

**MINUTES OF THE TOWN OF CHESHIRE ENVIRONMENT COMMISSION MEETING
HELD ON WEDNESDAY NOVEMBER 12, 2025, AT 7:00 PM, ROOM #210, TOWN HALL
84 SOUTH MAIN ST., CHESHIRE, CT 06410**

Present:

Karen Schnitzer - Chairman

Commissioners: Lara Monte - Secretary, Randal Raines, Sean Henri, Peter Prohaska, David Schrumm, Albert Buell, Jr. (via phone call)

Staff/Guests:

Patricia Cramer, Cheshire Town Council Liaison (via zoom)

Absent:

John Gawlak, Director of Parks and Recreation

I. CALL TO ORDER

Karen Schnitzer called the meeting to order at 7:00PM.

II. ROLL CALL

III. DETERMINATION OF QUORUM

A quorum was determined to be present.

IV. PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE

V. APPROVAL OF MINUTES – REGULAR MEETING OCTOBER 8, 2025

Karen Schitnzer motioned to accept the minutes from October 8, 2025, meeting. Sean Henri seconded the motion. All in favor and motion passed unanimously by those present.

VI. OLD BUSINESS

1. Yankee Highlands- Status of Forester Report

Karen Schnitzer reports that the DEEP Forester report has been completed and would like everyone to read it prior to next meeting.

Albert Buell Jr. entered the meeting at 7:02 PM. He asked whether the Environment Commission was included on the agenda for the upcoming Town Council meeting. Karen stated that she did not see them listed but will email Peter Talbot tomorrow to confirm.

2. POCD Status

No updates.

3. Trail Stewards Group - Update

Laura Monte reported that Trail Stewards recently completed their eighth work session, with another planned soon. The group currently has eleven members. Laura noted she is still awaiting a response from Mark Cunningham of the Department of Public Works regarding whether DPW can assist with removing larger invasive species, such as Japanese Knotweed, which can reach up to eight feet tall. She also stated that the Trail

Stewards need guidance on where removed invasives can be placed to dry out so they don't resprout. Laura also reported they are looking for additional volunteers to assist the Trail Stewards

Karen Schnitzer suggested that Laura set up an in-person meeting with Mark Cunningham and John Gawlak to discuss invasive species management. Peter Prohaska asked what other towns do with removed invasives, and Laura stated she was unsure about their procedures.

4. Open Space Management – Updates

a. Roaring Brook

Not discussed.

b. Boulder Knoll

Sean Henri reports that the Boulder Knoll Loop Trail is complete, with an estimated length of 0.72 miles. He notes that the trail still needs to be updated on both the official map and the kiosk map. When asked by Peter Prohaska if the trail was previously blazed, Sean stated that it was not. He also mentioned that an Eagle Scout is working on a project to place markers along the trail, though the scout is still in the fundraising stage. The final step of the Boulder Knoll project will be connecting the loop trail to the Red Trail. Karen suggested exploring Sustainable CT to see if they will match funds to support the Eagle Scout project if the scout is having difficulty raising funds independently.

c. Fenn Road

Karen reports that the Fenn Rd is thriving. She informed John Gawlak and Mark Cunningham that mowing is not required currently. During their last visit, Karen and Laura observed that the south field consisted of 99% native plants. Karen also spoke with Fiona regarding CCSU drafting a bridge but has not received any updates. While there may eventually be a need to mow up to one-third of the field to support native birds and insects—allowing populations to move and colonize—Karen prefers that the DPW avoid mowing in the spring or fall. Laura agrees, emphasizing that management decisions should be made on a case-by-case, year-by-year basis, as there is no single “right” approach for every field. Consequently, mowing at this site has been moved to a lower priority and will be conducted only as needed.

d. DeDominicis

No updates.

e. Cheshire Park – Disc Golf Course Update

Karen Schnitzer noted that the 10th hole requires players to throw a disc across a stream, raising concern that not everyone will use the existing bridge to retrieve their discs. Karen states that John Gawlak mentioned that the scout may place a bridge to facilitate crossing. Randy states he has researched bridge options and found that a 40-foot prefab bridge could be obtained for an estimated \$60,000, highlighting that prefab solutions may be a more cost-effective option. Randy will continue to explore this further.

5. Papandrea Property Purchase Progress

Karen reported that the letter of support for the Papandrea property purchase has already been submitted to DEEP, and she received a response indicating that they are reviewing all information related to the purchase. Sean Henri asked when an announcement would

be made regarding whether the purchase was approved. Karen said she was unsure of the exact date but believes the decision will likely be announced sometime in the new year.

6. Environment Commission Projects & Priorities Spreadsheet List/Updates

Not discussed.

7. HOA Updates

No update.

8. Other Old Business

Not Discussed.

VII. NEW BUSINESS

1. Staff Report/ Town Council Liaison Report

John Gawlak's full report is attached to the minutes.

Laura Monte reported that she and Karen will be attending the Town Council meeting on November 18, 2025. Karen plans to check with Peter Talbot about getting the Environment Commission placed on the agenda.

John Gawlak provided preliminary dates for the next forester walk at the Boulder Knoll property; however, Karen noted that the date is typically set by Dave Irvin, Andrew Martelli, and Sean Kimball. She expressed a preference to conduct the Boulder Knoll walk in the spring, and the rest of the commission agreed that there is no urgency and that holding the forester walk in April or May would be ideal.

A discussion was held regarding open space signage, with the commission agreeing that the town engineer will need to confirm the property boundaries before any signs can be placed. Laura Monte noted that the design can be prepared in the meantime, and that the sign will be a small marker reading "Town of Cheshire Open Space Boundary." Sean Henri stated that the commission should verify whether the boundary signs are required to include any specific language for legal purposes. Sean added that several issues facing the Environment Commission cannot be resolved until the boundaries of various open space parcels are formally marked.

Patricia Cramer read the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) pertaining to NEMBA and Yankee Highlands. Laura Monte asked whether there is a limit to the number of miles of trails they are permitted to create. Patricia explained that, according to the MOU, prior authorization is required for any new trails, the use of heavy equipment, and moderate to major trail reroutes. Karen noted that while the MOU appears solid from a legal standpoint, it lacks environmental relevance. Laura added that now that the commission has a copy of the DEEP Forester report, NEMBA should take the recommended restrictions into consideration. Because the DEEP report is newly received information, the Environment Commission will need to reconcile its findings with the currently drafted MOU.

Patricia Cramer advised the commission to draft a list of potential environmental clauses and provide it to both her and Peter Talbot. She requested that this information be submitted as soon as possible so it can be reviewed prior to the Town Council meeting on

November 18th. The Environment Commission raised a question regarding oversight of NEMBA and responsibility for environmental compliance, asking whether it falls to the volunteers or to Cheshire Parks and Recreation. David Schrumm joined the meeting at 7:56 p.m.

Patricia Cramer suggested that the Environment Commission prepare a statement highlighting the challenges of maintaining and managing open space. This would emphasize to the town the urgency of allocating municipal funds for open space maintenance rather than relying solely on volunteers. Patricia asked how well the current open spaces are being maintained with existing resources. Laura responded that while they are trying to catch up, years of neglect have left a substantial workload, and any support the town can provide would be welcome. Sean Henri noted that as more open space is acquired, the management demands increase, making it unrealistic to rely solely on volunteers. Randal Raines suggested purchasing open space and leasing it back to farmers. Patricia pointed out that if the town buys a farm to maintain it, employees will be needed. Randal replied that the land could be leased to existing farmers. Patricia added that farmers usually establish agreements with landowners before the land becomes available for town purchase.

a. Presentation to Town Council – PDF attached

Karen stated that she has been working with Sean Henri to create a slideshow presentation for the next Town Council meeting. Sean noted that there is a more recent version of the presentation that was not provided as a physical copy and therefore could not be attached for the record.

The Commission, along with Patricia Cramer, discussed the name of “Yankee Expressway.” Karen shared that she attempted to gather input from residents but did not receive any responses. Randal Raines suggested removing the word “Expressway” and naming the area “Yankee Highlands” instead. The rest of the Commission agreed and expressed support for the name Yankee Highlands. Patricia Cramer left the meeting at 8:44pm.

b. Annual Report – Draft

Karen Schnitzer reported that the draft of the Environment Commission’s Annual Report has been completed and is attached for the record.

2. Grant Funding Opportunities for Town-Owned Open Space

Patricia Cramer reported that the Town Manager’s office has hired a new employee who specializes in communications. She noted that this employee is skilled in both identifying and writing grant proposals. Sean Henri asked how projects are selected and prioritized for grant opportunities. Patricia responded that the commission could explore any projects related to the environment and noted that these projects can also be carried out in collaboration with other organizations.

3. Map Vernal Pools

Not discussed.

4. Trail Planning: Best Practices

Karen Schnitzer provided an article titled “*Trail Planning for Wildlife*” for members to read.

5. Other New Business

Karen and Laura will begin immediately preparing a statement to be attached to the Memorandum of Understanding regarding the mountain bike trails, so it can be provided to the appropriate party.

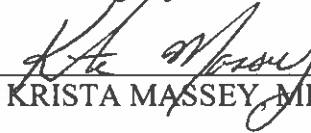
VIII. NEXT MEETING DATE: December 10, 2025

IX. ADJOURNMENT

Randal Raines motioned to adjourn the meeting, and Peter Prohaska seconded the motion. All in favor, motion passed unanimously.

Meeting adjourned at 9:07 PM

Attest:


KRISTA MASSEY, MINUTES CLERK

John Gawlak

From: jgawlak@cheshirect.gov

To: Karen Schnitzer

Cc: Kimball, Sean, Martelli, Andrew

Wed, Nov 12 at 12:47 PM

Karen,

1. MOU on the Yankee Expressway Highlands Land Use Agreement will be on the Town Council Nov. 18 agenda. I will be joined by Francisco Perez and other CTNEMBA representatives for technical questions.
2. David Irvin Central District Forester, completed the field visit to the Yankee Expressway Highlands property on Oct. 17, 2025 along with Commissioners Laura Monte and Sean Henri (Thanks for committing the time to you both) See attached report. I have completed the States Intake Survey with assistance from Mike Glidden Town Planner to request a field visit to Boulder Knoll which will provide us with the 4th Open Space Parcel review. Reminder the reviews are for data collection which will used to formulate clearer and more detailed objectives of a management plan. Here are some preliminary dates—Dec. 19, 22; Jan. 5, 7, 9, 12, 14, 15, 16. If we have a very snowy winter, and a cold and snowy one is currently projected, we may want to hold off rather than trudge through the snow. It will also be much more difficult to see what's on the ground for plants. Also note David has vacation plans through much of the Christmas holidays that may be canceled soon. If that happens, David could also likely be available between Christmas and New Year's, adding more dates to the previous. Please let me know your thoughts if anyone wanted to join.
3. Disc Golf course at Cheshire Park according the UDISC app The Honeypot Disc Golf Course is currently the 9th most played course out of 63 Disc Golf Courses in the State of CT.
4. Engineering Dept/ Public Works are working on designs for the Mixville Park Phase II of the master plan (boardwalk, new large pavilion, seasonal fishing pier, suspended bridge between the two water courses)
5. It's been brought to my attention through Public Works Director Dan Bombero that the town has retained the services of All Habitat to conduct a review of Mixville Park of invasives around the ponds and to look into the root causes of what may contribute to high bacteria counts during the swim season of Memorial Day and Labor Day. I am hoping to get an update in the near future.
6. Adaptive baseball/softball field design RFP for Cheshire Park Field 1 has been made public with a closing date of December 12, 2026.
7. Is there any movement on Open Space signage to define boundaries? Funds (\$14,000.00) are still available going into year 3 of the approved capital request. This should be a rising priority of the Commission.
8. Has a time been set to review the Environment Commission Projects Inventory excel presentation managed by Sean Henri to Town Managers prior to updating the Town Council of the Environment Commissions activities?
9. Is there progress on the trail restoration projects at Boulder Knoll?
10. Has there been any further discussion regarding the mowing needs /characteristics of each of the parcels (due to their different needs because of the invasive work that is happening) to present to DPW for assistance/ clearer tasks or perhaps seek RFP for a commercial mowing vendor ?
11. Update from DEEP ECON OFC Maciejko (203-710-2364) regarding deer stands on town property in the Boulder Knoll area: I have phone calls into him once I receive any information I will share
12. The Commission needs to provide a logo and type of garment for future purchase of Commission apparel to be used on field walks and community events where the Commission participates.

13. Are there any needs for the Environment Commission Trail Stewards?
14. Commission members at December meeting should discuss some changes to the Commission budget adding lines for educational trainings, memberships, professional services, materials/supplies. I will assist with discussions.
15. Andrew Martelli has had discussions with Sean Kimball regarding a design, permitting, access etc. for the Fenn Road piece across the Mill River its on their radar more to come.

John Gawlak CPRP

Director Parks & Recreation

Town of Cheshire

203-272-2743

559 S. Main St.

Cheshire, CT 06410

https://www.cheshirect.org/government/departments_and_divisions/recreation

Cheshire Environment Commission

Report to Town Council

November 18, 2025

Some of the Fun Things we do

Cut Down Invasive Plants! Mow Trails! Learn Things!



We go for hikes!



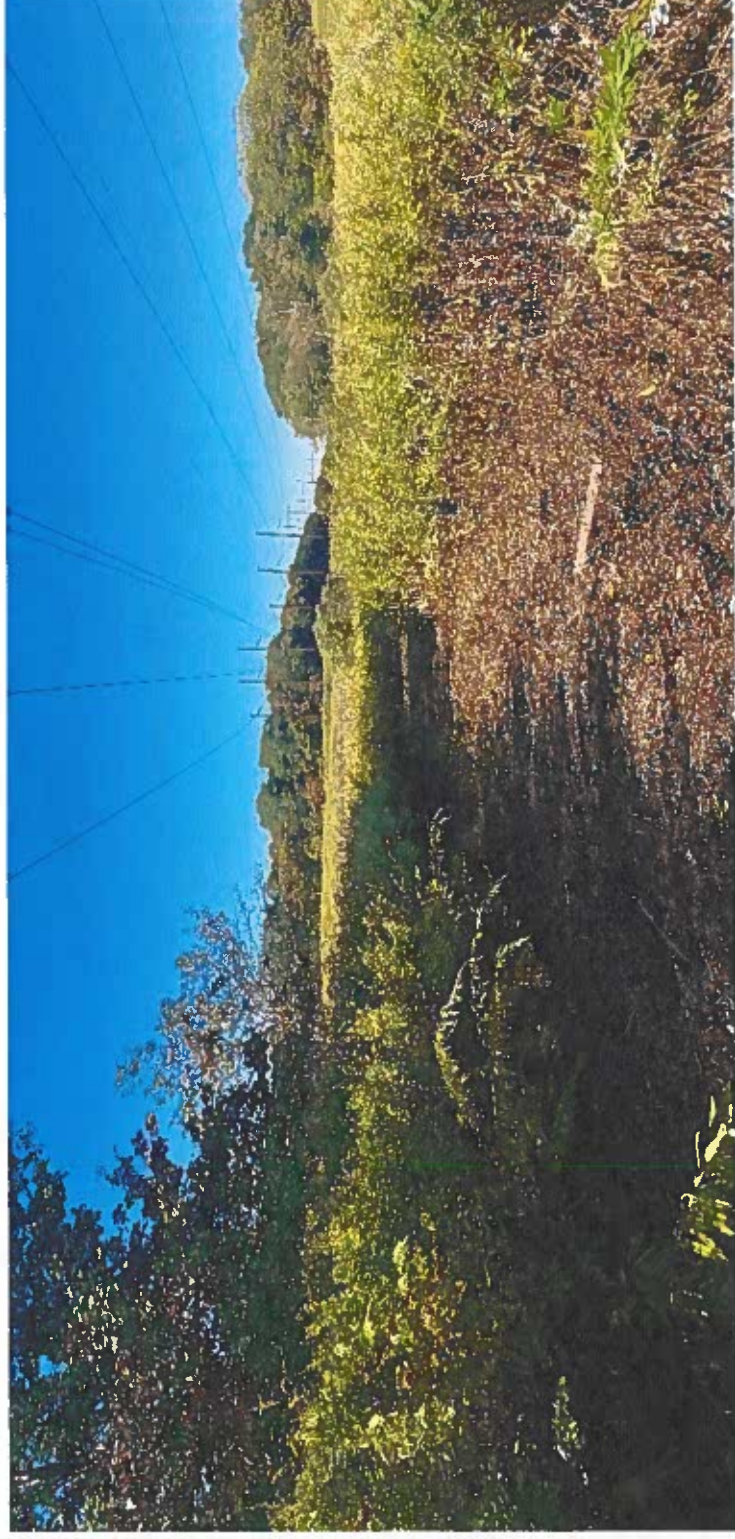
And squint at things!

Unauthorized vehicles, unauthorized trails, and shotgun shells



We Make Plans

- [Boulder Knoll Project Concept.pdf](#)



We Have a Searchable, Editable, Data Set

Environment Commission Project: X The Easiest Way to Take a Screenshot X

https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1YeP4XnVWb7q5tZbmABZulc7UzXVAzQ3qKLR2Py1k0/edit?gid=0#gid=0

Map of Connecticut... AOL Mail (516) Coalition for a Susta... Fenucci & Walicki, L... Lenovo Native Landscaping...

100% View only

	A	B	C	D	E	F
	Project Tasks	Project	Priority		EC Point Person	Cheshire Staff Point Person
1	Task					
6	Field trail cleaning	Boulder Knoll Trail Restoration	02 - High		sean.hent@gmail.com	lgawlak@cheshir t.gov
8	Parking Area & Trail Seasonal Mowing	Fenn Rd Maintenance	03 - Medium		kschnitzer1@aol.com	lgawlak@cheshir t.gov
9	Annual Field Mowing	Fenn Rd Maintenance	03 - Medium	Public Works	kschnitzer1@aol.com	lgawlak@cheshir t.gov
11	Annual Field Mowing	Boulder Knoll Maintenance	03 - Medium	Public Works	sean.hent@gmail.com	lgawlak@cheshir t.gov
12	Bird Survey	Boulder Knoll Maintenance	04 - Low	Environment Commis...	Name	Name
13	Other surveys (Botanical)	Boulder Knoll Maintenance	04 - Low	Environment Commis...	Name	Name
14	Evaluate Need for Parking at Trailhead	Boulder Knoll Trail Restoration	04 - Low	Environment Commis...	Name	Name

67 of 74 rows displayed

Tasks Add View By Project, Property, or Priority

9:32 AM 10/30/2025

Some of Our Goals Include:

- Reclaim and Improve Boulder Knoll Trails
- Continue Work on Removing Invasive Plants
- Develop a List of Projects for Scouts and Others
- Update Open Space Management Plans
- Educate our Neighbors about Open Space, Wildlife, and Native and Invasive Plants

Aspirational Goals include:

- Remove Callery Pear Trees and Tree of Heaven from Town Properties
- Support Funding of the Open Space Acquisition Fund Every Capitol Budget
- Support Expansion of Composting in Town
- Approve LightsOut!CT Model Lighting Regulations

Thank you for your support!

- John Gawlak and Parks and Rec Dept
- Parks and Recreation Commission
- Department of Public Works
- Town Manager, Sean Kimball
- Assistant Town Manager, Andrew Martelli
- Town Council

Environment Commission 2025 Annual Report

Date: November 1, 2025

To: Town Council

From: Environment Commission

This is intended to serve as our annual update to the Council regarding activities of the Environment Commission.

The Commission continues to meet regularly. In March the Commission was pleased to welcome Parks and Recreation Director John Gawlak as our Town Staff Person.

We continue to support and attend walks with the Ct State Forester. We now have received completed reports on two open space properties: Roaring Brook and DeDominicis, with Yankee Expressway Highlands expected soon. These reports are very detailed and we will use them to guide the updates of our management plans for those properties. We expect to have two more done next year.

We have visited Fenn Road, Yankee Expressway Highlands, and Cheshire Park several times this year. The president of the Connecticut Botanical Society joined us for an informal walk at Roaring Brook in the spring. Peter Picone, CT DEEP wildlife biologist, joined us for an invasive plant practicum at the Farmington Heritage Rail Trail in April. We hiked YEH with Francisco Perez of NEMBA to see where the proposed mountain bike trails will be located.

Members continue to **attend relevant seminars and symposiums** in order to keep current with conservation and land management trends. These include the CACIWC Annual Meeting and Conference, the UCONN Native Plants and Pollinators symposium, and the CAWS annual meeting. Karen Schnitzer and Laura Monte attended the UConn CLEAR Maps: Fundamentals of Site Plan Reading and Interpretation class in July. Members attend occasional IWWC, Planning and Zoning, and Town Council meetings and hearings. Commission members also participated in the Coalition for a Sustainable Cheshire's Sustainability Fair in October.

The implementation of Mountain Bike trails by NEMBA at **Yankee Expressway Highlands** has been followed with great interest. Francisco Perez of NEMBA attended the June 11, 2025 EC meeting and answered our many questions. We look forward to reviewing the LUA and supporting the responsible use of the property.

Commissioner Henri has initiated **a proposal to restore the Boulder Knoll hiking trails**. Some work has been done to open up the trails. A new, safer connecting trail from the parking area has been proposed.

The Commission is concerned that hunting stands have been found on and near the Boulder Knoll town property. Hunting is not allowed on town property, and informative signage will be installed.

The creation of a **volunteer Trail Stewards group** was approved. This group has been out half a dozen times to various open space properties, primarily to remove invasive plants. There are now more than ten volunteers. Our plan is to continue working on invasive plants, as well as to monitor trails, report encroachment and other violations, and begin to replace invasive plants with natives.

Work at Fenn Road included cutting and bagging Japanese Knotweed and cutting down Mugwort. Work at the Rail Trail near the Jarvis Street parking lot included cutting down 26 bags worth of Japanese Knotweed. Work was also done at the Yankee Expressway Highlands parking area on Rte 322. Our thanks to Public Works for picking up the bags of plant material.

Commissioner Sean Henri has produced a comprehensive, searchable, task list for the commission, which can be sorted by property, task, level of urgency of a task, or owner of a task.

The Environment Commission wholeheartedly supports the Cheshire Land Trust's effort to purchase 18.3 acres of land along the Quinnipiac River, and has sent a formal letter of support to DEEP.

The HoneyPot Disc Golf course was completed. The Commission thanks the Parks and Recreation Commission and Mr. Dinatale for their attention to detail, care in designing the course, and respect for the American Chestnut trees in their design.

Cheshire Open Space trails are being added to the various apps. The UConn College of Agriculture, Health and Natural Resources has added Roaring Brook and Dedominicis to the Connecticut Trail Finder app. Yankee Expressway Highlands has been added to All Trails by persons unknown with possibly unauthorized trails.

Current Goals include:

- Continued work on Boulder Knoll trails
- Invasive plant work on town open spaces
- Designing and installing signage at our open spaces
- Developing a list of projects for Scouts and others

Goals we need help with:

Mapping and marking the boundaries of some of our open spaces, including Roaring Brook and Boulder Knoll.

"No hunting" signs need to be properly placed, and other work done, but can't be done properly if the boundaries remain a mystery.

Better disposal method for some invasive plants. For example, Japanese Knotweed requires a lot of black plastic bags. It would be good to have a place where the plants could desiccate and die, become less weighty, and cost less to dispose of. Alternative methods of removal should be considered.

Future goals include updating our open space management plans. This would make use of the recent forester reports, but also would require surveys of plants, birds, amphibians, and more, in order to be complete.

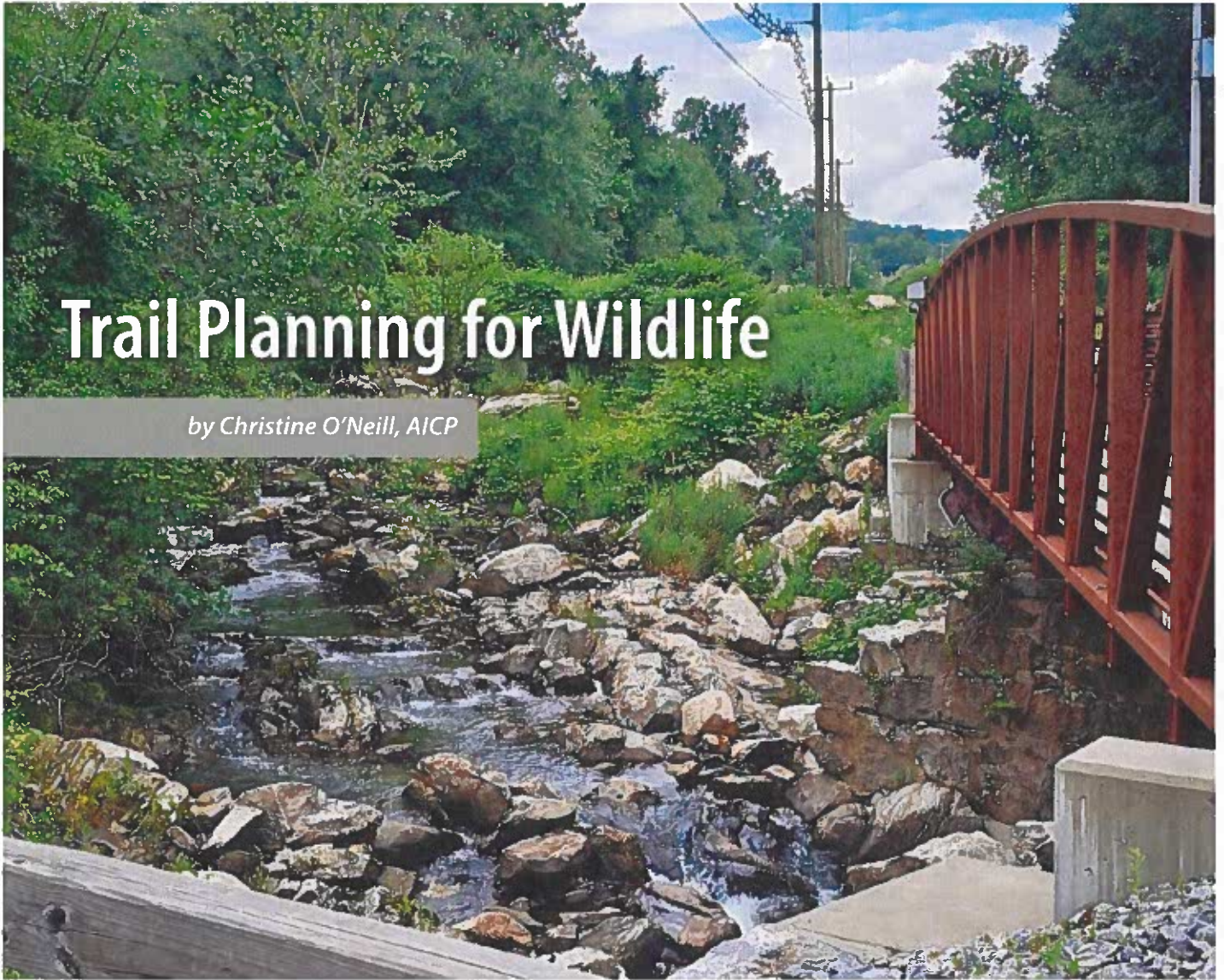
Our aspirational goals include removing Callery Pear trees on Town Property, removing Tree of Heaven from Town Open Spaces, and the town approving LightsOutCT! Model Lighting Regulations. Additionally, we would like to control swaths of invasives with the help of professionals such as All Habitat Services, LLC. Boulder Knoll would especially benefit from this, as it is currently overrun with invasive plants. If we can get the invasives under control and plant/seed with natives, it will make a big difference for native insects, birds, and other wildlife. Other goals include developing an Environmental Review Trigger Policy for Open Space. While we cannot impose a policy on private property, such a thing would have been informative for Yankee Highlands prior to the installation or planning of a mountain bike trail system. We would also like to encourage the Town to fund the open space acquisition account in every capitol budget, not just occasionally.

The Commission would like to thank Director of Parks and Rec John Gawlak for agreeing to be our Town Staff person. Thanks also to his staff for their help. We would also like to thank Parks and Recreation and Public Works for their continued collaboration and cooperation with our commission. Thanks also to Town Manager Sean Kimball and Assistant Town Manager Andrew Martelli for their continued support of our mission and activities around Town.

Respectfully submitted,
Karen Schnitzer
Chair, Environment Commission

Trail Planning for Wildlife

by Christine O'Neill, AICP



Numerous studies find that trails improve mental and physical health by providing space to exercise and gather socially.

Above: Steele Brook Greenway, Watertown, CT. Bridges and open-bottom culverts allow trail users to pass over aquatic habitats with minimal disruption.

Some of the most enchanting encounters humans have with nature occur on recreational trails. Not only are these instances personally meaningful, but a 2024 study found a consistent, positive correlation between “direct experiences of nature” and pro-environmental behavior.¹ Connecticut saw an explosion of hikers during the COVID-19 pandemic, when fresh air and wide open spaces allowed for recreation while social distancing.² The state prides itself on its 824 miles of blue-blazed trails³ that empower people from all walks of life to connect with the outdoors.

From a planning perspective, trails check all the boxes for a well-rounded community project. Numerous stud-

ies find that trails improve mental and physical health by providing space to exercise and gather socially.⁴ An intercept survey conducted at five sites along the Naugatuck River Greenway found that 88% of trail users reported exercise as their primary reason for visiting.⁵ Moreover, the presence of trails increases nearby property values (often by tens of thousands of dollars⁶), generates economic activity in surrounding communities, and can attract additional development.⁷ Multiuse trails that connect to downtowns or transit stops



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Trail Planning for Wildlife, cont'd

also offer a much-needed alternative to cars, which is especially important for populations without access to transportation. Depending on a trail's location and popularity, it may even become central to a municipality's identity.

In summation, there is no question that trails are good for humans — but are they as good for wildlife?

The State Perspective

The Connecticut Department of Energy & Environmental Protection (CT DEEP) seems to support the narrative that trails are not incompatible with their mission of protecting the environment. For instance, their annual Open Space & Watershed Land Acquisition⁸ grant requires that any property obtained through the program must allow public access. CT DEEP also directly funds the planning, design, construction, and maintenance of trails through Recreational Trails⁹ grants. Interestingly, CT DEEP is even structured to have both the Bureau of Natural Resources and the Bureau of Outdoor Recreation under a single branch called “Environmental Conservation.”

The cognitive dissonance begins when comparing CT DEEP's many planning documents. On the one hand, both the 2016-2020 Comprehensive Open Space Acquisition Plan (Green Plan)¹⁰ and the 2024-2029 State Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan (SCORP)¹¹ extol the virtues of trails, as a way to both “support tourism” and “protect natu-

ral resources.” They encourage further development of trails and greenways to meet rising demand; neither document acknowledges any negative impacts.

Surprising and contradictory conclusions, however, emerged in the recent publication of the State Wildlife Action Plan (SWAP)¹² for public comment. The draft released this summer points out that “Recreational infrastructure often overlaps with ecologically sensitive areas, such as beaches, marches, and trails through forested wetlands, [which] can lead to habitat degradation.”¹³ It provides three examples of Species of Greatest Conservation Need that have suffered from human exposure via trails:

- Piping Plovers experience “reduced occupancy or altered behavior.”
- Northern Long-Eared Bats exhibit “reduced foraging activity near recreational trails.”
- Wood Turtles demonstrate “decreased basking and nesting near high-use areas.”

The SWAP estimates that up to 59% of mammals designated as Species of Greatest Conservation Need are affected by recreational activities or human disturbances. Smaller, though still significant, figures are listed for invertebrates and birds (both 32%).

Similar conclusions were reached in CT DEEP's 2020 Forest Action Plan¹⁴, which states that “Both authorized and unauthorized trail usage can be disruptive

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The CT DEEP seems to support the narrative that trails are not incompatible with their mission of protecting the environment.



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15. Wampanoag Parkway Stormwater Management Project

Regulatory Compliance & Permitting
Site/Civil Engineering
Water & Wastewater Engineering
Survey & Mapping
GIS & Asset Management
Construction Phase Services
Subsurface Utility Engineering (SUE)

Contact: Richard Couch, PE
860.436.4364
couchr@martinezcouch.com

martinezcouch.com

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College Farm, Prospect, CT. Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts are great partners for trails projects, and have been responsible for many throughout Connecticut.



Trail Planning for Wildlife, cont'd

to wildlife, provide opportunities to collect and remove wildlife, introduce invasive species, fragment core habitat, [and] cause erosion through overuse or poor trail location.” The Plan goes on to state that wildlife within 400 feet of a trail suffer behavioral changes, decreased reproduction, and a greater risk of predation. These findings are corroborated by a number of studies and articles published over the last decade.¹⁵

CT DEEP is not at fault for its seemingly contradictory statements about trails among multiple planning documents — the nature of each plan dictates the conclusions reached. When planning for public open space and outdoor recreation (human-centric), trails are positive; when planning for wildlife and forests (environment-centric), trails are problematic. To reconcile these competing priorities, municipalities, regional organizations, and land trusts must approach each proj-

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Trail Planning for Wildlife, cont'd

ect with careful planning, thoughtful site design, and mitigation measures to protect Connecticut's priceless wildlife.

Best Practices

■ **Site considerations.** Before the first shovel hits the ground, planners should make use of all tools at their disposal to understand wildlife's presence on the subject property.

- Begin by checking municipal records and land trust documents for information specific to the property.
- Some municipalities — Guilford, Windsor, Ridgefield, for instance — have natural resource inventories,¹⁶ which may be instructive.

- CT DEEP's Natural Diversity Database (NDDDB)¹⁷ is an online compendium of approximate locations of endangered or threatened species. By downloading a town map, planners will see if any such species fall within range of the proposed trail.
- With enough lead time, planners can also request an Environmental Review Team (ERT)¹⁸ analysis of the trail area — although ERT reviews can take up to a year to complete.
- There are a plethora of GIS and mapping applications to identify the presence of natural resources on a given property. UConn maintains the CT ECO advanced viewer,¹⁹ which can display watersheds, wetlands soils, critical habitats, farmland soils, geology, elevation, and much more.

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When planning for public open space and outdoor recreation (human-centric), trails are positive; when planning for wildlife and forests (environment-centric), trails are problematic.



*Ansonia Riverwalk (Naugatuck River Greenway Trail), Ansonia, CT.
Railings signal to trail users not to leave the designated walking area.*

Environmental nonprofits, land trusts, and academic programs can add valuable expertise to trail projects. These groups are often quite motivated to work alongside planners on evaluating sites and creating wildlife management plans.

Riverbound Farm Sanctuary, Cheshire, CT. A "bird blind" allows users to observe animals without disturbing them.



Trail Planning for Wildlife, cont'd

- Nothing beats a site visit. Walking the property with a camera and notebook, even if the observed species cannot be immediately identified, is invaluable for later planning. (Apps and websites like iNaturalist²⁰ use a combination of AI and a broad userbase of experts to help identify submitted photos of plants and animals.)
- Don't know where to start? American Trails has developed a checklist²¹ that can serve as a blueprint for incorporating wildlife considerations into each aspect of trail development.
- All resources mentioned above are free and publicly available. If planners have funds for more in-depth analyses, like an environmental impact assessment or an ecological survey, these should certainly be incorporated into early-stage planning.

■ **Engage partners.** Environmental nonprofits, land trusts, and academic programs can add valuable expertise to trail projects. These groups are often quite motivated to work alongside planners on evaluating sites and creating wildlife management plans. Their participation may be as simple as sharing resources and tools for the planner to use, or as involved

as making regular site visits to document species and monitor construction. Again, it is worth noting that if funding is available, these partners should be compensated for their time.

- Members of the public are also wonderful partners, especially if they have special knowledge of the area. A resident whose backyard abuts the subject property may have experienced wildlife sightings that could round out planners' understanding of the species present. This is why community engagement should begin early and often when planning a trail.

■ **Avoid sensitive areas.** Consider identifying ecologically sensitive areas on a property to avoid while routing the trail. These areas could be determined based on the site considerations listed under the first bullet — such as the presence of an NDDB hit — or could be developed based on recommendations from consultants and partners. Mapping these portions of the property and adding a liberal buffer (ideally 400+ feet, as DEEP recommended in their Forest Action Plan) will ensure that wildlife have plenty of space to retreat from humans without leaving behind crucial habitat.

- Some properties may simply not be suitable for trails given their value to endangered wildlife. Although it can be difficult to turn away an opportunity to build a trail, work with partners to identify an alternative property if possible.

■ **Establish and display rules.** Clearing an area for trail development is only part of the risk to wildlife — the rest comes from the behavior of trail users. A kiosk prominently posted at the trailhead with rules for use is critical preventative measure, even without a monitoring or enforcement mechanism.

- Two starting points for developing rules are CT DEEP's #Responsible Recreation campaign²² or UConn CT Trails Program's "Trail Safety and Etiquette Overview."²³

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Trail Planning for Wildlife, cont'd

- Rules specifically related to wildlife might include:
 - ♦ “Leave No Trace”²⁴ by properly disposing of waste and not removing anything from the property.
 - ♦ Pets must remain leashed. For particularly sensitive properties, disallowing pets altogether may be the prudent choice.
 - ♦ Remain on marked paths at all times. Adding fences or railings alongside trails provides an additional signal to users not to wander.
 - ♦ Trails are closed from dawn to dusk. This should preclude the need for any artificial lighting, which can disturb nocturnal animals or migratory birds.²⁵
 - ♦ No motorized vehicles. It is well-documented that ATVs (all-terrain vehicles) disturb plants, animals, and habitats. Their tires erode soils and snag plants; their tailpipes emit fumes; and their engines create loud noises that interrupt wildlife behaviors from foraging to mating.
 - ♦ For both human and wildlife safety, hunting should be prohibited in proximity to trails.
- Enforcement of these rules can be challenging for resource-constrained trail managers. Consider these low-cost, high-impact solutions:
 - ♦ Recruit volunteers as “trail stewards” to do periodic checks of the trail. While they should never directly confront a violation in progress, they can pick up trash, document cases of illegal dumping, or educate users on best practices.
 - ♦ Provide an easy way for users to report violations, such as a QR code posted near the rules.
 - ♦ Install several cameras — even fake cameras! — in highly visible areas. These can deter potential violators before any rule-breaking occurs.



Wallace Barnes Accessible Trail, Bristol, CT. Plaques calling attention to wildlife-friendly features or educational signage can increase awareness of trail users.

■ **Educate with signage.** The more trail users understand about wildlife, the easier it is to coexist. Interpretive signs can help users identify plant and animal species that they share the trail with and communicate their value to the ecosystem.

- Maximize the accessibility of your signs by including Spanish (or whichever the dominant second language is in the community) translations and Braille text. Consider gearing some content towards children as well.
- Beyond environmental topics, signs can also communicate historic and cultural information.
 - ♦ Some trails have series of signs correlating to webpages or audio clips, which act as a self-guided tour. Norwich's Benedict Arnold Trail²⁶ or Mystic's Greenmanville Walking Tour²⁷ are great examples.
- An ideal funding source for signage is Sustainable CT's Community Match Fund.²⁸ Any organization within a municipality that is registered with Sustainable CT can use the CMF to crowd-source donations up to \$6,000. CMF will match those donations dollar for dollar, for a total of

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Trail Planning for Wildlife, cont'd

\$12,000. The Walnut Beach Signage Project in Milford²⁹ and the Cheshire Conservation Connection Project³⁰ have successfully used the CMF for this purpose.

Conclusion

There are many other complex factors to consider when developing trails; this article was written only as an introduction to trails planning specifically for environmental conservation. When planners consider the environment, we often do so in terms of how it would impact people. *Can this bridge withstand a 100-year-flood? Is this slope shallow enough to build houses? How much hotter* (continued next page)



Eastern Box Turtle, Wolcott, CT. The State of Connecticut has listed Eastern Box Turtles as a Species of Greatest Conservation Need ("Most Important"), due to habitat loss and declining populations.



Pine Hill Recreation Area, Seymour, CT. This Regional Water Authority owned property strictly regulates its trails to protect water quality and wildlife.

Trail Planning for Wildlife, cont'd

can we let our planet get before we can't live here anymore? While planning for people is a noble cause, especially when it is done in a truly inclusive and equitable manner, we must also acknowledge the original users of the environment we aim to shape: wildlife. Plants and animals exist for more than human consumption and enjoyment, but trails planning has not always reflected that. Designing our trails more intentionally — and with the right partners — can spare our native wildlife from fragmented habitat, human disruption, and challenges to threatened species already under siege. 🌲

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Employment Opportunities

More info: <https://ct.planning.org/jobs/posts/>

Director of Land Use and Development
Town of Stonington, CT

Assistant City Planner
City of New Britain, CT

Planner II
Cape Cod Commission
Barnstable, MA

Administrative Assistant to the Department of Planning & Zoning
Town of Guilford, CT

Regional Planner I/Transportation Planner I
Connecticut Metropolitan Council of Governments
Bridgeport, CT

Principal Planner/GIS Manager
Town of Middletown, RI

Endnotes

- ¹ <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0006320723005189?Via%3Dihub>
- ² <https://cttrailcensus.uconn.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/2046/2020/04/COVID-19-Trail-Impact-Report.pdf>
- ³ <https://ctvisit.com/articles/hiking-highlights-explore>
- ⁴ https://media.clear.uconn.edu/projects/ct_trail_census/docs/Trail-Impact-Series_Health.pdf
- ⁵ <https://nvcogct.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/NRG-EconomicReport-Spreads.pdf>
- ⁶ <https://cfpa22.wpengine.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/2011-Economic-Impact-Study-CT-Parks-Forests-and-Natural-Resources.pdf>
- ⁷ https://media.clear.uconn.edu/projects/ct_trail_census/docs/Trail-Impact-Series_Economies.pdf
- ⁸ <https://portal.ct.gov/deep/open-space/open-space-and-watershed-land-acquisition-grant-program>
- ⁹ <https://portal.ct.gov/deep/outdoor-recreation/trails/crt--funding>
- ¹⁰ <https://portal.ct.gov/deep/open-space/the-green-plan>
- ¹¹ <https://portal.ct.gov/DEEP/Outdoor-Recreation/SCORP>
- ¹² <https://portal.ct.gov/deep/wildlife/connecticut-wildlife-action-plan>
- ¹³ https://portal.ct.gov/-/media/deep/wildlife/pdf_files/swap/draft-2025/ctwap2025draft-ch3.pdf
- ¹⁴ <https://portal.ct.gov/-/media/DEEP/forestry/2020-Approved-CT-Forest-Action-Plan.pdf>
- ¹⁵ <https://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0167259>
<https://www.5280.com/are-trails-in-colorado-harming-wildlife/>
<https://extension.usu.edu/fort/research/new-trail-impacts>
- ¹⁶ <https://sustainablect.org/actions-certifications/actions#open/action/5>
- ¹⁷ <https://portal.ct.gov/deep/nddb/natural-diversity-data-base-maps>
- ¹⁸ <https://ctert.org/>
- ¹⁹ <https://experience.arcgis.com/experience/34f549c9ef18479a8630b33e8310c462>
- ²⁰ <https://www.inaturalist.org/>
- ²¹ <https://www.americantrails.org/resources/wildlife-and-trails-checklist-getting-the-whole-picture>
- ²² <https://portal.ct.gov/deep/natural-resources/responsible-recreation>
- ²³ <https://cttrails.uconn.edu/paths/trail-safety-and-etiquette-overview/>
- ²⁴ <https://cttrails.uconn.edu/paths/trail-safety-and-etiquette-overview/>
- ²⁵ <https://www.lightsoutct.org/about>
- ²⁶ <https://walknorwich.org/benedict-arnold-trail/>
- ²⁷ <https://dpnc.org/greenmanville-self-guided-walking-tour/>
- ²⁸ <https://sustainablect.org/funding>
- ²⁹ https://www.patronicity.com/project/digital_environmental_awareness__signage_project_at_walnut_beach#/
- ³⁰ https://www.patronicity.com/project/cheshire_conservation_connection#/