

Case Estates Ecological Management Plan Stakeholder Meeting - Notes

June 12, 2019

7-8:30 pm

Weston Town Hall, Lower Level Meeting Room

Hosted by: Town of Weston Conservation Commission

Facilitated by: Amber Carr, Mass Audubon Ecological Extension Services

Emily Schadler, staff for the Weston Conservation Commission (WCC), opened the meeting. She explained that Amber Carr from Mass Audubon's Ecological Extension Service (EES) has been hired by the Town, under the direction of the Conservation Commission, to draft an Ecological Management Plan (EMP) for the Case Estates, a 62.5 acre open space property purchased by the Town in 2016 from the Arnold Arboretum.

Brief Background on the Case Estates and Need for the EMP

Ms. Carr gave a brief history of the Case Estates. The Case Estates is a 62-acre property of historic open land located on both sides of Wellesley Street just south of Alphabet Lane. The landscape features forests, fields, wetlands, historical features, and remnants of horticultural gardens, many of which remain from the time when the property was an experimental farm founded by Marion Case and later a regional horticultural center for Harvard University's Arnold Arboretum. In 2006, the Town voted to acquire the Case Estates from Harvard University. However, soil test results indicated that significant portions of the Case Estates were contaminated with lead arsenate and other pesticides. Years of debate over the purchase and clean-up of the Case Estates ensued, during which time the property received minimal maintenance. Finally, in the fall of 2015, Harvard began clean-up of contaminated areas of the property, and the Town of Weston finally purchased the property on June 8, 2016.

Michael Harrity, former Selectman, explained that due to the contamination, some areas of the property are restricted to passive recreational use only (under an Activity Use Limitation), while other areas were remediated and other areas (namely the open fields) were declared uncontaminated.

Mr. Harrity and Ms. Schadler talked briefly about the reason the Town decided to have an EMP drafted. Following the Town's purchase of the Case Estates, the landscape architecture firm Thomas Wirth Associates drafted a Case Estates Master Plan that included a long-term vision for community farm and forestry uses. The intent of that plan was to envision future uses of the property, largely in line with past agricultural uses, so that anything undertaken on the property in the short-term doesn't preclude potential future farm and forestry uses. However, there are no funds to implement the Case Estates Master Plan, and momentum has been slow. In the interim, the property requires maintenance and care.

Once finalized, the EMP will serve as a roadmap for the maintenance, stewardship, and care of the Case Estates over the next 7 years and beyond. A summary matrix will help to lay out priorities and rough budgetary impacts. Topics the Town has asked EES to address in the EMP include:

- Setting goals for the care and stewardship of the property
- Managing invasive plant species
- Improving meadows for scenic and ecological value
- Maintaining field edges and stone walls
- Caring for specimen trees and heritage plantings
- Welcoming passive recreational uses in balance with habitat values

Legacy Trail and Connector Paths

As previously approved at Town Meeting, the Town will construct a new set of pathways on the Case Estates, including the Legacy Trail and connector paths. These will be accessible trails, of both paved and crushed stone surfaces, that will ultimately connect the Case Campus area to the Weston Reservoir across the Case Estates. Construction on these paths will begin in July 2019 and, when complete, will welcome a new set of users onto the property. The EMP will not address the design or installation of these paths since that project is already under contract, but it will take into consideration how the paths impact passive recreational use of the property.

Ecological Management Planning Process

Ms. Carr explained her ecological management planning process. She will be visiting the site over the summer months and again in the fall to observe site conditions and current use patterns. She visited the site in the fall of 2018 with Ms. Schadler and has reviewed documents related to the property. Toward the end of the year, she will have a draft EMP ready for review by the public and the Town. Public comments will be welcomed through a public review period and public meeting. A final draft will be presented to the Conservation Commission in early 2020.

Open Discussion

Ms. Carr lead an open discussion of various ecological management topics at the Case Estates. She noted that the fields at the Case Estates, in their current status, are not large and open enough to serve as habitat for grassland bird species, such as bobolinks. The trees in the center of the fields break up the fields too much for them to be attractive to grassland birds. They could better be managed for pollinators, which would involve mowing later in the season to manage for flowering species rather than hay or grass species.

She noted areas of invasive species that have been identified on the property, including Tree of Heaven, Euonymus, and Dame's Rocket in the Nose area; black swallowwort in the fields (more extensive in some areas than others); oriental bittersweet along the stone walls; and Japanese knotweed in several locations. Black locust is also present in the field behind the 3 buildings. She noted that knotweed and swallowwort are two of the hardest invasive species to manage in this area.

Mr. Harrity explained the plan for the 3 structures located on the property – the Rand House, the Schoolhouse, and the Barn. The intention is that these houses will be sold into private ownership. The Town cannot occupy the buildings for municipal use due to restraints around wastewater; State regulations dictate that the Town would need to build a sewage treatment plant in order to keep these as municipally-owned buildings. Even if a sewage treatment plant is built for Case Campus, it is prohibitively expensive to tie these buildings in due to the distance between Case Campus and these buildings. Originally, it was hoped that Land's Sake would take over these buildings, but they are not in a position to do so at the time. So they present a challenge; there's no good way that has been presented to use them for public use, and the only option appears to be to sell them for private use. The Historic Commission would like to place Historic Preservation Restrictions on the buildings to protect their historic character. The Conservation Commission plans to place Conservation Restrictions onto the building lots to preserve the meadow view-scape on the back of the lots.

Barbara Fullerton, Weston resident, expressed disappointment that we can't manage the fields for grassland birds and asked how long it would take to rid the fields of the invasive species and repopulate them with native vegetation. Ms. Carr explained that her usual approach to field management is shift the management regime for a few years and see what comes in naturally from the seed bank before undertaking a re-planting effort, which can be costly and time-consuming. After a few years under a new management regime, an ecological contractor, such as the Native Plant Trust, might be hired to come in and suggest the most useful native plantings based on the natural seedbank. The group discussed the merits of changing the mowing regime even this year versus waiting for the EMP to be complete.

Nina Danforth, resident, asked for suggestions about restoring the soil health in the fields. Ms. Carr suggested that her knowledge of soil health is limited and that a deeper look into soil health could be a possible project recommended in the management plan, if that is something the community wants to see undertaken.

Al Anza, resident, asked about the remediated areas. Mr. Harrity responded that the seedbank was excavated out of the areas that were remediated and that they were hydroseeded, so the current vegetation in those areas is either from the hydroseed or from what has migrated in from the adjacent fields.

The group expressed interest in figuring out ways to have programming, outings, or other events that bring members of the Council on Aging, Community Center, and school populations onto the property.

Ms. Danforth talked about the Tom Wirth Case Estates Master Plan, which she had been involved with when it was underway. Mr. Wirth believed in grouping native tree and shrub plantings. She expressed concern that many trees have been removed in the years during remediation and since the Town has purchased the property and expressed interest in seeing what trees can be planted on the property.

Meg Kelly, resident, stated that she would like to see the invasive species cleaned out of the Nose. Beautifying this area in a non-manicured way would help to reinforce why the Town went to so much

effort to buy this gorgeous property. Mr. Harrity reminded the group that there was a vision that the Nose would become an arboretum-type managed woodland, rather than either a very manicured area or an overgrown area.

The group discussed labelling the specimen/heritage trees and shrubs on the property, as well as installing educational elements that could help people interpret the Case Estates landscape, flora, and fauna. Ms. Fullerton suggested signage about the mowing regime, once it is changed, so that people don't complain about it looking "messy." Ms. Kelly expressed a desire to have enough signage for information but not so much that the property feels peppered with signage. Mr. Harrity noted that we could forgo physical signage and have it all be digital. Ellen Freeman Roth, Conservation Commissioner, noted that Wellesley Center has great digital interpretive material that could be looked at as a model.

Ms. Danforth asked about whether grazing could be on the horizon for possible meadow management, with moveable fencing. Ms. Carr talked about goats that have been used as an invasive management tool in other areas throughout the state. Many people expressed interest in having grazing animals on Parcel 9. Mr. Harrity clarified that Parcel 9 is under municipal ownership rather than the care of the Conservation Commission; the Conservation Commission would like to have a Conservation Restriction placed on Parcel 9, and the BOS have agreed not to move forward with any plans for this property for a few years.

Mr. Harrity supported the idea of managing different areas of the Case Estates differently. He also asked about the best way to deal with mowing under the trees in the fields and around the field edges - how to best protect the trees and deal with the undergrowth, which is unsightly and slowly encroaches into the fields over time. This is an issue faced at many conservation fields throughout town, not just at Case Estates, and figuring out the most efficient way to tackle growth under field trees and on field edges is of great interest.

Ms. Carr noted that the forested area (the Pine Woods) has a significant amount of invasive buckthorn, and that the deer population in Weston is high, which exacerbates the buckthorn issue. She could look further into creative ways to improve forest regeneration in these buckthorn-infested areas. Deer exclusion areas are widely variable in their success; if the seed bank is filled with buckthorn, an exclusion area will grow back in as buckthorn even in the absence of deer. There may be a need for actively replanting native shrubs for many years in order to restore buckthorn-infested areas. The group discussed checking Land's Sake Forestry Management Plan and looking at their harvesting area to make sure that their equipment is being cleaned so that it doesn't spread buckthorn seeds. She also noted that mowing exacerbates buckthorn and that hand-removal using weed wrenches can be of great use in removing buckthorn shrubs.

Ms. Schadler stated that the Conservation Commission may consider the idea of limiting this property to on-leash dog use only, with no off-leash dog use. This idea was very popular among the group. The factors of having busy roads nearby; unfenced abutting land; use by the schools, families, less mobile users, and the Council on Aging; interest by some residents to have an area in town where all dogs are

required to be on-leash; and possible agricultural use all lead to this property being a good candidate for on-leash dog use only.

Lori Hess, resident, noted that she saw a large population of native lady's slippers wildflowers on part of this property close to a trail. She asked if there guidelines for preserving unique plant populations such as these. Ms. Carr responded that in cases like this, Mass Audubon would typically put up temporary signage during bloom season to help preserve those special areas.

Ms. Carr thanked everyone for their participation and encouraged further input to be submitted in writing or by phone. Anyone wishing to submit further input may do so by July 30, 2019 at:

<https://tinyurl.com/CaseEstatesEMP>.