

JOHNSON RAIL TRAIL COMMITTEE
MEETING MINUTES
MASONIC TEMPLE, JOHNSON PUBLIC LIBRARY
22 PEARL STREET, JOHNSON, VT
WEDNESDAY, MAY 15, 2024

Present:

Committee Members: Kyle Nuse, Doug Molde, Peggy Williams (remote), Jan Gearhart, BJ Putvain, Mary Lou Kopas, Kim Dunkley

Others: Beth Foy, Shayne Spence (remote, then in person)

Absent: Adrienne Stevson

Note: All votes taken are unanimous unless otherwise noted.

1. Call to Order

Doug called the meeting to order at 5:39.

2. Changes or Additions to Agenda

Doug said Yva Rose could not attend this evening.

3. Approval of Minutes

Kyle moved to approve the minutes of April 17, 2024, Jan seconded and the motion was passed.

4. Johnson Website Design, Marketing and Integration with Vermont Tourism and Marketing and Other Sites

Beth said she previously volunteered to put something on the town website. She got approval from the selectboard. She is still happy to do that. We can create links and maybe we can show what the Vermont Tourism site has in addition to showing our own info. Another angle to consider is what type of information we want to send to Vermont Tourism and Marketing. She is not willing or ready to dive into that angle.

Kyle said she thinks starting with our own website is probably fastest and the best use of our time while the state gets their site ready. Mary Lou asked, doesn't the state already have a website? Beth said they have had it for a while. It has more comprehensive info about some towns than others, probably based on what towns have asked them to put on. She thinks their website person probably was pulled away to work on flood response.

Doug said there was a lot of good information on the Johnson Works page. Kyle said she created that web page. Most of the content was public information pulled from business websites. A lot of it is dated.

Beth suggested that the committee think about what content is most important and also how to get people to the website. What is most important for them to see first? That is a key question.

Doug said he thinks it would be good to have a discussion on that in light of what Yva Rose told the committee. He explained to Beth that she said people booking through her company are typically starting at one end or the other and taking 3 days to ride the trail, stopping in Hardwick and Jeffersonville. According to the Rails to Trails Conservancy, if people spend the evening in a town they spend 6 times as much there. He thinks we need to create services. We need a hostel, camping, and couch surfing. He thinks our web page needs to highlight attractions showing why people who are not staying here overnight might want to spend the day here.

Peggy said not everyone will do a 3-day trip. If they want to do a 2-day trip, we are in a great place. Jan agreed. A lot of people she has spoken to are thinking of a 2-day trip.

Beth said we need to identify the type of person we are trying to attract. Are they biking alone or in a group? Do they have kids? Pets? Those things change the need.

Kyle said food is important for everyone. Others said lodging and safe parking for cars and bikes are also important. *(Kim arrived at 5:53.)*

Doug said he thinks Yva could give us an idea of who the target clients for their business are. He would like to know if many people are starting their trip at their business location. How does their business assist us?

Doug said he talked to Jackie Cassino, who had information about where we can put links to our town's information on the Tourism and Marketing website. He will pass on that information.

Peggy said as a stranger to the community she would be more likely to go to the town web page for info on Johnson. She would not be likely to go to a tourism web page unless she wanted a general overview or it was long before her trip and she was looking at options. Kyle said she thinks it depends on the demographic. Someone coming from out of state might go to the tourism website. Someone from in state might be more likely to go to the town website. Mary Lou said a lot of young people use biking sites where people recommend rides. Jan said she thinks people will look for info on trails, not specific towns.

Shayne said we should make sure our website is optimized for search engines. Beth said she thinks the town website will not meet that need. She thinks we would need a standalone website for that. She would be supportive of creating a new site, but that is not what she is prepared to act on. Kyle said she thinks using the resources we have is the way to go now. Eventually maybe our goal is to have a standalone page.

Kim brought up QR codes. Beth said we could create a QR code to draw people to the web page. Kim said she is thinking about having QR codes at the trailhead. Beth said a lot of people use the rail trail Facebook group. That is a place where we could post a link or QR code.

Doug said Bill Mason runs that. We could probably get him to a meeting. He is at every LCPC rail trail committee meeting but he is not a member. The problem with the state's website is that there is so much information that it can be hard to find information on the rail trail. Beth said the same will be true of the town website.

Kyle and Beth agreed to use Google Drive to share information and to loop Adrienne in. Beth asked if Adrienne will do graphics. Kyle said she can. Beth said she thinks we will want graphics. Kyle said Adrienne is also creating a Johnson-specific map. *(Shayne arrived in person at 6:01.)* She and Adrienne also plan to use QR codes to link to businesses.

Beth said we should use AI. People should make a concerted effort to ask questions to an AI about the rail trail to start that model learning about us. It self teaches and the more questions you ask the more it learns. Shayne suggested feeding the AI any information we think would not be online. Beth said she suspects younger trail riders are using AI. Shayne agreed that they are.

5. *Trail Head Committee Update*

Kyle said she, Peggy and Adrienne were tasked with thinking about how we can update the trail head to make what we have in Johnson more visible. Peggy was traveling most of the time but she and Adrienne met at the trail head. They measured the current map and Adrienne has started a rough draft of a map that is more zoomed in on Johnson. There would be little numbers on it that would correlate with a list of businesses that we think would be desirable for rail trail users. But just today Kyle learned that the state is almost finished creating updated maps and they are going to give each town a zoomed-in version of their town. It won't have the businesses, but we could probably add that somehow. Jan suggested we request that the state put businesses on our map. Kyle said we can try. She doesn't know if they can, but if not, probably we can.

Doug said he wonders if the map the state is doing for Johnson is the trail-friendly business map. They want us to recruit businesses to get on that list. We should go to businesses and get them involved. Kyle said she and Adrienne were planning to do that anyway. They had discussed possibly asking businesses to pay a small amount to be listed. Or maybe we could ask the town to cover the expense of the map upgrade. Doug asked if the need for money changes if the state is doing the map. Kyle said she and Adrienne were going to make the map smaller and leave room to list businesses next to it. There would be some cost for putting up the business information.

Beth suggested showing bike riders where they can find specific things like charging stations, phone chargers, water bottles, rain jackets, etc. If she could see a colored dot on a map representing a specific thing she was looking for, that would be more beneficial than an ad for a business. She suggested push pins that can be removed so the map won't be outdated. Kyle said that is what they are thinking of.

Doug said trail-friendly businesses is a state concept, an AOT effort. There would be an app. They want us to find businesses. He thinks we need to find out how big their map is. We may need to find money to put up another structure to hold the state map.

Kyle said what we need won't cost a lot. An enclosed bulletin board costs around \$100. She thinks we probably could get the town to pay for something small like that or we could ask businesses to pay.

Kim suggested we should think about symbols that could represent charging stations, food, scenic stops, etc.

6. *Report on Selectboard Meeting with Regard to Camping and Recreation on Holmes Meadow*

Doug said he went to the last selectboard meeting. After the meeting, Tom Galinat sent out a letter to various people, including Seth from LCPC, saying that the selectboard was in favor of using Holmes Meadow to connect to the rail trail and provide camping and recreational activities.

Shayne said he thinks the idea of low impact camping at Holmes Meadow is one the selectboard is supportive of, at least those at that meeting. He thinks the board is happy to have the committee figure out details and present them to the board for final approval. The board has not discussed how much money they are willing to put into it. The board would love for this committee to flesh out a proposal.

Mary Lou asked, wasn't Holmes Meadow being used for flood control? Shayne said that is one thing it needs to be used for. He has talked to Seth about a campsite and Seth has said it is possible but it has to be done along with mitigation. It is doable to do both.

Doug said he thinks we need to insert ourselves into the subject with Seth, who will be involved in setting up the engineering work. We want the engineers to keep camping in mind.

Beth said with properties in the buyout program you cannot build on the land. There may be similar rules for a flood mitigation property. We would not be able to put in facilities like water and restrooms. Shayne suggested we could put facilities nearby in Old Mill Park.

Beth said Old Mill Park is very regularly used by soccer teams throughout our county. She thinks there can be a fine relationship between camping and soccer, but there will be people showing up at 8 am. Kyle asked if the soccer fields get used in summer. Beth said there are soccer camps sometimes and there are spring and fall leagues.

Doug said Lisa Crews and Dean Locke probably should be involved in the discussion about camping.

Kim asked what "low impact" camping means. Shayne said he doesn't know the specific rules but he would guess we are not allowed to build permanent structures. Jan asked, how about platforms? Beth said she doesn't know. If we use a floodable site we need to make sure the campsite is built into the emergency management plan so if anyone is camping there the emergency management team knows. Mary Lou said she thought platforms would extend use during mud season. Doug said there are restrictions in the deed. Some are waivable with permission.

7. *VOREC Grant Status*

Doug said the grant has been awarded. Randall has prepared an RFP but he won't send it out until he gets answers to some questions about the grant. Jan asked how much this grant is. Kyle said she thinks it is close to \$30K. It is for a scoping study for a bike lane into town.

8. *AARP Grant Status*

Doug said we did not get the AARP grant. There were over 3100 applications. Kyle said the grant is available every year. She thinks we did not get it because of the high competition.

Kyle said we have benches that are in disrepair. The bike racks look bad. What can we still do even without grant funds to fix them up? She asked if BJ is willing to donate time to help repaint the bike racks. BJ said yes. Jan asked if we can get community volunteers to work on benches and tables. Kim said she thought AOT had a grant that sounded like it could be used for these things. Kyle said she knows there are other grants, but if we want to do anything for this season they may not be helpful. She suggested seeing if we can get any funding from the village trustees.

9. *Community Fund Grant: Determination of and Request to the Selectboard to Authorize Expenditures*

Doug said he thinks we need to figure out where to apply the Community Fund money. He thinks it can be spent now. We would need to talk to the selectboard about it. Kyle said she wonders if they will want us to spend money on something village-owned. Doug said we can talk to the village and figure out what they can help us with. BJ said he can get it on the agenda for the next trustee meeting to discuss whether there is any money for repairing or replacing benches, bike racks, and picnic tables.

Kyle said the Boy Scouts had a Father's Day event in the past where kids and fathers put together picnic tables for the village green. Parker and Stearns donated materials and put kits together. Shayne said he loves the sound of that. Father's Day is coming up. Kyle said the grant application had included 3 or 4 picnic tables. Shayne said he will call someone he knows at Poulin Lumber and see if they would be willing to donate materials. BJ said we should see if the Boy Scouts would be willing to build tables. Kim asked if we could ask if the village would be willing to chip in. Shayne said he

understands that they are short on cash. (*Peggy left at 6:39.*) Shayne said he will email the committee in the next few days about whether this possible and whether it will cost anything. Doug said maybe we can get selectboard approval to spend some money from the Community Fund grant on this. Shayne suggested asking the village first.

10. Grants/Funding Opportunities and Application Schedule

Kyle said by the next meeting she will have a better idea about funding opportunities and the application schedule. The RTC trail grant program has a deadline of June 9. It looks like maybe this grant could support development of Holmes Meadow. She got a communication today from someone who wants to do a small art installation project off the rail trail in Johnson – a directional sign showing distances to various international places. It would be maintained over the years by Upward Bound, a service learning projects group that helps kids go to college. The Beautification Committee would love to have some art at the trail head, as well as landscaping with perennial flowers. We would want to make sure the art was in the town right of way and not the state right of way. Doug said the head of the Rails to Trails Conservancy will be coming to Johnson to look at our facilities.

The committee discussed possible uses of RTC grant funds. Kyle said she doesn't know if it would support building a website. The average grant is \$12K. Kim asked the cost of a charging station. Kyle said the one we were looking at was \$20K. There are not a lot of smaller options. Doug suggested possibly using the grant to fund signs in the village directing people to places like the arboretum, Beard Park and fishing accesses. BJ said he has seen trailheads with brochures you can take with you. Kim said maybe this grant could pay for brochures. Mary Lou suggested the alternative of a QR code that would take people to the map on their phones. Jan and Shayne suggested using both paper brochures and QR codes. BJ said he thinks businesses will be willing to pay. Kyle said if we get funding maybe it can be free the first year and we could ask them to pay after that.

BJ suggested something people can see to show them we are the halfway point. Jan said “midpoint of the LVRT” should be our slogan. Kyle said it would be fun to have something that depicts that that people would want to stand by to take pictures.

11. Should the Committee Switch from Teams to Zoom

BJ said he knows Peggy wants to go to Zoom. He is also in favor of Zoom. We can use the same account as the selectboard with our own address and then the meeting will not be shut off after 40 minutes. Shayne said the selectboard has discussed getting rid of Zoom and using Teams. BJ said he is pushing for Zoom because downloading and other aspects of Teams are more complicated.

12. Next Meeting

The next meeting will be June 19.

13. Adjourn

The meeting was adjourned at 7:00.