

**Ware River Watershed Advisory Committee Meeting**  
**Thursday, January 11, 2024**  
**7:00 PM**

**Location:** Rutland Public Library, 280 Main Street, Rutland, MA 01543

**Members:** (Members in **BOLD** were present)

Massachusetts Council of Sportsmen: **Laurie Pray**

Alternate: Mike Moss

Worcester County League of Sportsmen's Clubs: **John Root**

Alternate: Dave Papale

Trout Unlimited: **Jeffrey Schaaf (chairperson)**

Alternate:

A Rod and Gun Club: **Vincent Kotowski**

Alternate: **Dennis Guberski**

Barre Selectboard: **Mike Wood**

Alternate:

Hubbardston Selectboard: Cindy Schlener

Alternate: **Dave Marsh**

Oakham Selectboard: **Thomas Hughes**

Alternate: **Phillip Warbasse**

Rutland Selectboard: **Charles R. Williams**

Alternate:

Barre Historical Society: **Dave Flick**

Alternate: **Margo Petracone**

Hubbardston Historical Society: Robin Langer

Alternate:

Oakham Historical Society: **Bill Mucha**

Alternate: **Lee Dougan**

Rutland Historical Society:

Alternate:

Massachusetts Wildlife Federation: (group disbanded)

Alternate:

Massachusetts Audubon Society: Martha Gach

Alternate:

Sierra Club: **Matt Hopkinson**

Alternate:

Upper Ware River Watershed Association: (group disbanded)

Alternate:

General Public: Mark DuBois

Alternate: **Brett Russ**

**DCR Staff Present:** Dan Clark, Justin Gonsor

**Members of the Public Present:** Madison Ambragi, Deb Cary, Jane Dewey, Bill Dobson, Eric Goodhart, Mark Kablack, Steve Larivee, Sue Meagher, Bonnie Schmohl, Charles Schmohl, Diane Smith, Stephen Smith, Brian Sweeney, Howard Whitney, Marianne Wojcicki

## Meeting Minutes

Meeting Start Time: 7:04 PM

### **Approval of minutes from meetings on Thursday, October 5, 2023**

Tom Hughes made a motion to accept the minutes from the Ware River Watershed Advisory Committee (WRWAC) meeting on October 5, 2023. Charles Williams seconded the motion. The motion was unanimously approved.

### **Update on progress of implementing new Ware River Watershed Public Access Management Plan**

Dan Clark updated the committee on DWSP's progress implementing the updated Ware River Watershed Access Management Plan.

The new plan reconfigured the road network in the WRW. The updated 'roads open to vehicles during daylight hours' map is attached at the end of these minutes. As a result of the changes, some new gates needed to be installed. A list of the new gates are as follows:

1. Intervale Road is open to the prison camps. A gate was installed heading south on Prison Camp Road to prevent vehicles from passing that point.
2. A section of road goes past the prison camps toward Brigham Road. On the left you pass Rueben Walker Road where a new gate has been installed to keep vehicles off Rueben Walker.
3. Prison Camp Road turns into Brigham Road and access is provided up to the first crossing where the bridge is located. A new gate has been installed at that bridge to keep vehicles from passing that point.
4. Heading up Gilbert Road where it intersects with Fisher Road on the left, Rice Road is on the right. Access was provided up to that intersection and a new gate was installed to keep vehicles from passing that point to the north.

The language in the plan calls for designating an open water distance swimming location from DCR land, specifically referencing the south end of the pond. The

decision was made to designate the Comet pond beach as the entry/exit point for distance swimmers. To accommodate the parking area modifications will need to be made at the site. The plan is to move the lower gate further down the driveway, still within sight of Rt. 68. That will enable new parking spots (estimated 10-12) off Rt. 68 to be created.

There was concern regarding direct vehicle access to the river at the Rt. 122 canoe launch. A contract has been awarded to a vendor to install a metal guard rail. A gate will also be installed where the road is. A 3' wide space will be left around the gate so people can carry their canoe in/out. Multiple people suggested creating at least a 4-5' wide space around the gate citing the difficulty of carrying a canoe through anything smaller than a 4' wide space. Dan commented that creating a wider space should not be a problem.

A trail maintenance request form has been created. Dan will share the link with WRWAC members so that their group can submit trail maintenance requests directly to Dan. This link will not be available to the public.

The new plan called for the creation of Ware River night access hunting permits. The application has already been posted online and there is no charge for the permit. It is an annual (calendar year) permit. Anyone who received a permit for 2023 should apply for a new one in 2024.

Work has begun on updating gate signage through the watershed to reflect new policies in the plan. The signs are not an exhaustive list of all/prohibited activities, but the more common activities conducted in the watershed. A sample of the current signage template is attached at the end of these minutes. Dennis Guberski recommended taking out the binocular symbol and replacing it with a horseback riding symbol.



There has been an initiative with DCR-State Parks to redefine responsibilities within the watershed. Historically, State Parks managed certain sections of the rail trail that are on DWSP property, two locations specifically:

- a portion of the MA Central Rail Trail
- a section of the north/south Rail Trail that starts at canoe launch and goes to up to Williamsville Road.

This will bring more consistency to the access plan. Both areas will now be under DWSP management.

Large motor permits (no more than 50 to be given out) for Long Pond get issued in the spring. There was a question on if watershed residents would get priority to receive these permits. DCR legal is still looking into the issue.

The Prison Camp basement structure represents a safety hazard and DCR is looking into getting it demolished. The proposal was brought to the town of Rutland and their Historical Commission to get their feedback.

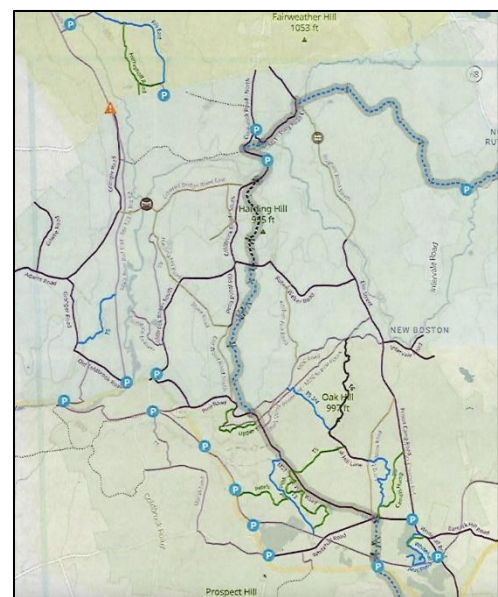
The new snowmobile trail that was created to avoid the sensitive area around the intake needs a wetland crossing installed before it can be used.

Another big challenge is coming up with clear, concise signage for all the new multi-use trails in the watershed. There is also a plan to develop a mobile app for smartphones that will show in real time where you are in the watershed and what is allowed in that area/trail. There are also many outdated signs that need to be removed throughout the watershed. Brett offered the trails subcommittee's help on coming up with signage for the new trail network.

### **Trails subcommittee proposals for improvement to two roads crossing and trail access at some gates; discussion of a possible trail crossing over the Ware River at Old Covered Bridge Road**

Brett Russ updated the committee on the trails subcommittee's activities over the past year as well as their proposals and requests to DCR for the upcoming year.

- Trails subcommittee introduction
  - Trails committee seats represent:
    - 4 towns' Open Space Committees represented
    - Historical interests represented
    - All major user groups represented (hiking, biking, equestrian, snowmobiling)
  - Stewardship efforts have focused on trails in the watershed, shown as green, blue, and black lines on the map.



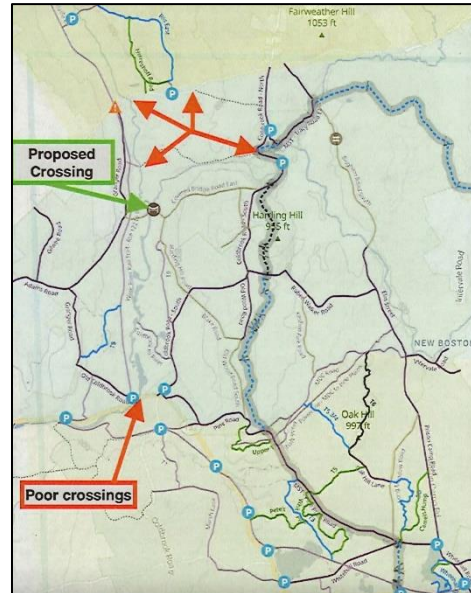
- The entirety of the network, a mix of woodland trails and roads, is popular across all authorized user groups.
- In 2023, 44 people contributed 140 volunteer hours (a roughly \$5,500 value)
- Proposal 1: Town of Hubbardston: Ware River Rail Trail (WRRT) crossing at Williamsville Road.
  - WRRT crosses Williamsville Road today with no markings of any sort.
  - The proposal is to install trailside button-activated flashing crossing lights and always-active blinking advance warning sign.
  - Town of Hubbardston is applying for MassTrails grant (due Feb. 1) and is looking for letters of stakeholder support.
    - The trails subcommittee has already drafted a letter in support of the town's proposal.
    - Brett made a motion that a letter be drafted on behalf of the WRWAC that they support Hubbardston's proposal. The trails subcommittee letter could be used as a template. Brett will quickly draft the letter and send it to Jeff Schaaf for final approval before it gets submitted before Feb. 1. Dave Flick seconded the motion. The motion was unanimously approved.
  - The location can be seen here:  
<https://www.trailforks.com/poi/135694/>
- Proposal 2: Town of Barre: WRRT crossing at Hubbardston Road (Rt. 62)
  - WRRT crosses Rt. 62 today with no markings, high speed approaches, and blind corners.
  - This crossing is especially nerve-wracking for horseback riders and long, slow-moving snowmobile groomers.
  - Trails subcommittee would like to pursue a similar project at this site as proposed by Hubbardston on Williamsville Road (proposal 1).
  - Looking for WRWAC support including reaching out to the right people in the Town of Barre to get this project started.
    - Mike Wood represents the Barre selectboard and will reach out to the appropriate folks in the town government on behalf of the WRWAC.
    - Dennis suggested involving DOT in early discussions or whatever body oversees that stretch of road if it isn't the town.
    - Mike Wood made a motion that the WRWAC is interested and supportive of the project and bringing it up to the town and DOT. But the committee will need more information on the final design and layout from Barre before they can officially

endorse it. Dennis seconded the motion. The motion was unanimously approved.

- Location can be seen here: <https://www.trailforks.com/poi/128037/>

- Cemetery Bridge goals

- All user groups could cross all four rivers in one central and safe spot. Other options are dangerous (Rts. 122 and 62) or don't serve certain user groups.
- Provides important connections and loop options between the WRRT (just west of this crossing), the center of the WRW trail network, and Barre Falls. The proposed crossing can be seen on the map.



- Add a paddling launch/takeout
- Road and parking improvements on Covered Bridge Road West (DCR has already completed this)
- Location can be seen here: <https://www.trailforks.com/poi/130292/>
- Funding for the bridge was discussed. Dennis suggested that MWRA pay for the bridge.
- The type of bridge that would be constructed was discussed. Multiple people expressed concern that building a bridge there could negatively effect fishing in the area. It was suggested that whatever style bridge is chosen that it be long/high enough that I won't affect the riverbed, river, or slopes leading into the water.
- Intended usage of the bridge was discussed as well as how much increased traffic from additional recreational groups using the bridge; whether that would be a good thing.
- Dan was unable to give official approval from DCR at the meeting.
- It was noted that building a bridge and not making it a dead end could result in less nefarious activity occurring in that spot.
- WRWAC is in support of the trails subcommittee completing a site assessment and preliminary plan for the bridge. It was suggested that the committee members visit the site so they can see it for themselves before the next meeting.
- Matt Hopkinson expressed concerns with the bridge project and its impact on a quiet area of the watershed and the wilderness he experiences there.



- Request: Improve passive recreational passage at Fisher Road gate
  - The gate at Fisher Road has become unsafe for some users to get around the side of the gate. There is the hope that DCR can create a more level 4-5' wide space on the side of the gate. Dan will investigate the issue.
  - Location can be seen here: <https://www.trailforks.com/poi/130463/>

### **Report from DCR regarding road damage due to December rainstorms**

Dan updated the committee on road damage and closures due to the December rainstorms.

Some roads were closed as a precautionary measure to assess road conditions and any washouts that may have occurred. Barre Falls was holding back water which also resulted in roads being flooded. As roads were checked and deemed safe, associated gates would then be opened. Proactively closing roads and then assessing them before opening gates back up will be the protocol for DWSP going forward. This method seems to work out better than waiting until a road is damaged before closing it. WRWAC members are notified from DCR as soon as possible about gate closures.

### **Discussion about selecting a vice chairman for the WRWAC**

There was discussion about the need for the committee to appoint a vice chairman.

Dennis made a motion to appoint Mike Wood as the vice chairman of the WRWAC. Dave Flick seconded the motion. The motion was unanimously approved.

### **Member Issues**

Mike Wood recently met with the DCR commissioner and expressed his interest to the commissioner in being able to revisit minor, annual modifications to the public access plan rather than waiting for the regular 10-year updates. He stated the commissioner said he was in favor of public input.

Susan Meagher, president of the Asnacomet Pond Association, commented that their association met as a group in November and decided that they didn't support DWSP creating an access point for distance swimming at south end of the Comet Pond, but do support the distance swimming access point occurring at the beach (which is now DCR's plan). She spoke about the homeowners that live around Comet Pond feeling the impacts of policy changes that have occurred over the years.

Stephen Smith, Comet Pond resident, spoke on behalf of one of his neighbors, Ed Blanchard. He's lived on the pond since 1982 and expressed concern about DCR's decision to allow open water swimming at Comet Pond. He spoke on behalf of boaters and fishermen who contend with many different users (kayakers, paddleboaters, swimmers, people on floatation devices, etc.) and how their ability to use the boat ramp has been compromised. He noted that the boat ramp parking lot is frequently full. He feels adding open water swimmers to this list of users decreases safety for everyone and creates the risk of liability. Watercrafts now need to keep a 50 ft. distance away from distance swimmers. He urged the public to contact their representatives to voice their opposition to open water swimming at Comet Pond. He expressed water quality concerns over the potential for larger numbers of people swimming at the pond and suggested Brigham and Moosehorn Ponds as potential alternatives for distance swimming. He cited the lack of lifeguards at Comet Pond as a safety concern for swimmers. He hopes DCR will reconsider allowing distance swimming at the pond. Dennis suggested allowing swimming at Long Pond as another potential alternative.

Jane Dewey, Comet Pond resident, was expressed concern about the process for how the swimming policy was updated. She stated that DCR failed to hold a public hearing before reversing the policy. There was discussion of the timeline of events regarding the Ware River Public Access Management Plan. Jeff Schaaf reminded everyone that after DCR presented their draft plan to the WRWAC, DCR also held a public hearing at Quabbin Regional High School, prior to releasing the final plan, as DCR is required to do by law. Dan Clark summarized the access plan update to the current day. One of the first steps in the update was to meet with user groups, one of the user groups was the Asnacomet Pond Association. At that time, it was interpreted from the DCR commissioner's office that open water swimming was only allowed at Walden Pond, which was reflected in the draft version of the access plan (there was no distance swimming access point at Comet Pond). As DCR leadership changed, the policy was revisited and determined open water swimming on DCR properties was not limited only to Walden Pond, which then allowed for other DCR areas to allow open water swimming. By law, updating the public access plan entails creating a draft, presenting it to the committee and the larger public, having a public comment period, and then formulating and presenting a final plan, considering the comments received on the draft version. Dan made an important distinction that DCR doesn't control whether distance swimming is allowed at Comet Pond, their responsibility is whether to allow it from DCR property.



Jane also questioned the difference between ‘long-distance’ swimming ‘distance’ swimming and ‘open water’ swimming is. It was discussed at the meeting and determined they all mean the same thing, neither term has a definitive definition. It was stated that swimming within the designated, roped-in area at the pond has always been allowed.

Kathy Barnard, Comet Pond resident, expressed concern over the increased number of people who use the pond today compared to in the past. She has seen the number of boaters, swimmers, kayakers, etc. go way up over the years. She is worried about this negatively effecting water quality. She would like to see regulations put in place to protect homeowners, such as setting a proximity to how close water users can get to homes.

Mike Wood asked if a permit is required to use the beach at Comet Pond. No permit is required.

A member of the public spoke about distance swimming at Comet Pond. He mentioned that kids/families tend to use the roped-in area of the beach. Those looking to swim longer distances simply swim under the rope and out into the larger pond area.

Dennis commented about wording in the access plan regarding hunting dogs not being allowed direct access to water when retrieving a bird. He would like to see the policy reviewed before the upcoming hunting season.

A member of the public asked about the rollout of the new 5-year hunting permits for the Ware River Watershed has gone. Dan answered that since the change only happened this past season, they haven’t received much feedback. Rangers have been focusing on educating hunters about the new permits for hunting on watershed lands. Everyone was reminded that when parking outside of a locked gate in the watershed to leave enough room so that your vehicle isn’t blocking the gate so DCR staff or other personnel can safely enter/exit.

Dick Williams suggested a pole barn be constructed at DCR’s Oakham office to house/protect some of the machinery there. He also alerted the committee that he is stepping down from the committee. He has represented the Rutland selectboard on WRWAC for many years and his service greatly appreciated. The selectboard plan to appoint a new person to the committee before the next meeting.

**Meeting End Time: 8:59 PM**

## Upcoming WRWAC Meetings

- Thursday, February 29, 2024, at 7PM – Rutland Free Public Library, 280 Main Street, Rutland, MA 01543

