

**Town of Amherst  
Massachusetts**

*Puffer's Pond 2020 Committee*

**Report to the Conservation Commission**



**June 2010**

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## Committee Charge and Process

### Committee Charge and Process

The Amherst Conservation Commission established the Puffer's Pond 2020 Committee (the "Committee") in spring of 2009. The Committee included members from the Select Board, Planning Board, Conservation Commission, and Leisure Services and Supplemental Education (LSSE) Commission, as well as citizen volunteers who responded to a call for participation by submitting a Citizen Activity Form.

The eleven voting members of the Committee began meeting in July 2009 with a charge to "consider options for the use, restoration, beautification, and preservation of Puffer's Pond (the "Pond") and surrounding conservation lands, including the Mill River/Cushman Brook Greenway and to make recommendations to the Conservation Commission" who will make the final decision on which recommendations to implement for the Pond's future. The initiative for the Committee comes from awareness that we are 'loving the Pond to death' – that increases in use and impacts of use are creating an unsustainable situation for the ecology and aesthetics of the area, and presenting significant safety problems. In addition, the inadequate town funding for Pond maintenance and management creates significant challenges in channeling and controlling public use on hot summer days in particular, but other times of the year as well.

The Committee represented a variety of interests, including neighbors and members of the Friends of Puffer's Pond, swimmers, birdwatchers, dog walkers, conservation commission members, and advocates for the poor, for recreation, for budgetary discipline, for the ecology. We began the process with awareness that there were significant issues that had to be addressed if the Pond that we each, for our own reasons, loved was to remain in its current (or even better) condition. One thing shared by all members was a deep commitment to the best interest of the Pond and its users. By the end of the process we had developed a shared understanding of the challenges and opportunities for the Pond and greenway. The final votes on Committee recommendations, policy by policy, were largely unanimous. This report thus represents the consensus of the Committee.

## Committee Charge and Process

The Committee has met at least once a month from July 2009 through May 2010, with various subcommittees meeting more often. The Committee held two public workshops at the start of the process to identify key issues of concern to the public, and to get a sense of possible solutions that might have public support. In general, the main public sentiment was that we should minimize change to the uses and beauty of the Pond and trails, but that we should also be open to solutions that might address key problems as long as they do not significantly change the shared experience of the Pond and trails. We gave mid-process presentations to the Conservation Commission and the Town Boards in February and March and received positive feedback about our general direction. We were assisted by studies from the University of Massachusetts (UMass) and Amherst College. A UMass Landscape Architecture studio provided creative potential designs for the paths and built structures of the greenway, while Amherst College studies provided very helpful bathymetry and sediment composition data that assisted us in reaching consensus on the need for dredging. The Committee also consulted with Town Counsel regarding various liability issues.

Throughout the process, participation by Committee volunteers has been excellent and town staff has been extremely responsive and helpful. The Committee is also grateful for the public support we have received in this project.

Puffers Pond and the Mill River greenway are very important recreational assets for the Town and the region, serving swimmers, ice and water fishermen, hockey players and skaters, dog walkers, other walkers, and also as a transportation route from North Amherst to the Mill River Recreation Area playing fields. But the Town purchased the land with conservation as its primary goal, and the land is managed and controlled by the Conservation Commission. It provides important habitat functions for birds, turtles, frogs, and beavers (most years), among other species. The Pond, the Cushman Brook, the Mill River, and surrounding wetland resource areas also provide important ecological functions. For this reason the Committee has strived to maintain the appropriate balance between human uses and conservation values as the core of our decision making process. Related to this, the committee sought to maintain the balance between the rustic aesthetic of a traditional New England swimming hole with regulations needed to protect swimmers and

## Committee Charge and Process

natural habitat. Perhaps the key decision to be made was whether we should manage the Pond in a way that encourages more, less, or about the same human visitation, or to prioritize conservation and ecological values above human and recreational values.

We began by identifying particular categories of issues, and a range of possible actions that could be taken for each. We then ordered these along a spectrum of more recreation, to more conservation (see Scenarios Matrix, attached as an Appendix I, which lists the range of actions we considered technically feasible, but not necessarily wise). After further discussion about how different decisions fit together to create a coherent pattern, we worked through each category on the matrix, discussed, debated, and in the end voted on which actions we believed were in the best interest of the Pond, the greenway, and its users.

## Key Findings on Pond and Greenway Conditions

### Key Findings on Pond and Greenway Conditions

- The water quality and habitat value of the Pond are strong.
- The trails and beaches are subject to an unacceptable level of erosion and compaction with vegetative loss that is impairing wildlife values. The Julius Lester Trail between Mill River and the Pond is in terrible condition, and the trail around the Pond (the “Perimeter Trail”) is broken down and sloughing off into the Pond. The beams put in place to hold beach sand in and the handrails and other amenities that make the beach accessible must be replaced, and preferably be redesigned before rebuilding to better meet current needs.
- The Pond has not been dredged in 20 years, and if it is not dredged fairly soon, more and more of it will become an unswimmable wetland rather than open water.
- Visitation on peak spring and summer days is increasing and the Pond is becoming a regional draw. This is leading to unsafe conditions on State Street by the Pond, given the very informal parking practices for that road and the heavy pedestrian/bicyclist uses of the road.
- Increased use of the dam and cliffs contribute to unsafe conditions in the pond.
- There is a pressing need to develop a dedicated maintenance, staffing, and long-term improvement fund for the Pond that is separate from the regular Conservation Department budget, given that the Pond absorbs a high percentage of staff time and money during the summer months, but lacks any direct funding.

## Committee Recommendations

### Committee Recommendations

- **Dredging:** The Pond needs to be dredged to maintain its swimmability. This should be one of the first priority actions for the Town.
- **Julius Lester Trail:** The Committee voted unanimously to recommend that the Julius Lester Trail be redirected in sensitive areas, that traffic should be directed to the main trail, and that some type of mulch or surfacing should be installed and maintained. The Committee agrees that this is a high priority issue given the poor current condition of the trail.
- **Perimeter Trail:** The Committee discussed whether the Perimeter Trail should be moved up and away from the edge of the Pond past the North Beach. There was a brief discussion of a boardwalk, as suggested in several of the UMass Studio presentations. The Committee voted 10-1 to recommend that the Perimeter Trail be kept in its current location, with minor redirection if needed in sensitive areas, and that vegetation, signage and natural fencing be used to protect sensitive areas. The Committee agrees that this is a high priority issue given the poor current condition of the trail.
- **State Street:** Following extensive discussion, the final recommendation of the Committee with regard to State Street is: One-way traffic from west to east (Sandhill Road to the Railroad Bridge near Leverett Road, with a drop-off area very near the Pond. No parking from Sand Hill Road to Cushman Brook. There should be traffic calming measures in areas where there is no parking. There should be a designated, marked pedestrian path on State Street. The Committee acknowledges that giving up parking from Sand Hill Road to Cushman Brook may require that a parking lot be installed to the east of the Pond, which would likely be across the street from the Kevin Flood Trailhead. The Committee prefers pull-in parking starting at the Kevin Flood trail.

## Committee Recommendations

In making this recommendation, the Committee sought to provide roughly the current amount of parking, but in a safer and more controlled fashion and in a way that made State Street more pleasant for pedestrians and bicyclists. The Committee discussed the following three options for State Street: 1) one-way year round, 2) seasonal one-way or full closure, and 3) year round full closure. There were seven votes in favor of making the road one-way, with parking on one side, with a designated pedestrian path; one member abstained from the vote. No Committee members were in favor of closing the road entirely. The Committee then discussed whether to restrict parking in front of the Pond between Sand Hill Road and the Cushman Brook. The Committee also discussed parallel parking vs. pull-in parking, and agreed that there are trade-offs between providing a larger amount of parking on the road and needing to build a separate parking lot to the east of the Pond.

- **North Beach:** The Committee agreed that we should try to attract more people to the North Beach to balance the use of the South Beach. The Committee voted on the following improvements at the beach: more gradual drop-off into the water, dredging, a wider view of the water from the beach, and a nicer sand area. Seven Committee members voted in favor, one member opposed. The discussion regarding the North Beach centered on whether to improve and maybe expand the beach or leave it in its current state. The Committee agreed that the meadow area was separate from the discussion of the beach.
- **North Beach Meadow Area:** The Committee voted unanimously to recommend that this be maintained as meadow, with ecologically viable meadow plants and flowers planted as necessary. The Committee also recognizes that the sumac is important to this area.
- **Parking Fees:** The Committee agrees that parking fees are necessary at the Pond. The Committee voted unanimously on the following structure: It is essential that revenue from the parking pass goes directly to a dedicated fund for the Pond controlled by the Conservation Department. Fees should be generated through



## Committee Recommendations

parking passes tied to vehicles; one pass per car. The passes will be required between April 1<sup>st</sup> and October 15<sup>th</sup> and from 10 am to 8 pm. The fee should be different for Amherst residents and non-residents, although the non-resident fee cannot be more than twice as much as the resident fee. Day passes at a more expensive rate should be available. The Committee would like free day passes to be available at the public library and recommends that passes should be subsidized to low income users and seniors. There should be additional signage and enforcement along abutting residential streets to reduce illegal parking and users trying to avoid getting the parking pass.

The Committee voted on the fee structure. The Committee recommends unanimously that the annual pass should be \$40 for residents and \$80 for non-residents. Five Committee members recommended that the day pass should be \$8; two Committee members recommended that the day pass should be \$10.

- **Dam Safety:** The Committee voted unanimously to recommend that safety buoys be installed seasonally in front of the dam.
- **Mill Street Bridge:** The Committee voted unanimously to recommend that when the Mill Street Bridge is rebuilt in the future, a pedestrian path should be added.
- **Trash:** The Committee voted unanimously to recommend that trash receptacles be removed from the Pond, and that educational signage be installed about carrying trash out. This measure will help users to understand that they are coming to a conservation area.
- **Restrooms:** The Committee voted to recommend that seasonal sanitary facilities be provided at the north and south beaches. Composting toilets should be installed if technically and economically feasible. The location of the restrooms should take into consideration aesthetics but also convenience. Eleven Committee members voted in favor of this recommendation, one member was opposed, arguing that no facilities should be provided.

## Committee Recommendations

- **Picnicking:** The Committee voted unanimously to recommend that no formal picnicking, BBQs, or fires be allowed at the Pond; this was essentially a vote for no change in policy.
- **Commercial Enterprises:** Committee members are concerned about private parties making profits from uses on conservation land. The Committee voted unanimously to make the following recommendations:
  - No commercial activities should be allowed without a permit and/or approval from the Commission.
  - Organized non-commercial (private) activities in excess of 25 people and/or regularly scheduled activities should also require a permit and/or approval from the Commission.
- **Invasive Species:** The Committee voted unanimously to recommend a strong effort to manage invasive species at the Pond.
- **Enforcement of Regulations:** The Committee voted unanimously to recommend that existing regulations must be enforced. The Committee notes that this cannot be accomplished without a staff.
- **Staffing:** The Committee voted unanimously to recommend that a dedicated staff be present at the Pond between 8 am and 7 pm, seven days a week during June, July, and August and as needed during April and May. The role of the staff is to enforce regulations, maintain the area, and conduct some outreach and education. Organized education or outreach about the conservation area is a separate function.
- **Dogs:** The Committee voted unanimously to recommend that the existing dog policy be maintained. The regulations need to be better enforced. The Committee noted that the existing policy was developed through a long neighborhood process. The Committee agreed that when the North Beach gets improved, the dog policy may require revisiting.

## **Committee Recommendations**

Beyond these items, there were a wide variety of issues discussed that were set aside as important, but not feasible to address in our forum or time period. Several of these issues are included as an addendum to this report.

The Committee believes that these actions will assure the ecological health and recreational viability of the Pond for many years to come.

## **Thank You From The Committee**

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Respectfully, the Puffer's Pond 2020 Committee:

Elisabeth Hamin (chair), Briony Angus, Meg Gage, Aaron Hayden, Emlen Jones, Paris Muska, Jim Patulak, Jim Pistrang, Mary Sharma, Evan Shopper, David Webber.

Staff: David Ziomek, Nathaniel Malloy

# Appendices

## Appendices

- I. Puffer's Pond 2020—Scenarios Matrix
- II. "Good Ideas Addendum"
- III. Draft Report—February 4, 2010
- IV. Committee Charge and Membership
- V. Public Forums Handout and Data
- VI. Town Counsel Memorandum—Use of Property, Fees, Liability
- VII. Parcel Acquisition Timeline
- VIII. Puffer's Pond Rules & Regulations
- IX. Comparative Analysis of Local Swimming Areas
- X. Fee Structures in Amherst
- XI. Newspaper Articles
- XII. Summary of 2009 Online Puffer's Pond 2020 Survey

# Maps

## Maps

- A. Basemap
- B. Property Ownership and Timeline of Acquisition
- C. Protected Open Space
- D. Priority Habitat
- E. Water Resources
- F. Density within 1-mile of Puffer's Pond—'nolli' diagram
- G. Year Structures Built
- H. Zoning within 1-mile of Puffer's Pond
- I. Action Plan Map—Open Space and Recreation Plan
- J. Mill River Area—Map #5: Amherst Open Space and Trails Series

## **Additional Resources**

### **Additional Resources** (Copies available in the Planning Department)

Puffer's Pond 2020 Public Meeting Agendas

Puffer's Pond 2020 Public Meeting Minutes

Puffer's Pond 2020 Management Plan

2009 Online Puffer's Pond Survey Results

University of Massachusetts Sedimentation Study, 2009

Amherst College Bathymetry Study, 2009

University of Massachusetts, Department of Landscape Architecture and Regional Planning,  
Greenway Studio Projects, 2010