

## **Avon Hills Initiative Meeting Minutes May 15<sup>th</sup>, 2004**

Introductions by Tom Kroll, Garth Fuller, and Kim Chapman. 31 persons attended.

### Background

Tom Kroll of Saint John's Arboretum and Garth Fuller of The Nature Conservancy thanked all the people who had participated. This meeting closes out the initial phase of the Avon Hills Initiative that was sponsored by Saint John's and The Nature Conservancy. The goal of that phase was to determine if there was broader support for conserving the rural nature of the Avon Hills and to create a map which outlined some of the prime natural resources, cultural resources, and recreational resources of the Area.

The general feeling of the original sponsors is that there is a strong desire of the local community to retain the rural nature of the Hills while respecting the property rights of the existing landowners who are to be credited for the fact that the Hills are still quite rural and undeveloped. We are very pleased with the high interest and shared values.

### Review of the Map Produced by the Project

Kim lead review of process, reiterated biological findings. Forest, prairie, wetlands, birds and pugnose shiner as examples of important natural features – seen on bus tour. Then reviewed the mapping exercise conducted by the breakout groups in the February meeting. Kim explained how he summarized the important areas, land use zones, connections and corridors, as well as areas critical for water quality and aquatic resources.

Map: Three Area categories were developed:

Recreational and Rural Beauty Area (Aesthetics based)

Major focus is to preserve the rural beauty at important approaches and corridors to Avon Hills area. This also creates biking, walking, touring, and other rec. opportunities.

Lowland Conservation Area (Water and Aquatic based)

Major focus is to protect water quality, maintain natural water flow regimes, manage storm water using ecological principles, involve wildlife habitat through careful stewardship and maintain populations of sensitive species

Upland Conservation Area (Forest/Savanna based)

Major focus is to preserve the continuous forest canopy, improve wildlife habitat through careful stewardship of the land and maintain populations of sensitive species.

### Interpretation of Map:

Examples of how the resource areas can overlap and or how they connect, why certain areas were not included in these areas. Reviewed the difference between the higher quality areas versus the areas of land cover categories (high quality forest vs. simply forest cover).

Strategies or methods used to conserve these areas will differ depending on many factors but for instance a solution for addressing large forest areas vs. a small patch or island. (Example of small patch on a single landowner where a landowner may decide to protect the entire patch vs. multiple owners dealing with various efforts and management).

### Took questions:

Q: In other situations where the distribution of biologically significant areas is not balanced across the area how was this handled? Were more surveys done?

A: More surveys might show some of the sensitive species.

Q: Could local landowners or interested people provide some of this missing info?

A: Yes, example of MPCA citizen lake monitoring program. Lake Watab Association does this. Birds; Breeding bird survey maintained by Cornell Labs could provide methodology etc, MN Natural Heritage program (and County Biological Survey could provide list of sensitive species they track for the state and would welcome sightings and records. Loon and Osprey monitoring mentioned as ways to track specifics and indicators of system health.

We can explore citizen monitoring in the subcommittee discussion.

Short discussion of pre-settlement vegetation and how things have changed was held, difference between big woods forest type and oak savanna and other fire maintained systems was discussed. Also discussion of how County Biol. Survey was done.

Brief discussion of scale and local importance of resources, and how strategies may be different at these different scales.

Tom asked the participants how these data/maps could be used:

Cliff – would like to use this kind of data to develop manuals for development in the township (Avon). They currently use existing data and would make use of this new data layer. Will be very valuable to townships for planning, perhaps other townships can also use this.

Jennifer - The County maintains data like this, perhaps as strategies are developed these maps can inform ordinances etc like they all ready do.

Allen – looking to develop zones for preservation and land use categories for the township this map will be informative

How will the landowners be informed about what is on their land and why it is important? What about Avon Hills festival? Public Meetings are often hard to attend. Use the WEB, have a web site that townships and others could link to and then promote through media.

Tom Wicks – Landowners may be concerned about being identified for whatever asset they have, may be afraid they will be turned into a park etc, need to translate importance to folks so that they appreciate value of their resources and help them not fear the map etc.

The group wanted to emphasize that this entire initiative is based on the voluntary cooperation of landowners. This group respects the property rights of the existing landowners.

### Future of the Initiative

In February, Chris Schellinger was named the chair of a subcommittee for Continuing the Initiative. In April, that subcommittee met and drafted some recommendations (see following copy of the handout):

#### **Avon Hills Initiative: Phase II Sub-Committee Report**

May 14, 2004

**Goal of Sub-Committee:** Propose a structure and method for establishing and pursuing strategies that will help realize the initial goals of the Avon Hills Initiative:

- Preserve the rural character of the Avon Hills
- Maintain the economic productivity of the Avon Hills
- Preserve the quality of natural areas in the Avon Hills

**Recommendations:** There must be a continuation of these efforts driven primarily by an independent, organized and diversified group of residents from within and outside the Avon Hills geographic area. This group will provide a structure and a “face” to these efforts.

The following organizational structure is proposed for moving forward in the efforts to identify and implement strategies that will help reach the community’s goals for the Avon Hills. These committees are listed with a brief explanation of their suggested responsibilities.

#### 1. Executive Committee

- a. Committee chairs and 1 member at large
- b. Draft and approve a charter for the group
- c. Organizational duties such as calling meetings, etc.
- d. Providing a leadership role

#### 2. Non-Governmental Opportunities for Land Conservation Committee

- a. Look at incentives, voluntary actions and privately funded options to help conserve land and natural areas.
  - b. Work with landowners interested in options available to them for land conservation.
- 3. Education Committee
  - a. Educate the local public and other stakeholders on the objectives of our Organization, the Avon Hills.
  - b. Educate landowners about options and alternatives available to them.
- 4. Marketing Committee
  - a. Events, articles, promotional materials, speakers, etc. to raise awareness of the Avon Hills and our organization, along with its efforts and goals.
  - b. Raise money through grants, fundraisers to support events, speakers, etc.
- 5. Government Committee
  - a. Dealing with issues associated with zoning, development, etc.
  - b. Dealing with government officials, actions at township, county and state levels.
  - c. Foster communication between township planning boards.
- 6. Cultural History/Sense of Place Committee
  - a. Identify culturally, historically significant sites within the Avon Hills.
  - b. Create a vision for the Sense of Place that is the Avon Hills.
  - c. Could be a sub-committee of the Education committee.

**Next Steps:**

- 1. Agree to proceed under this or a similar structure for a 1-year minimum.
- 2. Identify committee chairs and members of the Executive Committee.
- 3. Establish future meeting dates and times to begin the Second Phase.

There was a good discussion about the size and number of committees:  
Chris gave examples of ideas for each committee

John C – suggests reducing number of committee to 4 or so, expressed gratitude for hard work of subcommittee.

Ernie D- agrees that good basic structure and thinks this is good model that could be replicated across other areas.

Tom W – says could combine, 3, 4, and 6

Cliff – says in favor of continuing the effort. Need to broaden the initiative otherwise it will be seen as an elitist group and will be a problem.

Bill- mentioned that political landscape is changing, ex. Of St Joe town combining with St Joe Township, Waite Park is growing into St Joe. Time to act is now; don't be limited by existing political lines change could happen in the near future.

Discussion of structure and subcommittees:

Group into 3 committees.

Expand the group and broaden the involvement – stress VOLUNTARY,

Add a goal to the Initiative: Have a goal of open, community based, voluntary process.

#### Resolution to Continue to the Initiative

Ernie D – Motion made to adopt the written summary drafted by the Phase II Sub-Committee to continue the Avon Hills effort now underway.

Seconded by several (Cliff, Mark)

Passed unanimously

There was also group agreement to modify the proposed structure as needed to best facilitate the process. These included renaming Marketing /Fundraising to Public Relations and probably that portion of the committee with Education and splitting off the Fundraising function.

Chris Schellinger was elected as the Chair for a 1 year term by unanimous consensus.

The Chairs of the other committees will join Chris as the Executive Committee.

Participation in the committees is open to anyone and everyone who wishes to play a role. Contact Tom Kroll at Saint John's 320-363-3126 to volunteer for a committee or to be placed on the mailing list.

#### Ideas and Opportunities for the Subcommittees:

After a break, a discussion facilitated by Chris S. and Kim C. sought ideas from the entire group on activities that might be considered for the various committees to undertake.

The ideas were broken out into 6 sub committees to facilitate discussion and took suggestions for things/ideas to include under each category:

#### Committees:

##### 1) Executive Committee

- Broaden base of AHI

- Research/recommend BMPs other approaches from around the create “Position paper” on how to win-win country situations for all (Options)

- Update of existing fact sheet piece

- Concepts for economic development

- Analyze and fix problem of land values, affordability, market forces

- Describe cultural forces; analyze how to work with them

Note: As

##### 2) Non-Gov Opportunities for Land Conservation Committee

- Healthy Community Partnership (St Joe, Avon etc)

- Identify funds for landowners to implement actions, DNR, SWCDs, etc

- Use Environmental studies programs, BSA, etc to accomplish work

St John's Arboretum for outreach  
Use the MN Land Trust for their expertise in easement development (tax benefits)  
The Nature Conservancy  
St John's Arboretum  
1000 Friends of Minnesota  
Permanent Easements

3) Education Committee

Courses/college credits to learn about Hills  
Citizen monitoring program  
Provide maps to elementary and HS students & teachers  
Children's books about Avon Hills (animals, ecology, fire, arboretum etc)  
"SWAT" team of Avon Hills experts to work with individual or groups of landowners  
DNR as source of much information for groups/landowners  
Communicate to "doubter" and "skeptics" or folks with fears about AHI, to avoid black helicopter syndrome.  
On-line virtual tour of Avon Hills  
Tax benefit for landowners, explain & create opportunities

4) Marketing (Public Relations?) Committee (Fundraising)

El Rancho Manana Bluegrass Festival, outreach info available etc  
Use School weekend events to educate/explain  
Farm Market outreach  
BNSF RR source of \$?  
Regular newsletter  
Disseminate news through other org's newsletter  
Expand website to include learning opportunities  
Floats in local parades  
Use State Fair as venue  
For cooperating folks provide thanks a gift (e.g. map)  
Use Lake Wobegon Trail to promote natural features  
Give landowners win-win opportunities to be financially rewarded while protecting land

5) Government Committee

Development Design standards  
Freeway Noise issue  
Zoning recommendations from this group to government must involve affected landowners (-early in process)  
County Road 51 upgrade, maintain rural sense, provide recommendations  
Coordinate between townships, county, state, and feds + communicate to citizens  
Permanent Easements/Zoning

6) Cultural History and Sense of Place Committee

Make old schoolhouse interpretive center

Lake Wobegon Trail (kiosks etc) interpretation  
Name preserved lands and waters after landowners  
BNSF RR as history focus, potential partner  
National Park style entry roads into Hills

Tom announced that Saint John's will provide at least \$2,000 in cash towards the activities of the Initiative and will also provide staff time and facilities to work with the Initiative. Tom asked folks to fill out committee interest sheets, invited everyone to lunch where 5 tables will be assembled around the committees to discuss next steps.

#### UPDATE ON COMMITTEES AND CHAIRS -

Since the meeting, Chair Chris Schellinger has modified the committees as per the group discussion and announced the persons who volunteered to be Chairs of the Committees. Together with himself as Chair, this group constitutes the Executive Committee.

Avon Hills Initiative Chair – Chris Schellinger 320-492-1444

Administrative Committee: Chair – Mike Brown - 320-363-0911

Education and Community Relations Committee: Co-Chairs – Cliff Borgerding 320-356-7191 and Mark Conway (320) 363-5399  
(This also includes everything under “marketing” in the minutes that was not related to fundraising.)

Non-governmental Opportunities for Land Conservation Committee: Chair – Sr. Phyllis Plantenberg, OSB (320) 363-7101

Governmental Effects Committee: Chair – Alan Davisson (320) 685-3835

Cultural History /Sense of Place Committee: Chair – Steve Plantenberg - (320) 356-9447

Fundraising Committee: Chair Ernie Diedrich 320-363-4952