

Narragansett Bay Estuary Program
Blackstone Needs Assessment Meeting #2
Blackstone Valley Heritage Corridor Visitors Center
Worcester, MA
March 11, 2020
9:00 am to 12:00pm

MEETING NOTES

ATTENDEES

Ted Beauvais, Blackstone River Watershed Association
Jacquelyn Burmiester, City of Worcester, MA
Elish Carey, City of Auburn, MA
Phyllis Charpentier, Manchaug Foundation
Peter Coffin, Blackstone River Coalition, Blackstone Headwaters Coalition
Stefanie Covino, City of Worcester, MA
Bryce DuBois, RI Institute of Design
Pieter de Jong, Blackstone River Coalition, Blackstone River Watershed Association
Paige Dolci, Mass Audubon
Marina Flannery, Blackstone Valley Tourism Council
Keith Hainley, Blackstone River Watershed Council/Friends of the Blackstone River
Alison Hamel, RI Department of Transportation
Anthony Hebert, City of Pawtucket, RI
Hillary King, MA Municipal Preparedness Vulnerability Program
Kevin Kylberg, Blackstone National Park
Adam Menard, Town of Auburn, MA
Susan Thomas, Blackstone River Coalition
Donna Williams, Blackstone River Coalition, Blackstone Heritage Corridor, Blackstone Headwaters
Julia Bancroft, Narragansett Bay Estuary Program (NBEP)
Mike Gerel, NBEP

INTRODUCTION

Mike Gerel with NBEP welcomed the group and asked everyone to introduce themselves. He walked through today's agenda and provided materials, and a offered brief overview of the Blackstone Needs Assessment Project (project), with most of the time dedicated to getting the group's feedback on existing plans to review, key people to invite, and regional needs.

PROJECT BACKGROUND

Mike next provided a PowerPoint on the project's origins, purpose, obligations, and funding opportunities for participants, as well as the outcomes of the December kick-off meeting. A copy of the notes from the December meeting were provided via email and in hardcopy at the meeting.

Mike noted that project arose from the *Blackstone River—Past, Present, and Future* workshop that NBEP held in April 2019, where it was consistently shared that identifying needs that can help move from ‘a problem to a solution’ was a barrier to progress in the region. NBEP acquired funding from the EPA Southern New England Program (SNEP) to bring local interests together for five (5) meetings to develop a watershed-wide needs assessment, which will describe and prioritize needs that once addressed will enable more work for the Blackstone. Some identified needs and the work they enable may include, but is not limited to, new coordination and capacity, assessments and planning, on-the-ground projects, monitoring, etc. Mike added that funds are available for small capacity grants (up to \$5K) and for consultants to create support documents for two priority on-the-ground projects. This effort will be consistent with all of NBEP’s projects, which are collaborative, community-driven, inclusive of as many interests as possible, and designed to create immediately actionable information. A rough project timeline is offered as Figure 1 on page 3 of these notes. Further, a copy of the PowerPoint presentation is included with these notes.

Mike offered a quick summary of the project kick-off meeting held on December 11, 2019. A small group of local interests were assembled to identify organizations and people that should participate and an initial list of priority needs. He noted that this was a very productive planning session that helped NBEP design today’s meeting. Meeting notes were provided via email to all who were invited to this meeting.

Mike closed his talk by highlighting the small capacity grants (\$1K-\$5K) that are available to NGOs, municipalities, and academic institutions that agree to complete at one of the following project support tasks: (1) Draft materials for meetings; (2) Identify, contact, and invite new organizations/people; (3) host a meeting; (4) take meeting notes; and/or (5) review and edit written materials. The intent is that capacity/money is not a barrier for stakeholders to participate. He stated that a simple 1-page application and a separate risk assessment form are due to him at his email (mike.gerel@nbep.org) by April 3rd (extended deadline).

Susan Thomas with the Blackstone River Coalition (BRC) inquired as to whether there were plans to reach out the media for this project. Mike shared that he thought that sharing the project via individual participant groups social media channels (rather than NBEP) along the way, and then issuing a press release and holding a public meeting closer to the end made good sense. He obligated to include an item on the next meeting agenda to flush out the type and timing of outreach further.

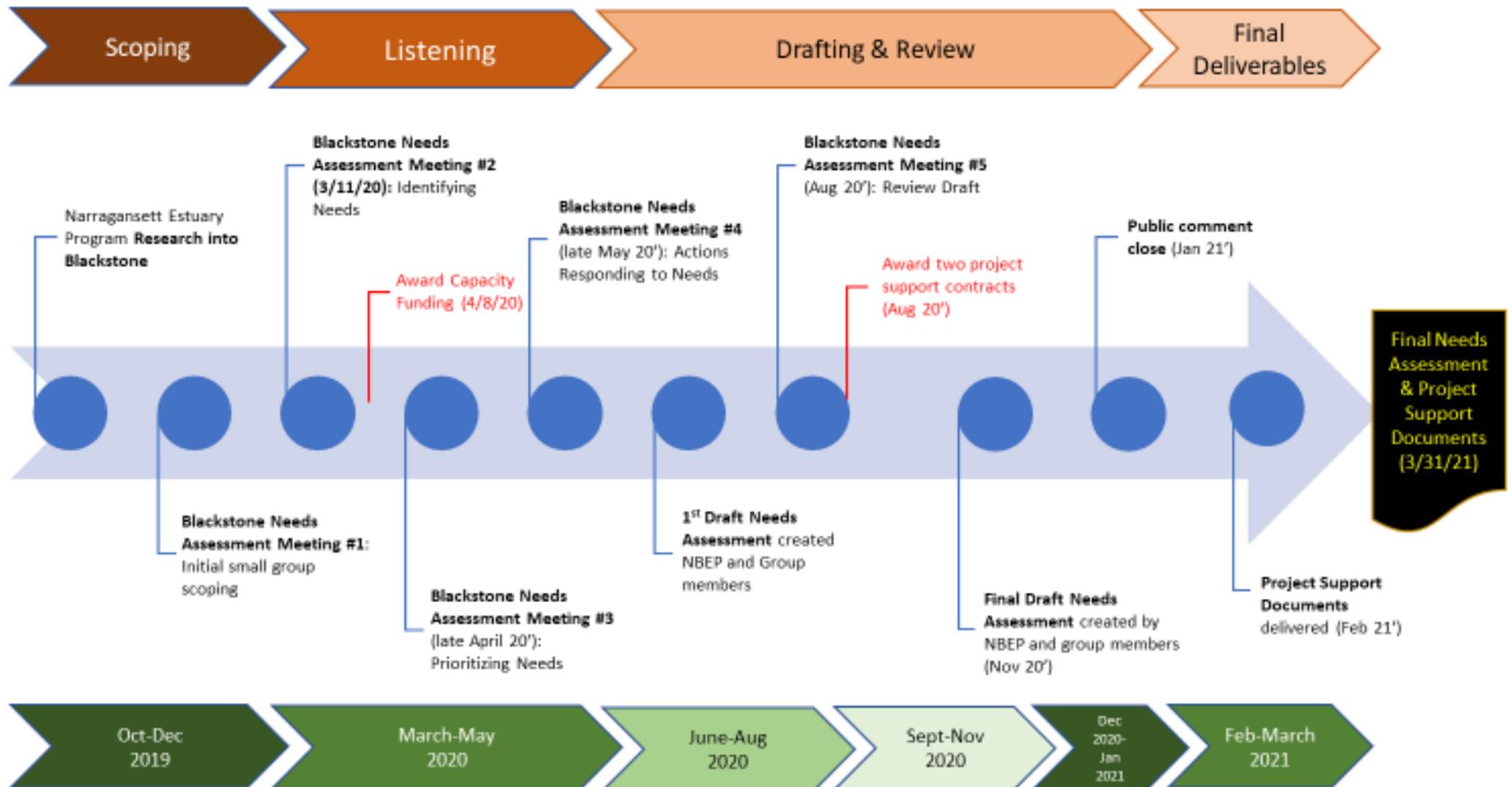
Several participants asked about plans for future meetings with the coronavirus situation. Mike noted that NBEP will host on-line meetings as it felt appropriate based on how things evolve. He inquired with those in the room whether meetings during the day, the evening, weekend, etc. were best. Municipal folks noted that it can be hard to get away from the office, but during the day is best. Some felt an evening meeting, particularly if we were seeking the general public, would be a good idea. Mike suggested that the group evaluate meeting-by-meeting and discuss the best plan for future meetings.

PLANS AND PEOPLE LIST

Julia Bancroft with NBEP asked everyone to review the list of existing Blackstone-related plans included in the handout and share any important documents that were missing. The following input was provided:

- MADEP/RIDEM most current 303d list—Julia to obtain
- North Atlantic Aquatic Connectivity Collaborative reports—Julia to obtain
- Work by Scott Jackson, UMASS—Stefanie Convino with Worcester to share with NBEP
- Upper Blackstone planning document—Hillary King with MA MVP to share with NBEP
- Nomination for Miscoe, Warren, Whitehall Watersheds area of critical environmental concern designation—Julia to obtain
- Report on fish passage options around the first four dams—Peter Coffin with BRC to provide
- Town open space plans (completed every 5-7 years)—entity to obtain TBD
- Lake association plans (e.g., Queen City, Singletary lakes)—entity to obtain TBD

Figure 1: Project Timeline



Next, Julia directed the group's attention to the list of folks invited to today's meeting and asked for others that we should invite to future meetings. The following feedback was provided:

- Jen West, Narragansett Bay Estuarine Research Reserve
- Paul Dell'Aquila, Worcester Urban Planning Partnership/Town of Spencer
- Katie DeGoosh, RI Department of Environmental Management
- Joey Wigglesworth, Mass Association of Conservation Commissioners (MACC)
- Tim Dexter, MassDOT
- Gina DeMarco, Northern RI Conservation District
- Rupert Friday, RI Land Trust Council
- Lorraine Joubert, URI-GSO, NEMO
- Metacomet Land Trust
- Greater Worcester Land Trust
- Massachusetts Land Trust Coalition
- RI State Conservation Committee
- CT NEMO
- Sudbury Alley
- MVP towns in region
- Floodplain managers

Julia asked everyone that has a connection to any of the people/organizations to please reach out to them and share their contact information with her so she can invite them to future meetings.

IDENTIFY NEEDS

Mike directed everyone to the summary of needs document shared via email and hardcopy. It provides a table of needs from the 2004 Blackstone River Watershed Five-Year Action Plan, a list of needs captured during the December 11th kick-off meeting, and a crosswalk table that calls out six (6) subject areas of needs found across these materials. These subject areas include:

1. Watershed Coordination
2. On-the Ground Projects
3. Capacity-building
4. Sustainable Development
5. Outreach
6. Monitoring

Meeting participants next broke into four groups, assigned a person to record notes, and then each group rotated through a station created for each subject area and recorded their input. Figures 2-7 on the following pages compile input provided by the four groups for each subject area.

Figure 2: Watershed Coordination

(1) Operate Umbrella Organization

- a. Host monthly calls.
- b. Coordinate grants, tech transfer, and projects across the watershed — herd cats!
- c. Go beyond water quality to different priorities in watershed.
- d. Resilient Taunton Watershed Network (RTWN) is a great example.
 - i. BRC played an “RTWN role” but funding dried up—could rebuild
 1. Still have email lists and website but needs overhaul
 - ii. State has watershed teams
 - iii. Develop new entity

(2) Create Central Information Clearinghouse

- a. Bi-state important.
- b. Document repository.
- c. Could be like the 2005/2006 document.
- d. Included resources: people, fact sheets, reports, plans, regulatory/permitting/enforcement updates.
- e. Will need capacity to host—money, intern.
- f. Who could host?
 - i. BRC
 - ii. MVP/MRP
 - iii. Section on <http://resilientma.org/> (but would need to include RI)

(3) Assist Communication With/Among Towns and Cities

- a. Municipalities have different capacities, drivers, constraints than others.
- b. EPA NPDES MS4 and CGP permits can be unifying factors.
- c. Entities that could help represent/connect municipal folks.
 - i. Central Mass Coalition
 - ii. Central Mass Regional Planning Coalition
- d. This need tied to Item (1) above re: Umbrella Organization

(4) Encourage New municipality/Non-profit/Academic Partnerships

- i. This need tied to Item (1) above.

(5) More Diverse Outreach (See Figure 7: Outreach subject area)

(6) Greater Technical Assistance

- a. MVP/MRP programs
- b. New SNEP Network
- c. RI Rivers Council

(7) Better Understand FEMA Map Changes

- a. Get all municipalities informed and provide feedback opportunities.
- b. Obtain FEMA money for hazard mitigation and training of floodplain managers in each municipality.

Figure 3: Field Projects – Restoration, Protection, and Recreational Access

(1) Specific Projects to Implement

- a. Install fish ladders on lower four dams on Blackstone River (in Pawtucket).
- b. Prioritize culvert replacement (UMASS-Amherst NAACC mapping tool).
- c. Finish interstate bike path (Auburn wants to connect).
 - i. Provide stewardship for bike path
 - ii. Provide signage for bike path
- d. Grafton Lake ripple sediment delta (proprietary TSS removal, needs to be on MassDOT approved materials list).
- e. Turn Cumberland dump into park/other recreation space.
- f. Poor Farm Brook dam removal.
- g. Install urban tree canopy cover (with heat mapping and water quality).
- h. Protect priority open space parcels.
- i. Install greater public access on river main stem.
- j. Look for “multi-benefit” projects that address multiple issues

(2) Processes to Get Projects Done

- a. Solicit new project ideas.
 - i. Municipalities.
 - ii. Recreation groups.
 - iii. Ties into Figure 2: Watershed Coordination subject area.
- b. Permitting as barrier.
 - i. Municipalities have less capacity than developers.
 - ii. Person/clearinghouse for permitting assistance.
- c. Prioritizing Projects.
 - i. Not just considering environmental issues, work with municipalities, landowners, etc. to benefit community
 - ii. Make sure water quality impact is considered with new projects (e.g., impact of new public access)
- d. Project Funding.
 - i. Can MVP morph or expand to provide funding for priority projects
- e. Regulations.
 - i. Advocate for revised regulation that enable the type of projects partners would like to see in the Blackstone (e.g., increased buffers, less impervious surface, better stormwater management, prevent development in floodplain).

Figure 4: Capacity-Building

- (1) More Staff Time at Municipal and State Government**
 - a. Staff is often too short to think beyond today's needs to the longer-term.
 - b. Lack of proactive assistance or enforcement follow-up.
 - i. Could revise watershed council involvement in enforcement.
 - c. Training for Public Works staff on balancing infrastructure and environmental needs.

- (2) More Operational Staff at NGOs**
 - a. The small groups/coalitions working in the watershed are generally short of administrative (overhead) and technical staff that can attend meetings, coordinate with partners, write grants, map projects, etc.
 - b. Rebuild capacity of BRC and Blackstone Heritage Corridor.
 - c. Could get funding to provide technical assistance on projects.
 - d. Consistent flow of interns could help in the interim.

- (3) Greater Technical Assistance Municipalities and NGOs**
 - a. Specific assistance needed for grant writing, QAPP development, mapping, and reducing any backlogs so forward-thinking is more possible.

- (4) Reliable Long-Term Funding**
 - a. Stormwater Fees/Management Districts. MVP/MPR, SNEP, and other grant programs can solve an acute problem, but don't provide a long-term, reliable source of funding for future stormwater projects, maintenance, monitoring, adaptive management, etc.—all the steps that truly make up a high-quality project.
 - b. Funding for small projects that may not be competitive on a national/regional basis.

- (5) Maximize Existing Capacity**
 - a. Form diverse, broad-based partnerships.
 - b. Hold more watershed-wide meetings (perhaps quarterly) to learn how we can all help each other—share staff, collaborate on advocacy, and offer consistent messaging and leadership to support efforts of municipalities.
 - c. Continue to hold annual watershed summit.
 - d. This need ties into the Figure 2: Watershed Coordination subject area.

- (6) Re-Energize Those Who Care for the Blackstone**
 - a. Generate interest from new people—create new champions.
 - b. Celebrate successes (Shrewsbury Stormwater Fee passed).
 - c. Highlight what individuals stand to gain, connect to their values.
 - d. Use Zap the Blackstone to share what still needs to be done and why it's important.
 - e. Pick a signature project to rally folks around.
 - f. Re-brand work as good for environment and communities (See Figure 7: Outreach subject area).
 - i. 30 years ago, visuals were enough to drive action—need to get creative.

Figure 5: Sustainable Development

- (1) Better Protect Farmland and Open Spaces**
 - a. Seek incentives beyond tax breaks, which have not been especially effective.
 - b. Focus on protecting farmland still a priority 6 1A land (Douglas).
 - c. Work with community farms (Holyoke/Worcester, Franklin) and local food.
 - d. Create new safety net for emerging producers.
 - e. Track MA Healthy Soil Plan to look for opportunities to protect prime soils.
- (2) Pursue Local Ordinance Reform**
 - a. Support zoning reform that supports sustainable and resilient land use that benefits ecology, economy, and community.
 - b. Other bylaw review.
- (3) Maximize Implementation of MVP/MRP Programs**
 - a. Existing participants to continue to pursue projects.
 - b. Sign up new communities.
 - c. Coordinate within and among municipalities.
- (4) Pursue Natural Solutions to Water Quality, Water Supply, and Habitat Preservation**
 - a. Preserve existing wetlands and restore degraded wetlands.
 - b. Planning that reduces fragmentation of existing green spaces and wildlife corridors.
 - c. Encourage green infrastructure and LID practices where appropriate.
 - d. Reduce impervious surfaces (e.g., de-pave parking lot sizes).
- (5) Implement Erosion and Sediment Control on Active Projects**
 - a. Build developer/contractor knowledge.
 - b. More consistent enforcement and follow-up.
- (6) Maintain Existing Infrastructure and BMPs**
- (7) Access Existing Wastewater Capacity**
 - a. Title V is good but must do more.
- (8) More Sustainable Water Supply**
 - a. Study, plan, and take actions to meet need.
- (9) Address Affordable Housing Shortage**
 - a. Emphasize reuse of existing buildings.
 - b. Ashton, Cumberland, Woonsocket, Pawtucket—See Providence EJ Plan.
- (10) Brownfield Redevelopment**
 - a. Still high priority--tax credits and other incentives not as available. New options?
- (11) Greater Transportation Planning**
 - a. Walkable/bikeable mass transit.
 - b. Reliable Saturday-Sunday expansion, free buses in Worcester.
- (12) Responsible Renewable Energy Siting**
 - a. Incentivize solar on rooftops and parking lots.
- (13) Encourage Composting**
- (14) Recognition for Sustainable Land Use/Developers/Designs/Decisions**
 - a. Encourage ENVISION certification and/or practices.

Figure 6: Monitoring

(1) Prioritize Monitoring that Can Inform Local Decisions and Actions

- a. Focus on headwaters and small tributaries in watershed where development is increasing impervious surfaces and/or resulting in loss of wetland, open spaces, and corridors.
- b. Impaired streams/those with TMDLs in place.

(2) Address Specific Monitoring Gaps

- a. Bacteria—could use more for trends and municipal engagement.
- b. Temperate monitoring in cold water streams.
- c. Expand habitat monitoring.
 - i. Benthic
 - ii. Invasive species
 - iii. Freshwater macroinvertebrates
 - iv. Water quantity

(3) Funding for Volunteer Monitoring

- a. Fully fund traditional funding programs in watershed.
- b. Consider higher tech options—24/7 systems (30 min intervals) and remote sensing
- c. Balance low tech with high tech options based on volunteer capabilities and utility of data.

(4) Federal and State Monitoring Efforts

- a. RI Board of Health to monitor for septic issues.
- b. USGS nitrogen.

(5) Data Sharing

- a. MassDEP external portal for submitted data a good idea but difficult for NGOs to meet specifics. What about RIDEM and municipalities taking NGO data?
- b. Data is available, but we need to know where to get it. Central repository would help. Ties back to Figure 2: Watershed Coordination subject area.
- c. Bottom line: if we have data share it.

(6) Increase Public Awareness of Conditions

- a. Use scorecards that spotlight specific problems and successes with citizens.
- b. Post water quality and other data more real time.
- c. Need a web presence that connects with younger, more diverse audiences (social media platforms).

Figure 7: Outreach

- (1) Empower Greater Community Participation in Decision-Making**
 - a. Inform about public comment opportunities at commissions and boards.
 - b. Meet people where they are—evening, weekends, on-line, etc.
- (2) Expand Outreach to New Interests**
 - a. Community cultural centers.
 - b. Churches.
 - c. Parks.
 - d. Scouts.
 - e. Businesses and business groups.
 - f. Environmental justice communities.
 - g. High school environmental clubs.
- (3) Expand Existing Youth Education**
 - a. Include discussion of resilience/sustainability in civics, other classes.
 - b. Think about “Watershed 101” classes.
 - c. MA needs to catch up to RI in this work—RI can share best practice.
 - i. RI has “Groundwork” camp program—expand to MA
 - ii. RIDEM WET program, fish in the classroom
- (4) Pursue Targeted Outreach to New interests**
 - a. Environmental Justice Communities.
 - i. Public health (e.g., lead, head islands), affordable housing, renters’ rights, public safety are key issues.
 - ii. Pay close attention to community needs—don’t strictly push an outsider agenda
 - b. Business Community.
 - i. Speak of both benefits and consequences from not address MS4, flooding, and quality of life issues on their bottom line.
 - ii. Find local leaders in the business community who can be champions.
- (5) More Simple Educational Signage**
 - a. Expand/replace signage river/stream crossings in each town (e.g., Rt 146).
 - b. Signage at parks, canoe launches, etc.
 - c. Increase storm drain stenciling.
- (6) More Compelling, Inspiring, and Targeted Education and Messaging**
 - a. Connect to people’s real-life experience—flooding, health, safety, etc.
 - b. Identify and activate local champions, who are trusted, good speakers, etc.
 - c. Make the connection to climate change—will impact flooding, fishing
 - d. Highlight successes as a “we” thing—what we all did worked!
 - e. Use Zap the Blackstone 50th Anniversary as a re-call to action.
 - f. Relaunch ‘Fishable, Swimmable’ or equivalent campaign—with specific actions people can take.
 - g. Expand RI bikeway app into MA.
 - h. Training for public officials (mayors, town managers) about why watershed actions (e.g., reduced impervious leads to less flooding) are important.
 - i. Highlight how public access to rivers/nature has improved.
 - j. Proactively seek press.

ACTION ITEMS

1. NBEP to complete and share meeting notes, including results of needs exercise, with full distribution by March 27th.
2. NBEP to send out poll with meeting notes for next meeting to be held on-line in late April.
3. Participants interested in capacity funding should submit application and a separate risk assessment form to Mike (mike.gerel@nbep.org) by extended deadline of April 3rd.
4. Participants to share information on this project via their social media channels this spring. NBEP to include a full discussion of project outreach as an agenda item in a future meeting.
5. People noted on Page #2 to find and share documents with NBEP.
6. Participants with connections to the organizations/people noted on Page #4 to contact them and share their contact information with NBEP so they can be invited to future meetings.

The meeting adjourned at 12:30pm.