

## **MINUTES**

### **CONSERVATION AND NATURAL RESOURCES ADVISORY COUNCIL (CNRAC)**

**March 24, 2021**

#### **MEMBERS PRESENT**

Silas Chamberlin, Member  
Greg Goldman, Member  
Meredith Graham, Secretary  
Sarah Hall-Bagdonas, Member  
Dean Jackson, Member  
Joanne Kilgour, Member  
Bob Kirchner, Vice Chair  
Gary Kribbs, Member  
Geraldyn Singer, Chair  
Steve Stroman, Member  
Dave Trimpey, Member

#### **DCNR**

Cindy Dunn, DCNR Secretary  
Gretchen Leslie, CNRAC Advisor

#### **ADMINISTRATOR**

Katrina Harris, CNRAC Administrator

#### **GUESTS PRESENT**

Eric Nelson, DCNR, Director of Legislative Affairs (presenter)  
Alex MacDonald, Chief, DCNR Trails, Greenways and Statewide Planning Section (presenter)  
Stacie Amsler, DCNR, Director, Bureau of Administrative Services (presenter)  
Meredith Hill, DCNR  
John Norbeck, DCNR  
Nicole Faraguna, DCNR  
Aara Vinsh, DCNR  
Nate Lotze, DCNR  
Chris Novak, DCNR  
Jake Newton, DCNR  
Shea Zwerver, DCNR  
Natalie Shearer, Geosyntec  
David Hess, PA Environment Digest Blog  
Sarah Corcoran, Sierra Club  
Jen Quinn, Sierra Club  
Megan Filak, Luzerne County Convention and Visitors Bureau  
Frank Maguire, Pennsylvania Environmental Council  
Donna Iannone, Sullivan County Commissioner  
Glendon King, PA House of Representatives  
Marci Mowery, PA Parks and Forests Foundation  
Joseph Neville, Keystone Trails Association  
Elizabeth Krug, PSSA  
Jack Clark, DCNR ATV/Snowmobile Advisory Council

Randy Green  
Ron Steffey

## **WELCOME**

Gretchen Leslie opened the meeting and welcomed everyone to CNRAC's virtual meeting for March 2021. Ms. Leslie read a list of Council members present. She stated Council members have the ability to interact with presenters and have discussions among themselves, and the general public will have an opportunity to speak at the end of the meeting. She stated the meeting is being recorded, and by participating, consent is being given to the recording, retention and use of the session recording. She advised no one had pre-registered to make comments, but if after hearing the presentations, anyone is interested in making a comment, they can place their name and topic in the Chat feature, and they will be acknowledged during the public comment period.

Ms. Leslie introduced some of the DCNR staff present. She also acknowledged the many individuals joining the virtual audience.

Geralyn Singer, Chair, expressed appreciation for everyone taking the time to attend and DCNR's support of the virtual meeting.

## **APPROVAL OF MINUTES**

Council unanimously approved the January 27, 2021 minutes.

## **COUNCIL REPORT**

**Geralyn Singer, CNRAC Chair**

Ms. Singer stated the officers of the Council and perhaps some members were able to listen to the Senate budget hearing with Secretary Dunn. She noted many issues were covered including electric vehicles, infrastructure needs, oil and gas taxes, climate concerns, water quality, outdoor recreation, and impact on local economies. Ms. Singer noted the staff of DCNR was acknowledged for their hard work during the pandemic and making things run smoothly for the many users of state parks.

Ms. Singer advised the Council's work groups have been very busy, and updates will be provided later in the meeting.

## **SECRETARY'S REPORT**

**Cindy Dunn, DCNR Secretary**

Secretary Dunn discussed the recent Senate budget hearing. She noted that since the Budget hearing, several Senators have introduced co-sponsor memos that impact DCNR's mission, so DCNR is engaging with the senators involved and is encouraged by their interest in moving forward. She stated the proposed budget will cover DCNR's mission, but additional funding could be used as high visitation rates are expected to continue.

Secretary Dunn advised that the Department is very actively opening up facilities to be ready by the first weekend in April or the start of fishing season and be able to keep people socially distanced. She noted visitor centers are being opened, and limited outdoor programming is

being offered with environmental educators. She noted visitation remains very high and is expected to continue; this past weekend, for the first time in history for this time of year, there was a park closure due to reaching capacity.

Secretary Dunn said DCNR is very closely watching the potential distribution of funds from the American Rescue Plan and potential funding opportunities of DCNR's mission, along with other federal funding possibilities. She noted that DCNR dollars invested in parks' infrastructure returns dollars to the local economy so it maximizes the use of the funds.

Secretary Dunn noted the buffer planting season is underway and interest is increasing with landscaping businesses and landowners. She advised the Keystone Tree Fund will help fund this program although more money is needed which could be added by legislation and other means.

Secretary Dunn noted that grant applications continue to be received at a strong pace and volume, comparable to past years.

Ms. Singer asked Secretary Dunn about the growing infrastructure needs and the impact of continued high usage. Secretary Dunn responded that issues such as a sewage system failure can close down a campground on short notice on a busy holiday weekend. Secretary Dunn said there is a current proposal to remove 12 old dams that present a hazard; 32 high hazards dams have some structural deficiency. Secretary Dunn stated DCNR is looking at the potential federal funding and the hoping the state budget will improve so DCNR can start gaining on the backlog of infrastructure needs.

#### **DCNR ADVISOR REPORT**

**Gretchen Leslie, CNRAC Advisor**

Ms. Leslie reminded everyone of future CNRAC meeting dates -- May 26, July 28, September 22, and November 17. She noted at least the May meetings will be virtual; decisions will be made at a later date as to whether the balance of meetings will be virtual, in-person or a hybrid meeting.

Ms. Leslie advised DCNR's Bureau of Forestry had received two favorable audits from the Sustainable Forestry Initiative and the Forest Stewardship Council which show that our state forests are meeting their standards for sustainable certification; these certifications are a stamp of excellence for how programs are managed and how DCNR manages our woodlands for tomorrow.

Ms. Leslie stated the Wild Resources Conservation Program awarded 12 individuals for their work to protect Pennsylvania's native plants and natural biodiversity. She noted grants from this program go to support field research and conservation projects.

Ms. Leslie advised that more than 130 new camping sites have been added to six state parks as pet friendly for 2022. She noted this request has been heard from many visitors, and DCNR responded with the additions.

#### **LEGISLATIVE UPDATE**

**Eric Nelson, Director of Legislative Affairs, DCNR**

Mr. Eric Nelson summarized several bills DCNR is monitoring:

- Senator Laughlin recently circulated a co-sponsorship memo concerning the removal of the prohibition on Sunday hunting; legislation is expected to be introduced in the near future.
- Senator Gordner's is expected to introduce legislation in April or early May for Growing Greener III which would allocate approximately \$500 million from the American Rescue Fund to DCNR and DEP.
- Representative Oberlander's HB 598 would clarify that only public entities can pursue public prescriptive easements.
- Senator Phillips Hill's SB250 would change the way the Commonwealth awards grants; DCNR has some concerns with this bill. No vote has been scheduled yet.
- Representative Owlett's HB478 would open up forestry trails and public lands to off-highway motorcycles; DCNR some concerns with this bill.

## **COUNCIL BUSINESS**

Ms. Singer advised one item of Council business will be covered during the Motorized Recreation Work Group report.

## **PRESENTATIONS**

### **LAND AND WATER TRAIL NETWORK STRATEGIC PLAN**

**Alex MacDonald, Chief of DCNR's Trails, Greenways and Statewide Planning Section, Bureau of Recreation and Conservation**

Mr. MacDonald stated the Strategic Plan had been released the previous week and is a companion document to the Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan (SCORP) which was released in the fall. He explained SCORP is a requirement for Land and Water Conservation Funding, and the Trail Plan is a requirement for money received from the Federal government.

Mr. MacDonald said the vision described in the Trail Plan remains unchanged from the last plan, developed in 2014, which is "to develop a statewide land and water trail network to facilitate recreation, transportation and healthy lifestyles for all."

Mr. MacDonald noted public input was the foundation for the planning efforts and information from the extensive SCORP public outreach, which resulted in more than 12,000 responses was used, as well as some more recent outreach/planning activities.

Mr. MacDonald explained the plan contains seven recommendations:

- Close Priority Trail Gaps = a trail within 10 minutes (previously 15) of every citizen
- Coordinate funding programs
- Cultivate a variety of partnerships
- More opportunities for everyone to regularly use a trail

- Connect communities and community assets
- Maintain and improve existing land and water trails
- Promote Pennsylvania's trails and their benefits

Mr. MacDonald noted the plan also has 40 action steps divided into themes: closing trail gaps, completing major greenways, regional trail planning efforts, engaging and welcoming, and user groups.

Mr. MacDonald discussed what makes a trail gap a priority including: the gap being along a major greenway or regionally significant trail; connects existing segments of trail or connects an existing trail to a state park/forest or key community; being five miles or less of a gap; and the trail has been formalized in an official planning document. Mr. MacDonald displayed a map (available at <http://maps.dcnr.pa.gov/trailgaps/>) showing 112 priority trail gaps. He also discussed Pennsylvania's Top 10 Priority Trail Gaps and the criteria for being a priority trail gap including: connecting continuous segments; involving large construction effort or rehabilitation of major infrastructure; significant funding required; or requires interagency coordination.

Mr. MacDonald displayed a map of Pennsylvania's major greenways/trail corridors, noting it depicts the backbone of trails across Pennsylvania. DCNR continues to work on completing these trails.

Mr. MacDonald next discussed the regional trail network, noting it is a regional planning effort for connecting trails.

Mr. MacDonald said another focus of the strategic plan is to ensure trails are engaging and welcoming and that people have access. He referenced a map developed as part of SCORP that shows outdoor recreation access and need; he also showed a map that ranked the level of need. He explained the data is being used to examine whether grants are being distributed in an equitable manner and helping to ensure places get access that have the greatest need.

Mr. MacDonald discussed the strategic plan's focus on specialized user groups and action steps to address their specialized needs as they relate to trails.

Meredith Graham asked Mr. MacDonald to elaborate on the physical challenges presented, aside from funding, with closing trail gaps; she also stated she was surprised to see bridges mentioned in the plan. Mr. MacDonald responded there are locations where bridges are needed, which can be expensive. He stated PennDOT has a surplus bridge program, but it will not fill all the gaps. Mr. MacDonald said in general all the easy gaps have been completed and what are left are the more challenging or difficult gaps. Ms. Graham asked if land ownership is an issue, and Mr. MacDonald responded that land acquisition/not having control of the property is an issue. Ms. Graham asked how the strategic plan will be used going forward. Mr. MacDonald said the plan will be used in evaluating grant applications and will give local and statewide organizations goals to work towards.

Mr. Bob Kirchner commented that DCNR did a good job of snowmobile trail grooming this year, which was very much appreciated by the user group and asked if Mr. MacDonald foresees any challenges or changes in the grooming program. Mr. MacDonald said the Pennsylvania State Snowmobile Association's concerns about funding the maintenance had influenced the grooming plan.

Mr. Kirchner asked if GIS information is shared with manufacturers as many of the newer high-end snowmobiles come with a GIS or the information can be accessed on smartphones and would be helpful in letting people know where the trails are and keeping them on the trails. Mr. MacDonald responded that trail data is available through the clearinghouse for GIS in Pennsylvania, and some data needs to be updated. He stated the data is not actively distributed to the snowmobile industry. Mr. MacDonald said DCNR is looking to coordinate better with individuals and the industry who provide trail apps to get them data for their apps.

Ms. Singer asked how the growing need for maintenance of trails is being addressed in the strategic plan. Mr. MacDonald said the plan includes 40 action steps some of which address this issue through education and training in light of limited funding being available.

Silas Chamberlin thanked Mr. MacDonald for his work on Pennsylvania's trails, noting Pennsylvania is one of the most popular trail states in the country. Mr. Chamberlin asked Mr. MacDonald if he had any thoughts on ways in which PennDOT and DCED or other agencies that trail funding might interact with DCNR's work. Mr. MacDonald responded that DCNR works very closely with PennDOT, including collaborating on grant applications as well as other projects. He stated with DCED there have been discussions at higher levels about how they can promote Pennsylvania's outdoor recreation resources. He noted the strategic plan also references collaborating with the Game Commission regarding trails through state game lands.

#### **DCNR 2021-22 PROPOSED BUDGET**

##### **Stacie Amsler, Director, DCNR's Bureau of Administrative Services**

Ms. Amsler noted she would be discussing the proposed Governor's budget, which could change during the enactment process.

Ms. Amsler explained the amount of funding DCNR receives from the General Fund is less than 2/5 of a penny for every dollar of General Fund appropriations.

Ms. Amsler displayed a chart showing the proposed budget for 2021-2022 compared to the current year and discussed changes in amounts from various sources. She stated the budget for 2021-2022 is just slightly lower than the current year.

Ms. Amsler advised that DCNR has received approval for 25 park ranger positions across parks and forests.

Ms. Amsler discussed a new restricted revenue fund, the Keystone Tree Fund, which was established in 2019. She explained this funding comes from a check-off box on drivers license renewals, and gifts, grants and donations can also be received into this program. She noted the legislature could also put appropriations into this fund. Ms. Amsler advised the proceeds must be used for tree revitalization and riparian buffers. She said the June 30 balance is approximately \$185,000 from the drivers license renewals, and currently an average of \$19,000 a month is being received.

Greg Goldman stated that it seems like from a department planning perspective, it is a fairly optimistic budget in being able to maintain programs and services, with a modest amount of growth. Ms. Amsler agreed that the budget looks somewhat flat, but it will fund necessary operations with a small increase.

Ms. Graham asked if the budget reflects the recognition of how important DCNR resources were during the pandemic. Ms. Amsler advised that Secretary Dunn had made that point during the hearings, as well as the economic impact of state parks and forests on local economies particularly in rural areas.

## **WORK GROUP REPORTS**

### **MOTORIZED RECREATION WORK GROUP**

**Bob Kirchner, Chair**

Bob Kirchner said the Motorized Recreation Work Group was formed in 2017 in consultation with DCNR leadership to address the growing demand for motorized recreation activities on state lands. He advised the Work Group released an initial report in January 2019 which identified eight key findings and 15 recommendations. Mr. Kirchner stated the work group has been tracking the recommendations in consultation with DCNR during the last two years, as well as taking a look at other issues that had arisen.

Mr. Kirchner said the Work Group has developed a three-page update to the original report. He reported that of the original 15 recommendations, six have been completed, five have been agreed to by DCNR and are in progress, three are shared responsibilities with other agencies and not completely within DCNR's control, and one was partially rejected. Mr. Kirchner explained that one recommendation asked DCNR to add a unit or bureau to specifically focus on motorized recreation issues, which has been precluded due to the lack of sufficient budget; however, a position within the Bureau of Forestry dedicated to motorized recreation has been added. He stated DCNR has showed strong resolve to act on the recommendations.

Mr. Kirchner explained the two new recommendations are not totally within DCNR's responsibilities. He continued explaining that the state legislature has at times placed language in the fiscal code requiring some connectivity be performed, particularly with the ATV situation. He said the work group has identified that this issue cannot be dealt with solely by DCNR as it requires some interdepartmental cooperation, primarily with PennDOT. Mr. Kirchner referred to the 40 action steps in the strategic plan discussed by Mr. MacDonald and noted 15 of the action steps identified PennDOT as a responsible partner in that action. He advised the 16<sup>th</sup> recommendation addresses PennDOT and uses the fiscal code as an impetus to pursue some changes. Mr. Kirchner said the 17<sup>th</sup> recommendation addresses an oversight in the initial report and deals with liability issues.

Mr. Kirchner made a motion the report update be approved and adopted by the Council, and the report be made a public document. The motion was seconded and adopted by the Council.

Secretary Dunn thanked the work group for their thoughtful and proactive work. She stated DCNR staff has benefitted from the conversations with the work group, and good progress has been made on motorized recreation issues.

### **COMMUNICATIONS AND OUTREACH WORK GROUP**

**Sarah Hall-Bagdonas, Chair**

Ms. Sarah Hall-Bagdonas advised the work group continues to expand its mailing list for its notices and newsletter and invited Council to let the work group know of any suggestions for adding groups to the list. She noted work continues on updating the CNRAC web site. Ms.

Hall-Bagdonas stated the work group will continue to be monitoring legislation and communicating with legislatures as needed. She said another recent activity has been working with the Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Work Group on the upcoming CNRAC Conversation event.

#### **DIVERSITY, EQUITY AND INCLUSION WORK GROUP**

**Joanne Kilgour, Chair**

Joanne Kilgour discussed the upcoming CNRAC Conversations discussion “Equity in the Outdoors,” which will be held on April 29 at noon. She referenced Secretary Dunn’s earlier comments about the value and continued high use of DCNR’s assets, and the purpose of the discussion is to further the goal of ensuring all Pennsylvanians have access and feel welcome and safe when using state parks and forests. She stated a panel of speakers will talk about their personal experiences of how social barriers have impacted their use of outdoor spaces. She encouraged Council members to promote the event within their own networks.

#### **INFRASTRUCTURE WORK GROUP**

**Geralyn Singer, Chair**

Ms. Singer advised monthly meetings are being held with Pennsylvania Parks and Forest Foundation to discuss infrastructure issues. She stated the work group is also working on talking points about infrastructure needs. Ms. Singer advised the next CNRAC Conversations will focus on infrastructure with a tentative date of October.

#### **STRATEGIC PLANNING WORK GROUP**

**Meredith Graham, Chair**

Meredith Graham advised the work group’s next projects will be looking at how CNRAC can provide input on proposed changes to the state science education standards, followed by a review of the draft Bureau of Forestry’s Strategic Plan.

#### **PUBLIC COMMENTS**

Ms. Singer noted no requests for providing public comments had been received.

#### **OTHER BUSINESS**

Ms. Singer asked for any other business topics, and none were offered.

Ms. Singer said the next meeting will be virtual and will be on Wednesday, May 26, 2021, 10 a.m.

#### **MEETING ADJOURNED**

A motion was made to adjourn the meeting at 11:46 p.m.



Notice of the March meeting was published in a newspaper of general circulation in Dauphin County and mailed to individuals and offices in compliance with the Sunshine Act (1986-84). These minutes constitute the official record of the Conservation and Natural Resources Advisory Council; no official transcript is provided.