

Executive Committee Meeting

Zoom Meeting

June 16, 2021

10:00am to 12:00pm

MEETING NOTES

ATTENDEES

Richard Carey, Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection (MassDEP)
Caitlin Chaffee, Narragansett Bay National Estuarine Research Reserve (NBNERR)
Richard Friesner, NEIWPCC
Sue Kiernan, Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management (RIDEM)
Regina Lyons, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA—Region 1)
Heidi Ricci, Mass Audubon
Jonatan Stone, Save The Bay
Susan Sullivan, NEIWPCC
Caitlyn Whittle, EPA—Region 1
Mike Gerel, Narragansett Bay Estuary Program (NBEP)
Julia Bancroft, NBEP

INTRODUCTION

Regina Lyons, the Committee Chair, called the meeting to order at 10:09am and asked everyone to introduce themselves. *The Executive Committee meeting notes from the April 8, 2021 were approved with motion and a second from Heidi Ricci and Caitlin Chaffee.* Mike Gerel next previewed the agenda for today's meeting.

PROGRAM REPORT HIGHLIGHTS

Richard Friesner with NEIWPCC walked through the program financials as of June 3, 2021. He noted that all FY20 funds and most of FY19 funds will move to the new host. Richard also shared that there has been some progress on the Aquidneck Island Planning Commission vegetated wetland project after staffing and COVID-related delays. Mike Gerel with NBEP next provided short updates on 10 ongoing NBEP projects, emphasizing the five below:

1. Blackstone Needs Assessment Project. NEIWPCC made the formal award of \$95,000 to Clark University for help them hire a Blackstone Watershed Coordinator. Contract negotiations are ongoing. Also, the first draft of the *Blackstone River Watershed Needs Assessment Report* is complete and a total of 35 comments have been received from Blackstone Needs Assessment meeting participants. A final draft will be shared prior to the next meeting on July 7th, with plans to release a final document when the Blackstone Watershed Coordinator starts in September.
2. Lower Blackstone Fish Passage. At the request of RIDEM, NBEP is serving as an independent convener for a new effort to overcome decades long challenges to achieving fish passage on the first four dams on lower Blackstone River in RI. NBEP hosted a pre-meeting with RIDEM Team to map out the project

and conducted pre-interviews with the initial list of 10 “core” stakeholders who have been asked to participate. The first meeting of the Core Team is expected late summer/early fall.

3. Science Advisory Committee (SAC). The SAC met on June 9th to introduce new committee members and their work, explore ways to collaborate and support NBEP, and begin to explore potential topics for a spring 2022 NBEP science event.
4. Science Corner Updates. NBEP has created three new short 2-page science pieces, which we are calling “Science Corner Updates.” The first three cover Narragansett Bay Watershed land use from 2001-2016, nuisance flooding, and atmospheric nitrogen deposition. Science Corners are intended to provide simple information on timely science topics to stimulate discussion among experts. We expect to release 6-10 year in between more substantive updates. These updates will be posted on our web site soon, and we view them as great fodder for social media.
5. Salt Ponds Story Map. NBEP completed a Story Map in collaboration with the Salt Ponds Coalition that promotes the Coalition’s volunteer monitoring program and pond use that is consistent with enhancing the long-term health of the ponds. We are pleased to be working in a part of our study area—outside the Narragansett Bay watershed—where we have not engaged much on-the-ground in the past.

STEERING COMMITTEE MEMBER REPLACEMENT

Mike indicated that Laura Blake, Pieter de Jong, and Nick Wildman are no longer on the Steering Committee. Since NBEP’s Guiding Principles do not include a process for replacing members before completion of their term, he felt the Executive Committee should weigh in how to proceed. Mike shared that we have three excellent candidates ready to assume the spots—Richard Carey with MassDEP has already stepped in in the interim for Laura, Nick Wildman has suggested his colleague Cristina Kennedy at MA DER, and Pieter’s replacement on the Blackstone River Council Board Chair, Donna Williams. The question before the committee today is whether NBEP should wait to appoint these replacements in December through our formal process or ask the Steering Committee to approve them at their meeting next week?

Heidi Ricci with Mass Audubon stated that it would be good to keep the two MA state agencies, and to keep our connections in the Blackstone based on our continuing work there. Johnathan Stone with Save The Bay said it was best to bring people on when they are available and interested—better to get them engaged right away. Several others concurred it is important to keep these interests engaged in the program’s work. *The committee voted unanimously to recommend that the Steering Committee consider the noted candidates for appointment at their next meeting.* Mike noted he will include discussion and a vote on the candidates in the agenda for the next Steering Committee meeting on June 24th.

HOST TRANSITION UPDATE

Regina Lyons shared the proposed approach for securing a new host for NBEP. She noted that there is a very quick turnaround time as the new entity should be place ideally August so they can apply for and accept the FY2021 EPA grant award on October 1st. Regina said that an Ad Hoc Host Subcommittee is being formed, and members so far include Bill Napolitano with the Southeastern Regional Planning and Economic Development District, Stefanie Covino with the City of Worcester, Sue Kiernan with RIDEM, Walt Galloway with the RI Rivers Council, and she and Caitlyn Whittle with EPA. The subcommittee will use a targeted approach—in that they will reach out to potential host candidates, as opposed to a broadcast search, and then focus on the top tier that are most interested and qualified. Right now, two potential candidates are in place, including one

academic institution and one NGO. Regina noted Sue Kiernan from the subcommittee was in attendance today, and asked for feedback or questions on this process from the group.

Caitlin Chaffee with NBNERR shared that she had been contacted by one of the potential candidates and wanted to make sure it was OK to engage. Regina confirmed it is fine for NBEP committee members to respond if contacted by candidates. Regina asked if the subcommittee's preferred host candidate should be brought to the Executive Committee first, or directly to the Steering Committee for consideration? Jonathan Stone felt a separate discussion by this committee first would strengthen the subcommittee's recommendation before bringing it to the full committee. Caitlyn Whittle noted that some existing funds will stay at NEIWPC, and others that have not been drawn by NEIWPC (and remain at EPA) will be awarded to the new host along with the new FY2021 award. Mike Gerel followed that the FY2021 award will be larger than usual, so we will need extra non-federal match. He said we still have about \$600K committed last year that has gone unused that can apply to the new award, but will still need to put out a call to the partnership for more match. He noted that talking about the FY2021 award is the next agenda item today. *The committee supported the proposed process, including Jonathon's suggestion that the Executive Committee and then the Steering Committee discuss and approve the new host.* Several members offered thanks to NEIWPC for their service to NBEP and their cooperation with the host transition process.

FY2021 WORK PLAN AND BUDGET

Mike Gerel noted that the total award going to the new host will be \$1.79M. This combines most FY2019 funds and all FY2020 and FY2021 funds into one three-year award. He added that there will be only one Work Plan and Budget for this award that covers §320 and SNEP funds. The plan includes 4 objectives and 18 tasks, includes three new tasks (new bylaws, new science event, grant writing), and is half the length of past plan. Highlights from the Budget Mike shared include 19 months of salary, several contracts, and \$617K for green infrastructure planning subawards. The most notable contract is a proposal for Julia Twichell to shift from a full-time employee to a near-full time contract employee (\$110K would equate to her current loaded salary) as she had decided not to return to Rhode Island from Florida where she has resided during the pandemic. Remaining questions around budget include final fringe and indirect rates (those included are likely high), computer support needs, and source of ~\$1M of non-federal match.

In terms of process, NBEP is seeking comments and 'preliminary' approval of the draft Work Plan and Budget today, with the Steering Committee to consider a revised draft at their meeting next week. Another option is to offer more time for review over the next week prior to the next Steering Committee on June 24th. Moving forward, depending on the level of changes requested by the Executive and Steering Committees and the new host, the committees may need to convene again to review and offer further approval. There has always been a July 1st deadline to submit Work Plan and Budget to EPA, but timing this year will depend on selection of host. Bottom line is the next award must be in place at new host by September 30th. Mike noted that we will all do our best to deal with the new circumstances created by the host transition.

Some committee members voiced concern about a Julia shift to contract status. Regina offered that nothing will be final until we get to the new host as they will negotiate a contract with Julia. Susan Sullivan noted that she likes Julia's work, but has an issue with full-time remote/contractor status based on the public facing aspect of the job. Caitlin Chaffee expressed similar concern and suggested sharing more details on the tasks she would complete. *Committee members agreed they needed more time to digest the concept of such a large contract for Julia, and thus felt it was not timely to offer preliminary approval of the draft Work Plan and Budget at this time.* Mike asked that members provide input on the package to him by June 23rd, so he can present more details and Executive Committee perspectives to the Steering Committee at their meeting the next day and all

can collectively establish a path forward for approving the NBEP materials necessary to support the next award.

Heidi Ricci inquired if projects and associated funds will remain at NEIWPCCC once NBEP shifts to the new host. Mike noted that five contracts/subawards totaling perhaps \$300K are expected to stay at NEIWPCCC. NEIWPCCC's role will be administrative to manage these awards until complete. He responded to a follow-up question that the Blackstone Watershed Manager that Clark University plans to hire with support from NBEP will be a partner and not NBEP or NEIWPCCC employee. Heidi suggested clarifying this relationship in the leadership objective (Objective 1.a) in the Work Plan. Jonathan Stone offered Save The Bay's office as a potential spot for any future hybrid NBEP meetings.

ACTION ITEMS

1. Executive Committee should reach out to Regina or Caitlyn with any questions about the host search process.
2. Executive Committee members should review the proposed FY2021 Work Plan and Budget and send Mike input by June 23rd.

UPCOMING MEETINGS

- Steering Committee: June 24th, 10am-12:30pm via Zoom
- Blackstone Needs Assessment Project: July 7th 1-3pm via Zoom
- Vision 2032 Planning Group Meetings: July 12-15th via Zoom
- Blackstone Fish Passage Team Meeting: Late August/early September

Meeting adjourned at 12:00pm