

**REVISED MINUTES**

**WALLINGFORD CONSERVATION COMMISSION**

**Regular Meeting  
Thursday, April 13, 2023, 6:00 p.m.  
Room 315, Town Hall  
45 South Main Street  
Wallingford, CT**

**Present:** Chair Mike Miller, Vice Chair Brad Sammis, Commissioner Dianne Lendler.  
Commissioner Jeffrey Borne arrived as noted below.

**Absent:** Commissioners James Pyskaty, Jared McQueen, Dianne Saunders, Carl Arsenault,  
John Lathrop.

There were 37 persons in the audience including three uniformed police officers on duty, and two more persons arrived later.

Dr. Joe Robles of Northford Road stated that he has issues with a Commissioner. Dr. Robles read from a prepared letter from himself and another person to the Chief of Police that he said he has posted on the internet. Dr. Robles stated he has 50 co-signers on the internet.

Chair Miller stated that there is no quorum yet, so it is not a Regular Meeting, but opened the discussion at 6:02 p.m. He invited Dr. Joe Robles of Northford Road to speak.

Dr. Robles stated that he has issues with a Commissioner. He thought the Stewards of Tyler Mill Preserve report to the Conservation Commission. He felt that one Commissioner who is also a Steward has been speaking as an authority on Tyler Mill and he feels that he and the group he represents have a problem with this Commissioner.

Dr. Robles said his research has shown that the Conservation Commission does not manage Tyler Mill Preserve. But the Commission by law is charged with finding land that is deemed worthy of conserving and finding grants that would support/enhance the Preserve. His letter says he has found no bylaws or mission statement for the Commission. He asked to know how Commissioners are appointed and how they could be removed. Commissioners serve a 5-year term.

Dr. Robles said he believes that his group of mountain bikers, which recently reconstructed the bog bridge there, is disliked by this Commissioner, and that the person has called the police to report instances. Dr. Robles said the Commissioner should be communicating to the Director of Parks and Recreation instead.

Dr. Robles said the 2018 microburst storm damaged areas in Tyler Mill, and it was not reopened for a while. After it was reopened, he said he felt there was an impression that trails were being made in the Preserve and that the prior Commission Chair had wanted to ban mountain biking there.

Commissioner Borne entered the meeting at 6:10 p.m.

Dr. Robles said his group has tried to bring things to the Mayor. And we have to work with the new Director of Parks and Recreation. It has been asserted that mountain bikers have been making and rerouting trails there. So we went to Parks and Rec and to the Open Space Committee and explained that Tyler Mill was valuable and was funded by the Land/Water Conservation Fund from the Bureau of Outdoor Recreation in the 1970s when the Preserve was created. A grant was made for it to be purchased by the Town, and it was to be "for all users of the Town" by the terms of the grant. So they cannot restrict access by the public: picnicking, biking, cross country skiing.

Dr. Robles continued, Mr. Michaels is the recently appointed Director of Parks and Recreation. He offered to be part of the solution. We reconstructed the Bog Bridge on the Green Trail, which was originally made 25 years ago. We went to Inland Wetlands. We did it for free and used materials available there. The Boy Scout Trail has been there for years, but it was never in the system. It's good for mountain biking, and this Commissioner opposed it. Now it's approved. We think this Commissioner, who is not an official, is opposed to us. So we would like to see this person removed. The Chief of Police said the problem at Tyler Mill does not meet the level of their work.

Dr. Robles added, We tried to do the process to get the White Diamond Trail also. We all agreed to abide by the Conservation Commission and the citizens.

Chair Miller asked for public comment.

Mrs. Holly Potvin said, I am a resident and not a mountain biker. I am afraid to go in there right now. It's one of the biggest assets the Town has, but I'm a senior citizen and I'm afraid to go in there. I feel that this Commissioner will call in people to come after me.

Commissioner Lendler asked, Have you witnessed that?

Mrs. Potvin said, Yes.

Mrs. Michelle Rowe said, My husband has a mountain bike. Someone came and assaulted my husband and broke his phone. I called for help to this Commissioner, and the police came and arrested my husband.

An unidentified woman said, We own near the park, and I take my kids in there. I don't want people to tell me when I can be there. It happened to others. Also, no one is supposed to be in there after closing. And I saw someone cutting up trees on the open space.

Chair Miller said, Thank you for speaking out. I appreciate it. This has gotten the attention of the Mayor, the Chief of Police, and Kenny Michaels. A lot of people are thinking about this.

The members of the public left at this time, 6:38 p.m.

Commissioners waited, but no one arrived to reach a quorum. The Commissioners dispersed at 6:45 p.m. Items on this agenda will be carried forward. (See p. 3 here.)

Respectfully submitted,  
Kathleen L. Burns  
Recording Secretary

Note: See Attachment to Conservation Commission April 13, 2023 Revised Minutes Submitted by Dr. Joe Robles (4 pp.) as posted on the Town website together with these April 13, 2023 Revised Minutes.

Chair Miller stated that there is no quorum yet, so it is not a Regular Meeting but he opened the discussion at 6:02 p.m.. He invited Dr. Joe Robles, of Northford Road, to speak indicating that it had been agreed that there would be no further discussion of the subject of his presentation to the Commission and no debate on the topic.

Dr. Robles stated that he ~~has~~ **represents a large group of the public that has** issues with a Commissioner. For some of his remarks he referred to a prepared letter he and another person wrote that he had forwarded to the Chief of Police ~~and also posted on the internet~~. He stated the letter has **over 50 co-signers, the letter obtained via the internet obtained in less than 36 hours. All signatories are listed with name and address and were obtained via word of mouth, not anonymously through the internet.**

**Dr. Robles thanked the police officers who were in attendance, and regretted that it should come to this.**

He thought that the Stewards of Tyler Mill Preserve report to the Conservation Commission. He felt that one member of the Commission, Commissioner Dianne Saunders, who is also a Steward, has been ~~speaking as an authority on~~ **has been representing herself as a town authority over** Tyler Mill and he feels that he and the group he represents have a problem with this Commissioner.

**He stated that Commissioner Saunders has entered vehicles that she considered illegally parked so she could identify the owner. She has openly harassed bikers, hikers, dog walkers, and trail runners all while wearing her orange "Stewards" vest. On numerous occasions she has called the police department to report what she viewed as criminal activity. There has been limited police investigation which has never been found to be criminal. Eventually she was calling Parks and Rec department members to call the police for her.**

His research has shown that the Conservation Commission does not manage Tyler Mill Preserve but by law is charged with finding land that is deemed worthy of conserving and with finding grants that would support/enhance the ~~Preserve~~ **town**. He has found no bylaws or mission statement for the Commission. He asked to know how Commissioners are appointed and how they could be removed.

Chair Miller stated Commissioners are appointed by the Mayor and serve a 5-year term. **There appears to me no mechanism to have a Commissioner removed. There is no published process for reappointment, or the ability for the public to comment on reappointment.**

~~Dr. Robles said he believes that his~~ **This** group of mountain bikers, which recently reconstructed the bog bridge in the Preserve **(which the Conservation Commission proposed to rebuild with approximately \$10K of town funds)**, **feels that it** is disliked by Commissioner Saunders and that she has called the police to report incidents. He feels this Commissioner ~~should be communicating to the Director of Parks and Recreation instead~~ **should not have the authority**

*to represent the town in her views of conservation in a recreational property. The 2018 microburst storm damaged areas in Tyler Mill, and it was not reopened for a while. After it was reopened, he felt there was an impression that trails were being made in the Preserve and that the prior Commission Chair had wanted to ban mountain biking there. After the 2018 microburst the town was slow to reopen Tyler Mill which was a frustration to all users. There was a perception that new trails were being created and the Conservation Commission openly considered banning mountain biking. This idea was featured in a Record Journal article. This proposed ban got many users involved.*

Commissioner Borne entered the meeting at 6:10 p.m.

Dr. Robles continued, adding that his group has tried to bring things to the Mayor. And now we have to work with the new Director of Parks and Recreation. It has been asserted that mountain bikers have been making and rerouting trails there. So we *A small group of Tyler Mill users* went to *various Conservation Commission meetings to get their voice heard. They also attended the* Parks and Rec and to the Open Space Committee and explained that Tyler Mill was valuable and was funded by the Land/Water Conservation Fund from the Bureau of Outdoor Recreation in the 1970s when the Preserve was created. A grant was made for it to be purchased by the Town, and it was to be "for all users of the Town Public" by the terms of the grant for passive recreational uses. So they cannot restrict access by the public. *Examples of passive recreation include* picnicking, biking, cross country skiing.

Dr. Robles continued, Mr. Michaels is the recently appointed Director of Parks and Recreation. He offered to be part of the solution. *Mr Michaels suggested that users should attend Commission meetings and try to work things out without confrontation. A process for trail revisions and improvements was created under his guidance. As a gesture of goodwill We a group spearheaded by bikers* reconstructed the Bog Bridge on the Green Trail, which was originally made 25 years ago. *We They* went to Inland Wetlands. *We They* did it for free and used materials available there. *The Stewards should have nothing to do with the trails.*

*The mayor has had little input on this matter, but has communicated to the Parks and Rec on two matters. He appears aware of the grant restrictions and has stated that anyone can go anywhere within Tyler Mill. He also has helped direct the creation of a "Trail Work Group" which has been charged with establishing, decommissioning, and maintaining trails on town property. The Stewards and the Conservation Commission should be recognized as helping to establish and maintain the marked trail system at Tyler Mill in the past, but going forward the trail system should fall under the Trails Work Group which represents all Tyler Mill users, not just those concerned with "conservation."*

The Trails Work Group will manage all the trails in the town *on public land*. The Boy Scout Trail has been there for years, but it was never in the *recognized* system. *It's good for mountain biking, It has long been used by horse riders, hikers, and bikers,* and this Commissioner

***Saunders has always*** opposed it ***and any changes to the "official" trail system.*** ~~Now it's~~ ***The Boy Scout Trail is now*** approved. We think this Commissioner, who is not an official, is opposed to us. So we would like to see this person removed.

~~The Chief of Police said the problem at Tyler Mill does not meet the level of their work. He added: We tried to do the process to get the White Diamond Trail also. In sum, he offered ten or so suggestions to improve the matter.~~

***Many examples of Commissioner Saunders behavior were listed. It is the impression of the many users of Tyler Mill that she perceives herself as the Town authority over Tyler Mill activity, given her role as the head Steward. There are various members of the public who have joined the Stewards but quit because of her actions. The signatories of the letter include some former Stewards, and several former Stewards support the letter who do not want to be named.***

***Given Commissioner Saunders' toxic behavior towards users of Tyler Mill, a list of suggestions was made. Now that there is a Trail Work Group established, all trail decisions will be processed through that group and then approved by the Director of Parks and Rec.***

***The members of the public in attendance suggest Commissioner Saunders:***

***–must go through chain of command, i.e. She should report issues to her Chairman to be discussed with her Commission. She should not portray herself as a town authority.***

***–cannot call the police department for her perceived violations. She must act as a private citizen when calling the police. If she has environmental concerns she should report through the Conservation Commission. If she has trails issues, she needs to report through the Trails Work Group.***

***–cannot call other town departments to call the police department for her.***

***–cannot call public works, other than to report illegal dumping.***

***–cannot call town, state, or federal officials, the risk manager, the Parks and Rec Director, or the Mayor for her complaints against Tyler Mill users. She must go through the chain of command.***

***–cannot interact with any Tyler Mill users. She portrays herself as a town official in her orange Stewards vest, which she does not have the authority to do. Many users of Tyler Mill have described interaction with her as harassment.***

*–cannot call or contact NEMBA, any user interest group, societies, online user groups, or use social media while portraying herself as a “Conservation Commissioner” or “steward”.*

*The above restrictions are suggested to limit her behavior as a Commissioner, and thus a town authority. She can do whatever she wants as a private citizen.*

*Again, she must abide by the Trail User Group for anything related to trails on town land. In fact there are two members of the Conservation Commission who are members of the Trail User Group so her issues should be heard.*

*All the signatories of the letter to Chief Ventura and all the attendees of this meeting promise to abide by the Trail Work Group. We all want to improve Tyler Mill and make it a better place for all users.*

*Tyler Mill should not be a private preserve for a misguided Conservation Commissioner who has long misrepresented herself as THE authority.*