

## MEMORANDUM

TO: Cape Elizabeth Conservation Commission  
Jessica Sullivan, Town Council Liaison  
CC: Horseback riding group  
FROM: Maureen O'Meara, Town Planner  
DATE: September 18, 2012  
SUBJECT: Horseback riding on the Greenbelt Status Report

### Introduction

In 2011, the Cape Elizabeth Conservation Commission initiated discussions with horseback riders regarding use of the greenbelt trail system. Some informal agreements were reached, including adjustments to trails and proposed trail improvements. Almost a year later and with fall weather approaching, it seems appropriate to review progress to date.

### Managing shared use greenbelt trails

The Conservation Commission, with help from volunteers, has been building boardwalks over the wetter portions of greenbelt trails for over a decade. Most of these boardwalks have been built by volunteers and primarily designed to support pedestrian traffic, although most boardwalks will also support a snowmobile with 1 rider. Two exemptions to this are the Great Pond Boardwalk and the Spurwink Marsh boardwalk, which were professionally installed, but are still designed primarily for pedestrian traffic.

It became increasingly apparent in 2011 that greenbelt trail surfaces and boardwalks were becoming worn and damaged from horseback riding use. Boardwalk boards were broken and fragile organic soils were being cut by horses hooves, pushing trails from seasonally wet vegetated surfaces to permanently muddy.

Greenbelt trails are generally intended to be multi-use trails where users are expected to be considerate of each other. When a specific use group appears to be damaging the trails to the detriment of other users, the commission has considered designating trails for limited use or closing trails temporarily or permanently. This issue first arose with mountain bike use. The Conservation Commission has been able to reach out to mountain bike users through the New England Mountain Biking Association (NEMBA) and cooperatively worked to improve trails and modify use.

## Coordination with Horseback riders

The Conservation Commission initiated the same approach by sponsoring a meeting on September 28, 2011 at Town Hall. The meeting was led by Town Councilor Jessica Sullivan, Liaison to the Conservation Commission and a horse enthusiast. A dozen horseback riders, including 3 stable owners attended the meeting. The meeting was productive in sharing information about the physical limitations of the greenbelt trails and the use of the trails by horseback riders.

In October, 2011, Robin Mills followed up the meeting with a map showing the greenbelt trails frequented by horseback riders and the bridges and boardwalks on those trails that may not be suitable for horseback riding.

At the November 8, 2011 meeting, the Conservation Commission discussed horseback riding on the trails identified. The horseback riding group had offered to volunteer to improve trails for horseback riding and also noted possible funding opportunities.

At the December 13, 2011 Conservation Commission meeting, the following discussion occurred:

Discussion of use of Greenbelt by horses.

Members of an interest group supporting use of Greenbelt trails by horses described their interest in potentially making the trails more useable by horses. Maureen O'Meara explained that the Conservation Commission receives a budget of \$8000 per year to fund all their expenses. Except the bridge over the Spurwink Marsh, the bridges were built by volunteer labor. In general they are not built to specifications that could support the weight of a horse. The Commission is concerned because no one wants a horse falling through a bridge.

Robin Mills stated that they may have labor available to reinforce the bridges. They do not cross the Spurwink Bridge. The question was raised as to whether there are any specifications related to the construction of bridges and trails that can support horses.

There is a place for horses envisioned in the new Open Space Management Plan. The trails are planned as multi-use, but we also may designate certain trails and bridges as safe for horses. The provision by Public Works of a part-time worker to maintain trails may mean that the Commission has more resources to put toward making trails more useable by horses. The Commission already works with a mountain bike group who donates labor to maintain certain trails for use by mountain bikes.

Horses are currently using the Gull Crest and Great Pond trails. The group was asked whether they might be interested in building separate trails at Gull Crest for horses, particularly in the fields. They could be designated horse only. The group will meet and

come back to the Commission with some thoughts and plans for trail improvements for horses, including what a structure that can support a horse would look like. Some or all of a given structure might need to be professionally done, for example, driving pilings. We would need to be very specific if we needed to contract out any construction. Standards that need to be determined include load, width, and access considerations.

A site walk was held at Gull Crest with Conservation Commission members and representatives of horseback riders on March 5, 2012. At the site walk, it was apparent that horseback riding on the more fragile organic soils was cutting the vegetated trails, leaving them muddy. It was agreed to mark a separate trail across the field for horseback riding only to preserve the existing trail for pedestrians. Other portions of the trail were on more stable soils and horseback riding could occur on the trail up to the athletic field with no expected damage. Closer to the Fowler Rd connector, gravel will need to be added to a muddy area. The boardwalk on the Fowler Rd connector needs to be evaluated to support a horse and the Fowler Rd end has become very muddy and needs to be stabilized with gravel. Across Fowler Rd at the Great Pond trail, the bridge next to the smaller pond and the boardwalk closer to Fenway Rd are likely not safe for horses. Robin Mills offered to have her husband, an engineer, review these bridges and prepare a recommendation for structural improvements. The recommendation would be brought back to the Conservation Commission for review. Once improvements were reviewed and approved by the Conservation Commission, the horseback riding group and the town would collaborate on pursuing funding sources identified by the horseback riding group.

At the May 8, 2012 Conservation Commission meeting, Lucy Rhodes, representing the horseback riding group, reviewed their proposal. This is the excerpt from the minutes:

1. Horse Trail bridges. Lucy Rhodes discussed the horse trail improvements. The trail has been flagged at Gull Crest. A small bridge, approximately 10 feet long, will be replaced at Great Pond, cost to be borne by the riders group. Wood will be used. It was asked what should be done with the old bridge materials, which are pressure-treated. If they can be moved to the end of Fenway, Public Works can be asked to move it to Whaleback for re-use.

The long bridge at Gull Crest would be a later project, probably in the fall. The bridge would be extended on the Fowler side and would need to come up a little further near the Malley's. The plan envisions removing the decking and installing heavy-duty slats. Because it is steep there, a design would need to be drawn up and submitted to the Conservation Commission. To stop vegetation from growing up through the screening, we could possibly install some fine mesh screen.

The need for bridge supports/posts on the Great Pond bridge was discussed, stringers will give some support but perhaps not enough for horses. Lucy dismounts and leads her horse over the bridge. There are railroad ties under there now, but they may only be at the end of the box. The design concept for Great Pond is ready but needs to be submitted to the Commission.

The horses are not using the other composite bridge at Great Pond (the Boy Scout bridge). It might be a good idea to have a No Horses sign there.

Between now and the fall, the Fowler bridge may need some limited repair, it's all but impassable now for about 50 feet. The idea was raised of using 4 by 4's run parallel to hold the gravel in place, on top of impermeable cloth. There are a dozen 8 or 10 feet long boards there now. Maureen will ask Public Works to put gravel in there. Horses are off that path for now.

The new trail around Gull Crest is working fine, according to feedback Lucy has received. Word has gone out to the barns that use the trail.

### September 18, 2012

Today, I made my periodic visit to the Great Pond boat racks and also walked the Great Pond trails. It is obvious that horseback riding is occurring on these trails. I found horse manure on the trail in two locations. Horses are also riding over both the Great Pond bridge and the Boy Scout bridge. I do not think either bridge has been reinforced or replaced since the May 8th meeting (this should be verified). The Boy Scout Bridge in particular has been damaged once by horseback riding and is not safe for horses.

The Fowler Rd connector bridge also has not been structurally reinforced and no design has been submitted to the Conservation Commission. The Public Works Department is there this week placing gravel on the Fowler Rd end of the connector. They used the boardwalk to access the area with their equipment and encountered stability issues. This bridge remains unsafe for horses.

### Possible Next Steps

1. The horseback riding group should prepare a design for structural reinforcement of the bridges and boardwalks they would like to use and submit them to the Conservation Commission for review. Once the improvements are approved, funding efforts need to commence.
2. The Conservation Commission should discuss interim measures to be taken until necessary safety improvements are made. As with the mountain bike users, the Conservation Commission may need to close the

trails to horseback riders until safety and trail preservation improvements are completed.