is not an attorney and cannot give legal advice. Depending on the deeds and how the properties were acquired, there are isolated parcels of land in the Merrill Creek property between Harmony-Brass Castle Rd and Montana Rd that are land locked and may be entitled to rights of easements. Mr. Moss urges the commissioners of Warren County to negotiate for easements to keep trails open. If the Merrill

Creek owners do not follow the guidelines, he thinks the land could be taken as eminent domain because the trail is for public use.

Mr. Fineran thanked Mr. Moss for speaking and acknowledged the number of public attendees. Most of whom are interested in hearing Mr. Tierney's presentation of the Bread Lock Park Nature Center plan.

Ms. Kerry Kirk Pflugh, Chair of the Warren County Environmental Advisory Committee, wanted to follow up on Ms. Hare's concerns regarding Merrill Creek. She suggested additional action for this board to take is to pass a resolution for the Board of County Commissioners to reach out to Merrill Creek to enter into discussions about their logging practices and address the concerns of county residents.

After thanking Ms. Kirk Pflugh, Mr. Trontis made the proposal, seconded by Mr. Tobaygo, to write the resolution to send to the Board of County Commissioners. It should include how over several meetings, members of the public have expressed their concern over the logging and the closure of the previously approved trail route supporting the Warren Highlands Trail, and this should initiate discussions with the owners of Merrill Creek. Vote was unanimously in favor. Mr. Trontis reiterated that there are landlocked county-owned inholdings within the Merrill Creek property. From Mr. Trontis' prior experience administering the State Parks Service, with other inholdings they had, maintenance and security access were legalities but they could not get public access unless it was negotiated with the property owner.

CORRESPONDENCE: None

REPORT OF COMMITTEES:

Morris Canal Committee/Warren Heritage Scenic Byway – This is covered in Corey Tierney's presentation.

Bread Lock Park Nature Center Plan: Mr. Tierney presented on what the future of BLP (the next 5-10 years) might look like.

- *Improve Barn Space for more Arts & Events* – The barn is currently undergoing restoration and already has a stage, built around 2012 by volunteers. Landscape is proposed around the barn so that plants and bushes or a wall will help buffer the noise of Route 57.
- *Create a Nature Center for our growing nature program* – The plan is to convert the building that houses the current museum into the nature center. Jennifer Correa-Kruegel, our first Park Naturalist, will be growing the county's nature/environmental programs. The goal is to offer more year round programming and to all ages.
- *Enhance the Visitor Center for the Warren Heritage Scenic Byway* – The plan is for the museum to move into the shop building that is in the front of the property right on Route 57, which is very visible and accessible. Bread Lock Park already has a picnic pavilion in the back and natural play areas could be added. We can promote the Scenic Byway from a historical, cultural and tourism point of view. We can improve parking in the front along Rte. 57 and improve access. The goal would be to have it open every weekend with rotating exhibits to draw visitors back.

Mr. Trontis had to leave at 6:00.

Mr. Fineran asked if the plan would be for professionals to do the work to improve or update current projects in the museum to make them more hands on. Mr. Tierney confirmed that to the plan would be to have any new exhibits designed and manufactured professionally.

Public Questions:

Ms. Beth Hehn asked where funds would come from. Mr. Tierney replied that it will be funded with County Open Space Trust Funds and the County can pursue grants.

In response to Mr. Tim Roth's question about architectural plans for the shop building, Mr. Tierney stated they are not preparing conceptual plans for the shop area because the County should be able to utilize it as is with just interior renovations and it will be phased in.

Mr. Jim Lee III stated the presentation gave him a good understanding of the plan, but wanted to warn that the NJ Registered Historic Places, Morris Canal District has a very intense review at the state level.

Mr. Dave Detrick encouraged the Board not to disassemble anything until the plan or new exhibit is in place and ready, and said that with public projects and historic reviews, it is going to be a slow process.

Mr. Matt Polsky, a sustainability professor at Ramapo College, stated it is good to look at best practices of what others are doing for the nature center, but you need to look at the future in a visionary and imaginative way, recognizing the challenges of climate change as a society, biodiversity, etc. He suggested it be a place with green buildings, not just for kids, but a place with imagination and for lectures, demos, art exhibits.

Trail Committee – Postponed until next meeting.

OLD BUSINESS: None

NEW BUSINESS:

Administrator's Report

Mr. Fineran asked what the Morris Canal Committee needed to address with the Board. Mr. Lee III asked when the visitor parking lot at Port Colden could be opened. Mr. Tierney stated that until the parking situation is resolved, it needs to stay closed. There was discussion, including the public, of opening it temporarily, and it being public land. There was some question about whether it was already open. Mr. Tierney stated that just because land is "open space", does not mean it is necessarily open to the public. If a property is deemed "not open" by the Board then people who go onto the property may be trespassing.. He suggested the Board vote on the best long-term decision, but noting the Board could revisit its decision at any time if circumstances change.

Mr. Fineran opened it up to the Board. Mr. Hann made a motion to vote on leaving Port Colden as is/closed. Mr. Tobaygo seconded the motion. All in favor to leave it as is.

Special Event Permit Requests

There is a request from Boy Scout Troop 56 to camp at BLP from Fri, 11/10 (6pm) to Sun, 11/12 (10am). Mr. Hann made a motion to allow the campout. Mr. Halmi seconded the motion. All in favor, motion carried to allow Troop 56's campout.

PUBLIC COMMENT: None

NEXT MEETING: The next meeting is scheduled for October 10, 2023.

ADJOURNMENT: There being no further business, Mr. Tobaygo motioned, seconded by Mr. Hann, to adjourn the meeting at 6:40p.m. Motion carried.

Respectfully Submitted,

Kim Barnes, Clerk
Warren County Land Preservation Dept.