

Minutes of Kennebec Highlands Scoping Meeting  
 Mount Vernon Community Center  
 May 17 2007  
 6:30-8:30 PM

Nearly 40 people from the towns and region surrounding the Kennebec Highlands gathered at the Mount Vernon Community Center for a formal Public Scoping Session regarding the Highlands Management Plan on the evening of Thursday May 17<sup>th</sup> 2007. They represent a large cross-section of interests including ATV, snowmobile, hike, horseback ride, ski, hunt, fish, access for different abilities, nature education, resource protection (land, water and wildlife), fire protection and more. The goals of the meeting were (1) to introduce the management planning process, (2) identify the state staff working on the plan, and (3) to hear the opinions of the public on the project, including their hopes and fears for the future of the Highlands.

## Welcome/Introduction

Will Harris, Director of the Maine Bureau of Parks and Lands (BPL) opened the meeting with a brief introduction. BPL oversees about 963,000 acres of state parks and public lands. The Kennebec Highlands represents 5,500 acres of this land. The Scoping Meeting begins the process for creating a plan that will guide the management of the Highlands over the next 15 years. Key players in the acquisition and development of the highlands were Lands for Maine's Future Program (LMFP) and the Belgrade Region Conservation Alliance (BRCA). BRCA efforts were central to the conservation of the Highlands, and the group continues to be involved in maintenance of the area.

The meeting is the beginning of an ongoing public dialogue, and the members of the public were encouraged to provide their contact information on the sign-up sheets at the door. The planning team will provide all who are interested with information about upcoming public and advisory committee events, as well as when and where drafts of the plan will be available.

BPL Planning Team Members and Contact Information		
Name	Title	Contact Information
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Also attending were Frank O Hara and Antje Kablitz of Planning Decisions, Inc., who are helping to write the plan and provide facilitation support for public meetings.

## **Project Overview**

Denny Phillips, past president of the BRCA, provided a brief history of the acquisition of the Kennebec Highlands. The original attempt to conserve the area began in 1988 with a Mid Maine Recreation Area Bond (MMRA). Though this bond failed, it began a process for the eventual successful preservation of mountains in Belgrade in 1998. The MMRA plan aimed to conserve other lands in the area, which was eventually accomplished through acquisition of 22 parcels that now make up the Highlands and costing about \$2 million, including funds raised by BRCA and awarded by LMFP. (Acknowledged assistance of Jerry Bley in effort.) Denny reiterated that the Kennebec Highlands are an asset to the area and the state, a place that locals know is very special with its five undeveloped ponds and varied landscape. His hope for the management plan is that the area be preserved and remain open to a variety of uses including hunting, fishing, snowmobiling, horseback riding, hiking, and other outdoor activities.

Pete Smith, Western Region Manager for BPL gave a synopsis of management efforts on the Highlands since purchase. LMF Access Improvement funds were used to develop the Sanders Hill and Round Top trails and to provide trailheads on Watson Pond Road that include parking lots, yardarms, signage and winter plowing. Parking and erosion control measures were implemented at McIntyre Pond. State staff, in conjunction with BRCA (with special thanks to Brian Alexander who has worked closely with the state) have done other work, including maintenance on deteriorated logging roads, and bridge and trail improvements. A boundary survey has been completed, and natural and cultural resources have been inventoried

A question posed was “why much of the land was blocked to standard four-wheel drive passenger vehicles.” Pete answered that the roads are at such a low standard, with serious erosion issues and washed out bridges, that large vehicles cannot be supported. Trucks have used snowmobile and ATV bridges, which cannot sustain their weight. Another comment noted the need for signage to warn 4-wheel passenger vehicles to stay off bridges.

Cindy Bastey then referred to handouts describing the planning process. The material contains excerpts from the bureau’s Integrated Resource Policy (IRP), which guides management of bureau lands. (Full IRP text is available on BPL website or on request.) The excerpts describe the planning process and the bureau’s method of allocating use/management areas based on resource opportunities and limitations. Page 13 of the handout outlines the timeline of the project, which includes:

1. inventory
2. meeting of the advisory committee who will help draft and review the plan (this committee will meet at least twice and be asked to review the plan in detail...interested persons were encouraged to join the committee by checking the box on the sign up sheet)
3. 2 drafts of the plan will be written (drafts will be available on the web and hard copies will be mailed out upon request)
  - a. A preliminary plan
  - b. A final draft

4. The public is encouraged to write, e-mail, and call the planning team with any comments, questions and concerns regarding the planning process and the plan itself.
5. A final plan will be endorsed by the Bureau Director and forwarded to the DOC Commissioner for formal adoption.
6. The adoption is scheduled for September 15<sup>th</sup>. (Plan completion deadlines are a requirement of BPL's forest (or "green") certification, which certifies that forests on BPL lands are sustainably managed.)

Once the plan is adopted, BPL will begin implementation of the plan with routine progress reports given every five (5) years to the advisory committee.

Some of the challenges faced in writing this plan include:

1. The large number of interested parties. With 138 notices sent out, this area has a greater number of abutting owners and interested parties than the typical management plan. As a result, the planning team wants to ensure that all parties are kept informed of the process and provided with a voice in the final outcome.
2. The status of roads could be its own plan. There is much research needed into the care, rehabilitation, ownership, and usage of the multitude of roadways within the Highlands.
3. Finally, these plans typically require coordination with a single planning and land use regulation agency (LURC), however, this project requires coordinating the management of the Highlands with the plans and ordinances of four distinct municipalities.

## **Public Introductions**

The goal of Thursday night's meeting was to get everybody's hopes and concerns on the table. No decisions would be made that evening. Rather it was an exercise to get a broad idea of who is using the land for what purposes and their ideas for the future of the Highlands. People attending were asked to briefly introduce themselves, describe their relationship to the Highlands, and/or indicate what they most wanted to see addressed in the plan.

- Most individuals were interested in maintaining open access to the land, including access for ATV, snowmobile, hikers, horseback riders, and individuals of all physical abilities and interests.
- Many were concerned about trail and stream erosion issues and wanted to ensure that management of use be mindful of what the land could bear.
- There was an interest in a nature center for area students and in trails designated for people with different abilities.
- Members of a variety of conservation/recreation organizations attended, including BRCA, Rome Ruff Riders, Mount Vernon ATV Club, and Rome Snowmobile Club.
- Other interests included access to the ponds for fishing, access to the Highlands from the west, adding more land to the property, identifying any changes in the status of roads resulting from State ownership and the allocation of trails between motorized and non-motorized users.

# Hopes

The question was posed to the public...What would the Kennebec Highlands look like/include in the next 10 years?

## *Trails*

- Well maintained trails
- Designated trails for different uses, ensuring safety and compatibility
- Trails designated for ski only
- Adapt trails for differently-abled persons.....Something similar to the Rangley Lakes Trust Area on Appalachian Trail
- Designated mountain biking trails
- Trails for horseback riders
- Trails of varying sizes, grades, and paving to accommodate all sizes, ages, abilities
- Benches along trail as rest areas
- Trails for utility vehicles
- Dolley parcel for year round accessible activities including nature center
- Joint efforts among clubs/groups to maintain trails
- Dolley Trail opposite parking area: Braille trails....wide trails for wheelchairs....small/mini flat areas for the less able
- Spread out use....limit trails in critical areas

## *Preservation*

- Remain the same with no deterioration of area
- Regenerated healthy forest
- Still rough and rocky unspoiled terrain
- Proper forest management: replanting, cut as needed
- Unchanged/better water quality in ponds
- Healthy wildlife populations
- Varied management practices to accommodate/enhance wildlife habitat; type of cutting determines type of wild life
- Designated critical areas for critical species
- Acquisition of blueberry fields
- Double the size of the Highlands

## *Access*

- Better access with protections: balance access and natural beauty
- Maintain balance between access and wild areas
- Areas of solitude with no “noise”
- Easy access to the ponds for non-motor boats. Places to park and carry in boats
- Low key nature center for students and adults
- Maintain public access at trail heads...club collaboration to maintain trails
- Safe hunting areas
- Maintain access for vehicles for safety and recreation
- Access from the Vienna side. Status of Boody Pond, Berry Hill and Cross Roads?
- Low impact camping

### *Monitoring*

- Policing of site: monitor for dumping, gravel/timber harvest, and trail misuse
- Issue of growth....need of a full time steward to monitor site

After a short break, the public gathered again to talk about two things (1) the meaning of access and (2) their fears for the development of the Kennebec Highlands. The discussion on the meaning of access was raised because the word had been used in a variety of contexts in the first half of the discussion, and the planning team wanted to ensure that the concept was thoroughly addressed. Members of the public defined access as including:

- ATV trail connections for long distance route
- Off road trailhead parking
- Separate trails for hikers, horses and ATVs
- Access to calm and quiet areas
- Respect of environment: erosion control/water quality for all trails
- Access not highly visible but locatable; i.e., attract people who want to enjoy the outdoors not parties
- Access for fishing: parking close enough for hand-carrying of boats, or boat storage areas, or state-provided boats for public use
- Access for handicapped to drive through or around the area and points of safe access to trails
- Policed access points to monitor activities and to maintain order within the area
- Access for educational use: from nature center or area schools
- A critical question raised was “what is the price to access?”
  1. where does the money come from to maintain, build and monitor trails and access points?
  2. how much access is too much access in terms of number of people in the Highlands at a time and the impact of people on trails, wildlife, erosion, and quiet, undisturbed wilderness experience?

### **Fears**

The next question posed to the public asked about their fears for the future of the Kennebec Highlands. The goal was to get an idea of what they would not like to see happen in the Highlands over the next 10 years. The majority of responses indicated that the major fear was **overuse**; that the discovery of the Highlands by more people would lead to development pressures in and around the park. There was sentiment that the highlands could be “loved to death” by too many trails, people, and uses - to the detriment of the natural environment and character of the area. Key fears included:

- Trail erosion from over/misuse
- Erosion of water quality/wetlands
- Trash
- Noise
- Demand/need for expanded parking and outhouses
- Trespass onto privately held land bordering the highlands
- Divvying up the land and trails for too many uses (conflict between uses)
- May not be able to fish or hunt on property

One comment made was that the fears presented here did not exist until the state got involved in publicizing the property, and that prior to this, overuse and management were not a concern as locals or individuals already familiar with the area and its character used the land predominantly. The overall feeling of those gathered was that the land should remain as it is while allowing for easy access for all users ensuring safety for both people and the environment.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the planning team again encouraged all present (either as individuals or as part of formal groups) to communicate their ideas for the Kennebec Highlands in any way they can (e-mail, write, call).

A final question was posed in regards to what areas or special interest should be included in the plan:

- The Round Pond/Beaver Pond wetland was identified as a special area with a significant deer winter area and other wildlife; too much access would be damaging to the environment and the wildlife.
- There was some apprehension about taking students out during hunting season. Though this was seen as the best time to explore the area, many felt that it was also the most dangerous.
  - Maybe restrict hunting in some areas?
  - There was some comment that few people actually go into the area to hunt, and as such, there may be ways to limit conflict.

The floor was then opened to general questions.

- To what extent does state plan to upgrade roads...and how will this be financed
  - Revenues for improvements come from timber harvests and leases on all public reserved lands. The money goes into a pool, and funds are allocated during a yearly budget review based on the perceived priority of projects statewide. We will not have to depend on timber revenues from the Highlands, as it will be some time before the forest can be managed productively.
- What roads will be improved?
  - This depends on the types of roads on the unit and current management needs. (1) Public use roads are reviewed annually for needed improvements. (2) Management roads, which are only used for timber management, are upgraded on at need basis.

THANK YOU