Musconetcong River Management Council

Minutes of a Regular Meeting – December 12, 2023

The meeting was brought to order at 7:02 by Treasurer Nancy Roberts Lawler. Also attending were:

Robbie-Lynn Mwangi

Paul Tarlowe

Robert Delpizzo

William Leavens

Dwight Pederson

William McQuaide

Casey Ezyske

Paul Kenney

Tom Dallessio

Cathryn Schaffer

Pam Bailey

Peter Dlugos

Marcia Benevengo

Christa Reeves

River Administrator Alan Hunt

Darrin Ferguson from the National Park Service attended as a guest. He is a Visual Information Specialist for our Partnership Rivers group.

A quorum was achieved. Notice of this meeting was published in the Star Ledger and the Express Times in accordance with the NJ Open Public Meeting Act.

The first order of business was approving the October, 2023 meeting minutes. Motion was made by Paul Tarlowe and given second by. Peter Dlugos. The minutes were approved by voice vote as previously distributed.

Under New Business, Alan Hunt shared the 2024 MRMC calendar. Meetings will remain at the third Tuesday of every other month as previously. The meetings are proposed to be hybrid – in person and via Zoom. The physical meeting location with the Musconetcong Watershed Association River Resource Center in Asbury. MWA has a good electronic setup in place courtesy of the National Park Service for virtual participation. It has been previously proven to work well.

Council members are urged to please reach out to their municipal governing bodies and request reappointment to the Council. This should be accomplished prior to the February meeting. Suggestion was made to perform Member training to bring everyone up to speed on the Council activities, purposes, and policies. The Orientation meeting will be scheduled on a late January or Friday evening after a survey poll is distributed.

Alan then reported that he and Charlie had been discussing a review of the Council by-laws. One suggestion was to add a new member, the Ramapough Culture and Land Foundation, representing the Lenape Indian community. They have been participating and the Council has included much of their history in material we have published. Their participation can be invaluable to achieve the Council’s purposes. Marsha Benevengo asked if the bylaw revision had to be distributed to the Council members. Alan replied that it will be done in routine notification to the members prior to the vote for the bylaw change.

Marcia then proposed that the Ramapough Culture and Land Foundation be asked to join the Council. Second was given by Ms. Roberts Lawler. On a roll call vote, all Members present approved the motion.

The next item for discussion was the Junior Ranger program. MWA previously had a ‘Meet the River’ program to introduce youth to the watershed which was only held at the River Resource Center by the river. The Junior Ranger program can fulfill that program’s goal, and offer broader engagement at other places throughout the watershed. This is an NPS initiative. Ryan Jiorle and Robbie Lynn Mwangi had prepared brochures for different age groups that Robbie Lynn presented to the group. Most of the photos used in the brochures were taken by Jeremy Travers. The brochure focuses on the wildlife along the river. Other sections discussed foods, resources, and recreational activities available in the watershed. The Munsee language was used to describe different elements of the watershed. Families are now testing the brochures that are close to being completed. Paul Kenney noted that the Great Egg Harbor River is also doing Junior Ranger brochures.

Tom Dallessio reported that the Beatty’s Mill dam on East Avenue, Hackettstown was removed in a very short period last month after many years of delay. There were immediate results observed from the work. The fishermen in the area were very pleased and the fish were moving in. The next step will be replanting the riverbank next Spring with assistance from Trout Unlimited.

Under New Business, Tom Dallessio discussed he final report of the ‘Together New Jersey’ evaluation for downtown Asbury as a Vibrant Place. That report was previously distributed in the notification of this meeting. Recommendations installing include wayfinding signs and creating a formal mechanism for popular engagement with the village. This is all aimed towards creating a pathway for local economic development. Within fifteen minutes of Asbury, the income average is greater than the statewide average. Ensuring tourist pedestrian and bicycle safety is paramount. Ms. Roberts Lawler encouraged Mr. Dallessio to present this report to all of the local municipal and County officials.

The next item for discussion was the Septic System Risk Assessment and Design Alternatives. The report aimed to address several questions. What alternative designs can be used to address septic challenges? What is in place now? What data is there on septic impairment to the watershed and how can that influence the design for future system design? The great percentage of biological impairment to the river is human induced. Further, there are common horror stories about people trying to sell their home with failed septic systems. Can we develop septic management systems that address these impairments? What is next? Is Federal funding available to help bear the cost of meeting these challenges? MWA is applying to USDA for funding to develop systems and responses to septic issues. How can we ensure that the water is cleaner than it is at present? MWA has undertaken a 319 program to work with municipalities in the middle part of the Musconetcong watershed, and applied to Hunterdon County to complete a Watershed Implementation Plan for the lower watershed. These plans should identify areas where remediation work should be focused. In 2025, the next round of COAH housing will be realized. If there is control over wastewater, meeting COAH obligations may be easier to accomplish while also meeting environmental requirements. How can we best accommodate the change--that will be coming-- will make things better.

Christa Reeves then reported on the Flow Together workshops as part of the watershed Management Plan. The challenges of non-point source pollution were addressed. Bacteria and Septic System issues were identified by the participants. Development was addressed as a public concern along with Invasive species, flooding and stormwater. People who participated were aware of the need of the importance of knowing and sharing information on the issues that had been identified.

Phase two of the Management Plan will discuss best management practices including identifying funding sources to help address issues. These meetings will start in January and February. Christa will release the schedule to Council members.

The next discussion topic was the Haberman Hampton residential development site. MWA recently won a court case whereby NJDEP had to re-open the application for a Flood Hazard Area Applicability Determination for public comment. One concern is that the proposed development’s applicant showed a too small drainage area of an on-site water feature as part of their submission to DEP. The fear is that development of the site will exacerbate flooding in the immediate area by filling areas currently available for flood storage. MWA is asking for people to submit comments about their personal experience with the site via an online website link: https://action.njlcv.org/a/protect-our-waterways

The MRMC has commented in the past on this issue, but the comment deadline is this Friday, December 15. Council members were encouraged to submit their own personal comments. The comment form is on the MWA Facebook page. Ms. Roberts-Lawler requested that the comment form be distributed to Council members. This is a comment on a state-wide permit, not a local issue so local municipal officials and volunteers can submit comment. The state has to respond to all comments.

Alan Hunt then gave his report as River Administrator. MWA has been undertaking an Interpretive Plan for the watershed. He will be scheduling a meeting of an Interpretive Roundtable, with entities involved in education and which have publicly accessible sites, that in the new year. He also advised that there will be a web-based story map of the recently completed NPS brochure.

He further reported that the next work will be developing an interpretive plan for the usage of the Asbury Mill. An MWA committee is working on that during January to March, 2024.

Alan then presented on the River Voices oral histories of the community. We are completing a video featuring a series of video with interviews with former employees of Asbury Graphite, a local farmer, and people doing river clean up. There is an interview with an angler, with a paddler, and with Chief Mann on the Lenape history in the area. There will be a publicity outreach when these are posted.

As his NPS report, Paul Kenney noted that the House of Representatives will not be cutting NPS funding and the Senate wants to increase it. That will be resolved in a conference committee. He also noted that the Raritan Headwaters people are interested in possibly joining the NPS Wild and Scenic program. They will be doing a reconnaissance survey in the coming months. He noted that NJDEP had defended their work on Category 1 status for the river in a recently released video by Raritan Headwaters Association.

There were no committee Reports or organization reports.

Under municipal reports, Dwight Pederson reported on the sale of the paper mill on the Musconetcong in Holland Township. Alan has reached out to the landowner but has not yet spoken with him. DEP has met with the new owner and that meeting went well. The new owner is interested in removing the dam.

There were no public comments. The meeting was adjourned at 8:50 on a motion by Bill Leavens and given second by Bob Delpizzo.

Respectfully submitted,

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