

Executive Committee Meeting Notes

October 13, 2023
1:00p-2:30p
Zoom Meeting

ATTENDEES

Richard Carey, Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection (MassDEP)
Caitlin Chaffee, Narragansett Bay National Estuarine Research Reserve (NBNERR), Chair
Topher Hamblett, Save the Bay
Allen Hance, Roger Williams University
Sue Kiernan, Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management (RIDEM)
Dave Monti, Vice-Chair
Regina Lyons, US EPA Region I
Heidi Ricci, Mass Audubon
Courtney Schmidt, Narragansett Bay Estuary Program (NBEP)
Caitlyn Whittle, US EPA Region I
Darcy Young, Narragansett Bay Estuary Program (NBEP)

MEETING OPEN

Caitlin Chaffee, NBNERR, Chair called the meeting to order at 1:04pm, summarized the meeting agenda, and asked for feedback on the February 2023 Executive Committee (EC) meeting notes. DECISION: The EC meeting notes from June 8, 2023 were approved by a motion (Dave Monti) and a second (Sue Kiernan, RIDEM and Heidi Ricci, Mass Audubon). Topher Hamblett abstained.

Caitlin welcomed Darcy as interim director of NBEP and Topher Hamblett as interim director of Save the Bay. Darcy began the [meeting presentation](#).

NBEP QUARTERLY FINANCIAL REPORT

Darcy Young, NBEP, walked through the NBEP Quarterly Financial Report (as of August 31, 2023). NBEP received its EPA FY2023 Section 320 and SNEP award (which started October 1, 2023) ahead of the start of the fiscal year and currently has \$1.9M to spend, much of it encumbered. Currently, the Program has funds for 5 full-time employees (FTEs) with 8 months of salary in reserves. The 5 FTEs include hiring an Executive Director and an Ecologist. NBEP plans to spend approximately \$65,000 on contracts for Vision 2034, non-RWU interns, and

community engagements during FY2023. This budget also represents two direct subawards (Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management and Rhode Island Natural History Survey) and the subawards from summer 2023's RFP for habitat and public access planning. The Program currently has approximately \$382k in Bipartisan Infrastructure Law (BIL) funds to spend that have not been encumbered for habitat and access subawards.

NBEP PROGRAM UPDATES

NBEP FY2022-2023 BIL WORKPLAN AND BUDGET AMENDMENT

Darcy next presented a proposed amendment to the FY2022-2023 BIL workplan. The approved BIL workplan called for all Year 2 funding to be dedicated to an RFP. After the summer 2023 habitat and public access planning subawards, there is \$382,300 in Year 2 funding remaining. Darcy requested to approve using these funds for direct capacity-building awards. This will require a change to the FY2022-2023 BIL Workplan and Budget. The proposed awards include:

- Old Colony Planning Council: \$100,000 (Year 1 award complete)
- Blackstone Watershed Collaborative: \$100,000 (moving capacity support to BIL from base budget following closeout of current capacity award 12/31/23)
- Save the Bay: \$100,000 (extending current agreement to 5/31/23 but likely ready for more funds in early calendar year 2024)
- Groundwork Southcoast: \$82,300 (Year 1 award complete)

Heidi Ricci, Mass Audubon, expressed concern about availability of funds for projects, given that NBEP has only three years of BIL funds remaining. Darcy responded that NBEP plans to release annual RFPs and will ask the Executive and Steering Committee for guidance on allocating funds. This request is in response to positive outcomes from Year 1 capacity-building projects and the desire of the Steering Committee to continue to support capacity-building.

Sue Kiernan, RIDEM, built on Heidi's point and cautioned NBEP to manage the expectations of those receiving capacity-building funds. In recent years, NBEP has tended to fund the same organizations year after year. At the end of 5 years of BIL funding, NBEP needs to demonstrate concrete projects; as we get into year 3-4 with capacity-building, we need to make sure we are seeing commitment to projects or seeing funds leveraged for projects. Suggested opening Year 3 funds to concrete projects that need implementation funds.

Darcy responded that the metric NBEP reports to EPA for BIL funds is number of projects developed and number of steps advanced. We will also be able to report on other metrics such as leverage that groups received.

Allen Hance commented that when a funder commits to capacity building, it should commit multiple years because pulling the plug loses the initial investment. NBEP needs to update the Steering Committee on project progress to justify year 2 funding.

Caitlin echoes Allen's thoughts and emphasized Darcy's point on leveraging money. Capacity building is important and NBEP's investments are seeing results - there will be a lot of successes to report on.

Darcy thanked the Executive Committee for this feedback because this was a pilot year for NBEP in awarding multiple capacity-building grants.

Topher Hamblett, Save the Bay, noted that capacity recipient organizations don't expect the funds to last forever; this particular grant has allowed Save The Bay to request from a private foundation to hire 1-2 more people in the habitat restoration department.

Heidi noted that we need to spread Years 3-5 of Bipartisan Infrastructure Law funds out towards planning and implementing while still funding capacity needs.

Darcy noted an interest in revisiting NBEP's BIL Long Term Plan to ensure committee member buy-in on moving to different stages of project development. NBEP's understanding has been that the committees are most interested in funding projects through final design, but not construction, because our funding is limited and it is better to spread it out across multiple projects rather than dedicating significant construction funding to just a few. For example, the majority of projects awarded with the summer 2023 habitat and access planning RFP plan to reach final design, if not permits, with their NBEP award.

DECISION: The EC recommends sending the revised FY2022-2023 BIL workplan and budget as presented to the Steering Committee. Moved by Caitlin Chaffee, seconded by Allen Hance. The motion passed with unanimous approval.

NBEP BIL EQUITY PLAN

NBEP's Equity Plan includes NBEP's definition of underserved communities, NBEP's baseline (2017-2021) of investment in underserved communities, and a numeric target for BIL funds investment to benefit underserved communities. Mariel Sorlien has developed a static map representing NBEP's definition of underserved communities and an interactive tool for partners to create their own maps.

Darcy noted that NEPORT does not accurately represent how NBEP invests our funds because NEPORT does not include green infrastructure or funds dedicated to planning. Therefore, the NEPORT calculation of NBEP's baseline (2017-2021) investment in underserved communities is 0%. NBEP staff calculated the percentage of funds, including those spent on planning and green infrastructure, were spent in underserved communities and found that the program spent 30% of its money in these communities between 2017-2021. Sixty percent of Year 1 BIL investments have been spent in underserved communities. Looking forward, NBEP is targeting 50% of its BIL investments to be made in underserved communities. The Executive Committee appreciated the work of the staff to do these calculations and recommends that the table be amended to reflect that the dollar amounts listed are from subawards and do not reflect the total award amount.

NBEP's Equity Plan will be used to show EPA how NBEP will meet the Justice40 requirements and not necessarily be used to mandate how the Program considers scoring for underserved community projects during RFP processes. Darcy noted that the Grants Subcommittee had a robust discussion on how to score projects during the RFP process so that the projects accurately reflect if they are serving underserved communities.

The Executive Committee discussed how many tools and maps are now available for the region that define underserved communities. There is some concern that number of tools and maps

available will cause confusion among partners and those applying to NBEP for funding. A future task should be looking at how to align the different products, if possible.

DECISION: The EC recommends sending the draft NBEP Equity Plan as presented to the Steering Committee. Moved by Dave Monti, seconded by Caitlin Chaffee. The motion passed with unanimous approval.

UPDATE ON NBEP EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR SEARCH

Allen Hance and Caitlin Chaffee met to discuss the process of filling the NBEP Executive Director position. Darcy will continue to act as interim director through mid-January, and her contract can be extended as needed. Allen and Caitlin edited the job description on file with RWU to emphasize reporting requirements and experience with federal grants. The salary range is \$96,000-\$147,000 with \$122,000 being the middle. RWU feels this is a good range for the position and will attract a lot of attention.

The Executive Committee agreed that the description was comprehensive and would like to look at it in more detail. They requested a description of NBEP be added to the beginning of the description to bring context to the job.

The next step is to submit the job description for approval from RWU administration and publicize it. Allen and Caitlin asked for volunteers to sit on the hiring committee. Allen would like to see bi-state and/or Executive Committee participation. RWU also offered a DEIJ ambassador to sit on the committee if need be. At the very least, the Executive Committee should meet the final candidates. If possible, those candidates should meet the Steering Committee. Above all, this hiring process should follow NBEP's bylaws.

PROGRAM EVALUATION

NBEP received its formal Program Evaluation review letter. The Program received a Proficient rating, meaning that the Program is meeting its programmatic and environmental results. The letter was very supportive, highlighting the partnerships and what NBEP can work on. Darcy thanked the Executive Committee and Caitlyn Whittle for shepherding the program through. The next Program Evaluation will take place in 2028.

UPCOMING MEETINGS

The Steering Committee will meet on October 19 at 10:00am at the Old Colony Planning Council's offices in Brockton.

The next Executive Committee meeting will be held the week of December 4 via Zoom (more details to come).

ACTION ITEMS

None. The meeting adjourned at 2:02pm.