

JOHNSON RAIL TRAIL COMMITTEE  
MEETING MINUTES  
MASONIC TEMPLE, JOHNSON PUBLIC LIBRARY  
22 PEARL STREET, JOHNSON, VT  
WEDNESDAY, APRIL 17, 2024

**Present:**

Committee Members: Kyle Nuse, Kim Dunkley, Doug Molde, Adrienne Stevson, Peggy Williams (remote), Mary Lou Kopas

Others: Dean Locke, Yva Rose, Jim MacDowell

**Absent:** Jan Gearhart, BJ Putvain

**Note: All votes taken are unanimous unless otherwise noted.**

**1. Updates**

While waiting for a quorum, Doug gave some updates. He said Jackie Cassino of VTrans said VTrans expects to spend two weeks doing trail repairs in Franklin County and be done with repairs in Lamoille County by June 1. There will be a bypass around the damaged East Hardwick area. They have to replace 30K yards of material. They estimate they will be done with that by the end of August.

Doug said the town crew will be picking up trash from trail cleanup at road intersections. Kyle said last weekend she walked from the village to the McClure farm. There was not much trash except at the road intersection. A mini fridge and a car bumper are over the side in the state right of way near Dog's Head. She rode to Morrisville today. It was mostly not bad. Most trash was at intersections. There is one bigger piece of plastic in Hyde Park and she noticed more trash close to Lamoille Union.

Doug passed out Lamoille Valley Rail Trail Ambassador applications. There will be training in Morrisville for ambassadors. They will be out July through September, mainly on weekends, helping people who are using the trail. Applications go through Tori Hellwig. This is a pilot program.

**2. Call to Order**

Doug called the meeting to order at 5:45.

**3. Changes or Additions to Agenda**

No changes to the agenda were made.

**4. Approval of Minutes**

Doug noted that the March 20 minutes should be corrected to show that he, not BJ, called the meeting to order. **Kyle moved to approve the minutes of March 20, 2024 with the suggested correction, Peggy seconded and the motion was passed.**

**5. Yva Rose: Updates and Insights**

Yva Rose said Lamoille Valley Bike Tours is getting back to their shuttle program that was put on pause last year. They are checking with the communities they will be serving to make sure where they can park. The VTrans website is really discouraging a lot of people. She thinks this year will be slower than last year would have been without the flooding. Many people have asked if the trail is open. People are confused about that. The VTrans website is visually very discouraging. It shows emergency symbols along the entire trail to convey where the rolling closures will be. It doesn't say that the closures will be short. There is no description other than that these are the damaged

areas. A lot of people are concluding it's not the best time to travel. Lamoille Valley Bike Tours is telling people that they can let them know if there is a closure and how to detour it. Most of the detours are easy and quick. Her understanding is that a lot of the closures will be brief. She needs to contact VTrans about the website. (*Jim MacDowell arrived at 5:52.*) She would like to point out that there may be a better way to convey these closures so the website is less discouraging. She thinks about half the people inquiring with her business are postponing their plans.

Yva said of people who are planning to use their shuttle, the most common travel plan is to break their rail trail travel into 3 days of about 30 miles each: Swanton to Cambridge, Cambridge to Hardwick, and Hardwick to St. Johnsbury (or the reverse.) She has spoken with a lot of Airbnbs around Johnson and asked about one-night rentals. They are generally not available, due to availability of house cleaners. She knows Uncommon Accommodations does not offer one-night stays.

Kyle asked if people want something more like an Airbnb vs. camping. Yva said of the people she has talked to, yes. But it could be because their website does not mention a lot of camping options. Kyle said she can think of people in the village who might think of offering camping in their yards, maybe even providing a tent or sleeping bag. Yva said she thinks if there were just a couple of people offering that it would make a big difference.

Peggy said many cyclists may not want to camp but don't necessarily need a typical Airbnb space. They just want a bed, a shower and maybe breakfast the next morning. They don't need a lot of space. Yva said right now the most convenient lodging option in our area is the Sunset Motor Inn. People can stay there for one night. People who are doing the trail in 2 days are typically going there. It is just off the trail and there is good room availability.

Adrienne asked how many calls a day Lamoille Valley Bike Tours gets. Yva said about 3 per day in winter. Calls are picking up now. Adrienne suggested maybe Yva could collect data from people who call. Maybe she could have a form she could fill out while she is on the phone with them. Yva said she can do that. The committee should let her know if there are any questions they would like answers to. Over winter she gets more emails than phone calls.

Adrienne asked if people are planning for summer or for just a few weeks from now. Yva said right now most people are planning for summer or fall. More are planning for fall. A lot of people want to come in October. It is an older crowd booking for fall. Younger people and larger groups are booking summer.

Kim said she would like to know the type of bike people are using – e-bike vs. regular. Yva said she will make note of what is being loaded on the shuttle. They rent about 50% regular bikes and 50% e-bikes.

Yva said a lot of other towns are also applying for VOREC grants. They are mostly planning to use the funds for marketing and signage. She thinks we are the only ones doing a bike lane.

Yva said she is considering putting together a passport program like the one the Missisquoi Valley Rail Trail has. People can get a badge from each town. She and others have been talking about using grant funding to get rub-on badges up on kiosks. But many towns in the Swanton to

Cambridge section don't have kiosks. Towns on that side are not focusing on the rail trail. The Northeast Kingdom side is pretty active, but not as much as Lamoille County.

Doug asked what we can do to make Johnson a stopping place. Yva said a lot of travelers come to the rail trail because they want their vacation to be without a car but they still want to be tourists and see Vermont villages, etc. She suggests to them that if they are doing the trail in 3 days their second day, which will be in Lamoille County, is the best day to enjoy the trail without having to worry about catching a shuttle ride or returning their bike. A lot of people are not staying their third night. Their second day is the day to really enjoy their experience and Lamoille County has much to offer by way of tourism. Her business has a ride guide that highlights Lamoille County. They suggest Johnson is the place to shop and Morrisville is the place to eat. People are looking for things to do because they have the whole day and it only takes 4-6 hours to go 30 miles. Trailhead kiosks highlighting businesses are helpful in letting people know what they can see, do, eat and buy.

Kim asked if people have the option to take a rest day during their tour. Yva said people can book a shuttle for whenever they want. Shuttles currently operate 4 days a week. They suggest 2, 3 and 4 day options. They don't yet have full trail tours. All their guided tours are day tours.

Kim suggested creating a list of fun things to do here. Yva said their ride guide mentions attractions like the Beard swimming hole and places to eat and shop. People who book with them get that guide but there are many other people on the rail trail. Peggy said we have been talking about something that could connect to the town website. Doug said he thinks we need that. The state is going to provide a platform for trail-friendly businesses but they are not telling people about swimming holes, the suspension bridge, or places to fish or hike on the Long Trail. Not everyone might start in Swanson. Some might start in Cambridge.

Kyle said this past weekend, she saw two people on bikes stop at the trailhead. She could tell they were looking for information. They were coming from Burlington. She told them about some things in the village. We desperately need to get that information at the trailhead.

Dean said the map at the trailhead is lacking information on what is in town. The graphic is starting to see wear. It might be time to make a new map graphic and add in businesses, swimming holes, etc. We could include Journey's End. Maybe we could put bike racks at Journey's End and the Beard swimming hole.

Doug said he mentioned at a regional rail trail committee meeting that the map is fading. He asked about efforts to revise maps and was told that is in progress. He thinks we need a free-standing kiosk with business information. Yva said Cambridge has a big one but they charge businesses to be listed on it. Doug said we might not have to charge.

Dean said the map is right over the water. It is big and attracts attention. He sees people looking at it all the time. It would be great to add extra pieces of information. Doug said that map is out of date. It shows the local section of trail and says the trail beyond that on each end is closed. It is from when only this section was open.

Kyle asked what we can do quickly and immediately as a group. She could ask businesses to sponsor things. Yva said QR codes are big now. They are easy to make. Kyle said there is a

demographic that does not use them at all. (*Mary Lou arrived at 6:28.*) Adrienne said she can design the map if people help her with a list of places. Peggy suggested just listing places to eat could be a manageable way to get started. There aren't that many. Yva said one thing about Johnson as a destination is that most restaurants are not open at lunch time. Dean said early lunch/brunch hours are key. Peggy said there are 3 lunch options. Doug suggested a subcommittee to work on this. Kyle, Adrienne and Peggy volunteered. Yva said she could help mark up the map. It was agreed that the map should just show Johnson.

Yva said she would be happy to display at the Lamoille Valley Bike Tours shop anything that is created for the trailhead and she is happy to make their ride guides accessible to anyone.

Jim asked about letting people know the point of departure from the trail if they want to go to places like Moog's or Maple Hill Barn. They would not necessarily want to leave from the trailhead. Yva said they have a hard time convincing people to stop at Maple Hill Barn. Peggy said we need to help people understand they can park their bikes at the church and walk across the road. People don't have to ride on Route 15. Doug suggested asking the Nazarene Church about putting bike racks there. Kim suggested asking the owners of the sandpit near Moog's if we can put a handmade sign there directing people to Moog's. We could have little handmade signs that say where to get off for different restaurants. Doug said he can talk to someone he knows who is attorney for MSI (owners of the pit.)

Kim said if anyone using the rail trail wants to go mountain biking the Cricket Hill trails are just across the road.

Jim MacDowell said many people may be content staying in a place that just offers a mattress on a bunk with an outhouse. He wonders if there is an opportunity to inform locals that they don't need a fully equipped Airbnb to support rail trail users. Dean said he wonders if the state has ever thought about providing spaces with lean-tos, almost like a state park. Mary Lou said her son does a lot of bike packing. He said a lean-to shelter out of the rain is nice. If it has a pad, that is even better. It is good to have access to water to hose off bikes and a place to lock up a bike. There are networks where people can sleep on someone else's land. We should advertise that the rail trail is gravel, not paved. People like that. (*Jim left at 6:41.*)

**6. Subcommittee to Study Implementation of Safe and Secure Parking Areas**

Doug said Yva had suggested that safe and secure parking is a big attraction. Johnson has parking on land owned by the town and village and there might be places in the village where we could offer parking. That would be a way to get people to start here. Yva said a lot of people want to start here. Peggy asked, don't we have enough parking near the food shelf and at Old Mill Park? Kyle said we are talking about overnight parking. Dean said overnight parking is not allowed at Old Mill Park. There is a sign saying it is not allowed. As far as he knows there is no limit by the food shelf. Yva said the small parking area by the food shelf does have some police presence. They drive by almost nightly. Dean said the sheriff's department drives through Old Mill Park.

Dean said he thinks if we are going to have overnight parking we should have some lighting. There is no electricity in Old Mill Park. A lot of infrastructure would have to be put into place. There is a transformer and power next to the small parking area. We could set up lights there and have it be safer. It could be made into a bigger parking area.

Kim asked, for summer have people thought about the school parking lot on College Hill? Is that lit? Dean said it is not lit but there are street lights nearby. Dean said parking at the trailhead is best for riders but parking in the village would be better for the village. We could strategically set up charging stations. Kim said she thinks it would be great to use FEMA buyout land for more parking. Dean said at least 5 buildings in the village will be leveled and removed due to buyouts. Those are 5 places where nothing can be built but we could have parking lots there.

Doug said he thinks we need to start at Old Mill Park. He hopes we can get grant money. His idea was that eventually we would light the ball fields. Dean said that is his dream. They would be the only lit athletic fields in Lamoille County. He has gotten cost estimates. It would be above 6 digits.

Doug asked about lifting the overnight parking limitation at Old Mill Park. Kim said she has already seen people with vans camping there because there is a restroom.

Mary Lou asked if we can put in solar lights for a parking lot without wiring. Dean said that could be an option. Another restriction at Old Mill Park is on how far down we can dig. We can only dig down 20 inches because of the cap over the talc tailings. Digging deeper can possibly be done but would involve a lot of paperwork.

Dean said his initial thought is that because Old Mill Park is a little isolated he does not feel too good about exploring overnight use there. It is not as seen or supervised as other areas. Doug said sometimes usage brings security.

Doug suggested a subcommittee to study secure parking. He thinks it could include people outside this committee. He thinks Duncan Hastings would be willing to be on it. And he would volunteer himself. Mary Lou also volunteered.

Adrienne asked if the parking lot across from the food shelf is in a brownfield. Dean and Doug said yes.

Kim suggested approaching the Manchesters about using the former lumber mill property. They probably have electricity. We could put up posts with lights and pay the Manchesters a nominal fee for letting cars park there.

Mary Lou asked, what about the parking lot where the grocery store was. Is that privately owned? Others said yes. Peggy said people can park overnight there. There have never been any restrictions. If we put in a kiosk where people could pay for overnight parking Pomerleau could make money. Doug said he doesn't think Pomerleau will commit to overnight parking until he decides what do with the property. Kyle said there is also flooding risk there. We might not want to put too much there that uses electricity.

**7. *Potential Use of Holmes Meadow for Camping in Association with Rail Trail***

Doug said we have not yet been able to talk to the selectboard about Holmes Meadow because they have started having work session meetings on third Mondays. Mary Lou did research on what would be helpful for camping.

Dean said he is situated to get funding to build a new pump track in Old Mill Park. Material will be taken from the skatepark and used for the track. Ideally we could coordinate a spur trail that goes to the pump track. He will probably secure the money for that in the next couple of weeks.

The people who can build it won't be able to do it until late fall. It would be designed for all sizes of riders and bikes. He needs to contact the state to see if would be okay to have a spur trail from the rail trail and what kind of permission he needs.

Doug said he and Mary Lou are going to talk to the selectboard about the possibility of camping at Holmes Meadow. (*Peggy left at 7:02.*)

**8. *Funding Opportunities for Kiosks and Other Means of Providing Information***

Kim said her assignment was to look into grants for kiosks. She learned that we can't apply for a Northern Border Catalyst grant until substantial progress is made with the first Northern Border grant the town got. Another grant possibility is a Building Communities Grant from the Agency of Administration. Jackie Cassino didn't get back to her.

**9. *VOREC Grant Status***

Doug said we are waiting for final confirmation on the VOREC grant. There is a June 15 deadline to apply for a grant from AOT for bike paths and lanes, but we haven't done the scoping yet for a bike lane. There is a webinar on these grants May 15. Kyle said she thinks it would be worth going to the information webinar and if they do this yearly we would be ready for next year. Dean said another use for that grant money could be lighted pedestrian crossing signs. Kyle said she can ask Randall what we could use these grant funds for.

**10. *Adjourn***

The meeting was adjourned at 7:08.

*Minutes submitted by Donna Griffiths*