



NATURAL HERITAGE ADVISORY COUNCIL

Meeting Minutes: Washington State Natural Heritage Advisory Council

June 4, 2020

9:30 am – 12:30 pm

Call-In Meeting

Council Members in Attendance (all via conference call): Peter Dunwiddie (chair), Becky Brown, Janelle Downs, Kathryn Kurtz, Claudine Reynolds, Cheryl Schultz, Randi Shaw, Ian Sinks, Heida Diefenderfer, Brock Milliern (DNR), Adam Cole (RCO), Janet Gorrell (WDFW), Heather Kapust (ECY), Andrea Thorpe (State Parks)

Staff in Attendance: Doug Kennedy, Joe Rocchio, Curt Pavola, Dave Wilderman, Jake Kleinknecht and Ben Guss

Chair Peter Dunwiddie called the meeting to order at 9:45 a.m. The agenda was accepted without changes.

Approval of Minutes from the March 27, 2020, Meeting

Chair Dunwiddie solicited council comments on the draft minutes. No corrections or edits were offered, and the minutes were moved as written by Janelle Downs, and seconded by Kathryn Kurtz. The minutes were approved unanimously.

Carry-Forward Items from Previous Council Meetings

- Report from NHAC member visits to Natural Areas

Janelle Downs reported on a visit to the Ginkgo State Park to look at the proposed areas for natural area preserve designation. She observed varying native plant community quality throughout the park and stated that the highest quality areas should be designated as preserve. Notably, the areas north of the freeway were highest quality, with good patches also on the south. Joe Rocchio noted that Natural Heritage Staff had similar observations and those thoughts were shared with State Parks.

- Update on Funding for Natural Heritage Program and Natural Areas Program

Brock Milliern reported that initial budget enhancement proposals have been submitted for the department's internal review process for both the Natural Heritage Program and the Natural Areas Program. They are at the concept stage, and should have more details by the next council meeting. Milliern noted that state budget cuts are likely due to the economic effects of the pandemic, however he feels any initial spending reductions can be handled without significant effects on the programs. The Natural Heritage Program has been successful competing for several federal grants. A special legislative session may be called to address revenue shortfalls.

- Recommendation updates – Steptoe Butte

Milliern reported continuing discussions with State Parks about options for the inholding with communications towers, perhaps including tower relocation which would involve both technical feasibility issues with the types of tower usage and appraisal implications. When Milliern presented the overview to the Recreation and Conservation Funding Board, it was met with many questions and perhaps some skepticism, but the department will address the concerns in order to find the best way forward. The council discussed the potential use of tower revenues for natural area management, viewshed issue with a possible relocation to the top of the butte, the relatively low impact to the natural area if the towers remain in the same footprint, and a question about whether the landowners could donate the towers and thus not use state grant funds for acquisition. Council member Downs inquired about the department buying the towers separately, and Milliern noted the department has a communications program and it is possible this could be reviewed, however it affects appraisals happening now and the revenues would not be kept for preserve management with that option. Downs supports having the council write a letter of support to the Recreation and Conservation Office for a favorable resolution of the communication tower dilemma to facilitate acquisition of the natural area. Chair Dunwiddie with work with department staff to create a letter.

State Parks Proposal for Ginkgo State Park NAP

Andrea Thorpe presented a slide show about Ginkgo State Park and the portions of the site under consideration for designation by the Natural Heritage Advisory Council as natural area preserve.

The Natural Heritage Program considers the element occurrences at this site to be “provisional” due to the limited time available under coronavirus pandemic work limitations for staff to analyze the site. Brief field surveys were conducted by Tynan Ramm-Granberg, Walter Fertig and Bec Braisted. Currently, one priority plant species is known from the site and others are under review by Fertig. Three priority ecosystem elements are found at the site but only cursory inventory of these has been conducted by Natural Heritage ecologists. The program zoologist position is vacant, and animal analysis has not been conducted. Program staff were able to update location maps to remove lesser-quality, impacted areas.

Thorpe said that State Parks is restoring fire-impacted areas to prevent cheatgrass invasion, including working on neighboring lands owned by the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife. She noted that an existing access road creates challenges for resource management, such as opening the area to plunder of ginkgo fossils, or being a potential fire source and weed source.

Downs suggested that management challenges may be difficult given the heavy use on adjacent areas, including hikers, unauthorized gathering of geological/archaeological resources, and a push for connecting the road system through the park. Thorpe did note past plant community restoration efforts in one area but, from a drive-by view the recovery is not looking very good. She agrees that the areas on the north side of freeway will continue to face weed invasion, wildfire, and other challenges.

The request to the Natural Heritage Advisory Council concerns only those areas considered for designation as natural area preserve; the other land classifications within the park will be determined by the State Parks Commission with public input through their planning process. Other likely designation options include “natural” and “resource recreation,” both allowing higher levels of use.

Joe Rocchio noted that one state natural area preserve, Mima Mounds, was designated for its geological feature. He said that the earliest versions of the Natural Heritage Plan referenced

geological features as Plan features but no criteria were adopted to determine their priority status.

Thorpe requested a council recommendation for the proposed “natural area preserve” boundary to be forwarded to the State Parks planning process for Ginkgo State Park, which will be reviewed and adopted by the Washington State Parks and Recreation Commission.

Rocchio inquired about the information developed by consultants with regard to rare plant community locations and coverage. Thorpe noted that they did attempt to follow natural heritage methodology, however she observed a variation in quality of plant IDs and estimates of quality.

Downs agreed that some areas are degraded but that the areas currently mapped as ecosystem element occurrence aligned with where she observed high-quality bunchgrass and sagebrush communities.

Chair Dunwiddie spoke in favor of the larger boundary presented, taking the long view for conservation recognizing that some problematic areas within the proposed boundary will recover as the site is managed as a preserve.

Becky Brown moved to recommend designation of the larger boundary presented as a natural area preserve within Ginkgo State Park in recognition of the rare and high quality plant and animal species, plant communities, and geologic features. Ian Sinks seconded the motion. The motion was approved unanimously.

Preliminary planning for the Natural Heritage Plan update

Rocchio presented an overview of the process for the next Washington State Natural Heritage Plan. The goal is to have the next Plan ready for submitting to the legislature for the 2022 spring session. Content and structure of the plan is yet to be determined but Rocchio outline three issues he would like to consider addressing: (1) revisiting approach for setting priorities to Plan elements; (2) updating the list of ecosystem elements with current ecosystem classification taxonomy; and (3) identifying and presenting “potential conservation areas.” Natural Heritage will be bringing recommendations to the council during the process to update the plan.

Chair Dunwiddie thanked staff for the presentation, noting that it will take time for councilmembers to digest the proposed plan changes. He said that for potential conservation areas it could take significant time to develop. Rocchio agreed, with the observation that the process is similar to the current process for establishing natural area boundaries, and that the information addresses the question for each site about what conservation design is needed to protect the element occurrences.

Claudine Reynolds stated her interest in the natural heritage data available statewide, noting that the Habitat Connectivity Work Group is looking into similar questions, with a current focus on southwest Washington to map priority natural systems.

“Quick-Plan” format for NAP management plans

Curt Pavola reviewed the draft “quick-plan” for discussion at a later council meeting. (The discussion was postponed due to limited agenda time during this meeting.)

Councilmembers offered initial thoughts about an expedited planning process for natural area preserves. Diefenderfer noted that the creation of plans likely would increase the burden on Natural Heritage Program staff to create more management-focused information for sites when they are established. Janet Gorrell stated her preference for smaller plans that are

easier to update, although they can still include a landscape perspective on conservation. Downs noted that quicker plans make sense for identifying appropriate management, but also noted that the council hasn't had the benefit of providing guidance on specific management actions. Chair Dunwiddie echoed this sentiment and encouraged councilmembers to be more involved in the management planning process. Sinks noted the value of plans in providing direction for the staff managing preserves, and suggested the council weigh in during the development of management strategies in the plans.

Address Council Questions about Pre-Meeting Materials

- Progress on Past Recommendations

See handout for recent land acquisition at DNR natural areas.

- List of likely 2020 WWRP Grant Applications

Not available due to work disruptions due to coronavirus response. Pavola will email the list to the council when approved.

- State Agency and Program Reports

Written reports were distributed due to the shortened meeting length.

Planning for September Council Meeting and Field Trip

Staff presented two options for the annual council field trip and meeting: Pincroft Natural Area Preserve with a focus on the planned interpretive trail and partnership with the City of Spokane Valley, or Dabob Bay Natural Area, with a focus on how the site has changed over time from a small estuarine natural area preserve to a combined preserve-conservation area with substantial upland features.

Dabob Bay was selected for the September 17 tour; with the meeting to follow in Olympia on September 18.

Other Business / Comments from the Public in Attendance

No public were in attendance.

Adjourn

Chair Dunwiddie concluded the conference call at 12:35 pm.

MINUTES APPROVED: September 18, 2020