

To the Open Space Committee,

Below organized, condensed and compiled general comments about the management plan for the Ethel Walker Woods submitted by people associated with Keep the Woods. I encouraged people to attend the Open Space meeting June 3rd. Expertise from Trout Unlimited will likely be present or will submit additional comments.

In general folks are happy with many aspects. There are concerns about “overmanagement” and people want to make sure we set the right priorities based on its well-researched values. They don’t want to spend money unnecessarily and feel it is important to address existing problems first and adhere to “**First Do No Harm.**”

1. Priorities: The first goals should be sustainable land stewardship, preservation of ecosystem health, and diverse wildlife habitat. Other properties which do not have a high level of biodiversity and sensitive habitat are better-suited as recreation-focused. For similar reasons people are concerned about forestry and “periodic income” since most of the damage done to the property (watercourses, ecosystems, invasives) was caused by previous logging and perc tests (did MMI’s previous contract include removal of PVC pipes for the septic sites?). Meadow habitats can be achieved by mowing and/or expanding the many existing nearby meadows.

2. Access: We need access, but not so many points. McLean’s is > 10x as large and has 3 parking lot access points. Putting in a gravel pull out on Woodhaven is an unnecessary expense since it will essentially remove 3 current on-street spots. Town Forest is a site the Town should invest in and maintain with services since there is a ballfield, playground, picnic area, pond, etc. A wheelchair-accessible path from the parking lot to the picnic area would be nice. Composting toilets should be used if possible (they have these at Heublein).

Upgrading access and adding signage should be a goal (rather than adding new access points and trail markings). Many people use these woods and have done so for years without harming the wonderful and varied wildlife and plant populations (Jay Kaplan at Roaring Brook can rattle off an awesome list of unexpected bird species). Access and use should not be substantially limited and trail closure avoided unless necessary.

3. Information and Signage: It does not appear that a comprehensive set of relevant resources and documents have been compiled from Trust for Public Land, Farmington River Watershed Association, and perhaps other sources. (Keep the Woods was a main resource). Malone and MacBroom mention educational signage in four locations. While many would rather not have signs every 20 feet it seems as the diversity of the woods provides opportunities to educate the public and thus calls for at least more than four signs. Maybe this could be done over a period of several years. Entrance kiosks should be visible from the road and/or parking.

4. Invasives: This should be a priority so they do not become worse. Most invasives are at sites of logging or other disturbance. The plan for the marsh may be excessive and too environmentally damaging; phragmites should however be contained from spreading further and hot spots downstream should be addressed.

5. Trail marking, erosion and water resources: Wide trails, suitable for heavier use, are already marked. Unmarked trails, for lighter use, should be left unmarked. The narrow trails are really important for quiet nature study and contemplation, with numerous plant species and invertebrates not seen on the wider, busier trails; if more traffic were to be directed there by blazes and signs their special features would be destroyed. Kiosks at entry points could state that unmarked trails are not maintained and travel on them is at one’s own risk. Bicycles should not be allowed on unmarked trails for safety reasons and because of erosion (and damage to plants and animals). Trail erosion is a big problem and has diverted watercourses in some areas. Siltation in the brook is a major problem – it is significantly “stressed” by runoff.... sand and silt, choking habitat, even downstream at the Trout Pond at Stratton Brook State Park.