Musconetcong River Management Council

Minutes of a Member Meeting, April 15, 2025

The meeting came to order at 7:00 under the able direction of Charlie Fineran. Also attending were:

Ben Yaskulka

Tom Dallessio

Alan Hunt

Bill Leavens

Steven Wolfrum

Pam Bailey

Nancy Roberts-Lawler

Tyler Greenfield

Steven Rattner

Jamie DeAngelis

Darrin Ferguson

Jack DeGroot

Paul Tarlowe

Bob Delpizzo

Sharon Petzinger

Dwight Pederson

Steven Gransky

Marsha Benovengo

Bill McQuaide

Cathryn Schaffer

A quorum was achieved. Visitors included Patrick Baines, Neil Moorcroft, and Brisa Gomez. Notice about this meeting was published in the Star Ledger and the Express Times in accordance with the NJ Open Public Meeting Act. This was a hybrid meeting with participants at the MWA headquarters in Asbury and on Zoom.

The minutes of the February 18, 2025, meeting were approved as previously distributed with spelling corrections. On a motion by Mr. Fineran that was given and Nancy Lawler second by Nancy Lawler.

The first order of business was a discussion of proposed warehouse construction along the Musconetcong. Pat Baines and Neil Moorcroft of Skylands Preservation Alliance discussed the impact that these buildings would have on the river environment along Asbury-Bloomsbury Road. This construction will affect 2200 people in the area and the existing farmland adjacent to the property. Three warehouses are proposed on the Tinsley Farm in Greenwich Township and the Heritage and Tobias farms in Franklin Township. The fear is that any effluent from these developed properties will affect the river and the surrounding wetlands. Multiple buildings have been proposed at the sites. There is significant local opposition, but the applicants have been persisting. There is no current application on Tobias, but that could happen at any minute.

The Franklin Township municipal planner found that there is a need for redevelopment in the township as well as a need for the municipal revenue it would generate. However, why would active farmland need to be redeveloped? The warehouses would be at the extreme edge of the Township. Most of the affected people live in the adjoining municipalities. In previous applications, there have been suits against NJDEP because they did not recognize streams which were clearly identified on the property. However, the principal stream was finally identified, permits were revoked, and the property owner is awaiting a final judgement on the use of the property that is pending. If the owner cannot build, they will quit the project, and the property may be preserved as farmland.

Neil Moorcroft then presented additional information on the Tinsley property. The Tinsley property is even closer to the river. That proposal is currently before the Greenwich Land Use Board. Property will drain effluent directly into the river. There is nothing proposed in the application that will stop hydrocarbons from entering the river. The only ‘good’ aspect of the proposal is its proximity to Rt. 78. The Township would permit ‘Light Manufacturing’ on the site, but the current discussion is about a warehouse. Because there is an 18th century house on the property, it could be qualified as historical property. The developer proposes to destroy that farmhouse. Three culverts would be directed into the river. The property lies on karst substrate and there will be a significant amount of blasting and rock removal on the site. There may be sinkholes due to the karst substrate.

The proposed building would be 185,000 square feet with 225 parking spaces for trailers behind the building. It will be a challenge to ‘hide’ the building due to its bulk and elevation. The building is proposed to be outside the 300-foot setback from the river, but not by much more. The access to the property would be through the Riparian buffer. The orientation of the building will be the subject of a variance. Much of the proposed construction can be achieved by the developer on the local level, but NJDEP will be involved in any final approval. A recommendation was made that further discussion on some aspects of the opposition to the proposal should be conducted between the Skylands lawyer and the Land Use Boards.

There are also issues with the site septic system and identified birds and endangered species on the surrounding properties. However, many of those off-property sites have been disturbed. The building on the property is eligible for state and Federal historic preservation, but there is no private or municipal application for that now.

Alan Hunt discussed how the proposed warehouse sites would affect the River Management Plan, specifically the historical and recreational components. There are oversight capabilities available that may have some application here. How can those resources be addressed and protected? The National Park Service has other issues that they might have in their area. These include the effect on the view from the river - that is another standard that can be used by the Council in their testimony to the Land Use Board. The Council can make both positive and negative comments on any development proposal. The Greenwich Land Use Board is currently holding hearings on the application. The method of making any comment depends on the rules that the Planning Board sets. Skylands Preservation will keep the Council informed.

The next order of business was an update on Washington DC activity with the Wild and Scenic Rivers Coalition visit to The Hill. Ben Yaskulka attended 30 Congressional offices to discuss funding for the Wild and Scenic River program. He was supporting a ‘Dear Colleague’ letter from Rep. Courtney of Connecticut that is now being distributed to Congress. He met with Members of the Florida and New Jersey delegations.

On the dam update, New Jersey’s Senators were given an update in funding freezes and how they are affecting the progress of dam removals. Some $20,000,000 will be coming into the region for construction and dam removal when these funds are unfrozen.

Tom Dallessio then discussed some MWA issues, providing a staffing update related to the funding freeze. Director of Education Linda Cerceau has moved to Texas. We have had to extend reimbursement to contractors and some of our employees may be asked to reduce their hours due to funding cutbacks. Mr. Dallessio has also announced his retirement.

Charlie then presented a personal check in the amount of $500 to MWA to sponsor an underprivileged child to attend Camp Musky. He urged others to follow his example.

Under Old Business, Ben gave an update of the USEPA RERC (Recreation Economies in Rural Communities) technical assistance program. We do not know which municipalities will be approved yet. The Outreach Committee has been talking with other organizations about joining with the Council if the program is approved.

PFAS is a continuing threat to the region. Ben gave an update about how MWA has been working with EPA to track the plume of contamination. Four hundred parcels have been identified as potentially affected and are now receiving bottled water. The highest level measured is well over the acceptable limit. One of the highest limit sites was up the side of the mountain in Bethlehem. That would have to be separate contamination unrelated to the sludge dumping south of Washington back in the 1970s. EPA is expanding their testing in the area. The river was not included initially but MWA has received a grant to look for PFAS in the river. We are testing at 32 different mainstem river sites. ‘Working with EPA has been a good experience,’ said Tom.

Ben has been working in Bloomsbury due to the warehouse issue. He is hoping for a Council candidate to emerge from that community.

Hunterdon County will be cataloging historic sites in their county. They will be conducting training sessions – at the River Resource Center. This is part of the County’s Highlands Conformance Plan Update responsibilities.

Tom then gave his report as River Administrator. The watershed planning documents are in print and are also online. There are strategies that can be employed going forward, notably the Affordable Housing obligations in the area. 17 of 26 towns in the watershed are seeking reduced numbers for their requirements. Towns argue that they have less developable land. MWA can advise those towns that are members of the MRMC on their Affordable Housing requirements.

We are also advocating the River Friendly Resident program, a self-selecting program that several water utilities and organizations have developed.

We expect to secure permits for the Shurts Road bridge for the education trail this Spring. This will complete a 3-mile trail for public use. Mill construction is also proceeding with the expectation that it will be open for Camp Musky.

Upcoming events – every Saturday from now until June MWA will have a public event. Check the MWA website. Christa Reeves is looking for a site to conduct septic system training. There will also be HABS training and other training activities conducted. There will be tree planting from April 22 to the twenty-seven on the Educational Train. Nancy Lawler noted that the River Ambassador did an excellent job – there were a record 360 registrations for the recent stream cleanup. Marcia Benovengo noted that there was much less trash seen in the area than in prior years.

Alan Hunt then gave the NPS report. He noted that Congress has fully funded the Federal budget, but he has no information on Wild & Scenic or NPS funding.

He has been working with Ben on the work plan for MWA and the MRMC for next year. The deadline for plan submission is May 23 for now. All the W&S Partnership Rivers will be getting their allocation when those agreements get processed.

NPS is looking at underground contamination with US Geological Survey.

He has no information on pending NPS funding for the Mill.

There was a meeting with EPA to establish standards for surface water contamination in Wild and Scenic Rivers. There is work toward developing recreational standards for Wild and Scenic Rivers.

Alan is monitoring the Tinsley property as part of any protection that might be sought on the proposed warehouse site. NPS does have experience in that area. Paul Kenney has retired from NPS and the NPS grants chief, Jamie Fosberg, has also requested retirement. There have also been other retirement requests and that may change the workload of remaining NPS W&S river managers.

The floor was then opened for municipal and NGO reports. Marcia Benovengo reported that TU is holding a widespread meeting of their chapters to determine how they will be moving forward. Jamie DeAngelis reported that Hackettstown is looking to rezone some of their property into parks to lower their affordable housing exposure. Jack DeGroot of Sussex County is working on their open space program update. Sharon Petzinger reported that Lebanon Township has drafted a municipal flood storage plan.

Nancy Lawler reported that Peace NJ is continuing work to remove the concrete platform in the river near Alumni Park. They have several grants to do that and to increase public access to the river, including ADA-compliant fishing access. Permit applications are being finalized. She has also been working with the Association of Retarded Citizens of Warren County and National Park Service on park accessibility plans for all citizens.

Charlie Fineran reported that Allamuchy has a $80,000 grant for a rail-to-trail upgrade on the Lehigh and Hudson line.

Bill Leavens discussed a proposal for 130 residential units to be constructed on Kingshighway in Washington Township, Morris, opposite the Mansfield, Warren Historic District. He was on the Planning Board that rejected an earlier application on several grounds ten years ago. Currently, the property is reverting to a wild state. There are reports of bobcat and other protected species on adjacent property. Ben Yaskulka has been following this for MWA. There is no application before the Land Use Board yet, but the Township is actively considering a proposal to rezone the property from its previous industrial use to residential. NJDEP is aware of potential chemical contamination on the site. Opponents have been requesting that they be allowed to review any written DEP determinations about the Highlands applicability of the site and the status of the property regarding potential contamination. Some nine hundred Township residents have gone on record opposing any such large-scale residential project. Township officials have expressed fear of a ‘Builders’ Remedy’ lawsuit for affordable housing, but there is at least one Township-owned property located adjacent to a school and near the center of Long Valley that can be developed for 100% low-income ‘workforce’ housing. A charitable religious group has offered to build those homes, but the Township Committee has not responded to this possibility.

Bill moved to adjourn the meeting numerous seconds. The meeting closes at 9:25 P.M.

Respectfully submitted,

Bill Leavens