



# Naugatuck River Greenway Steering Committee

Torrington • Harwinton • Litchfield • Thomaston • Watertown • Waterbury • Naugatuck • Beacon Falls • Seymour • Ansonia • Derby

## Meeting Notes

Wednesday May 13<sup>th</sup>, 2020, 9am

Via Zoom

See last page for attendance and a roster of steering committee members.

Co-Chair Jack Walsh started the meeting and introductions were made.

Jack introduced Charlie Tracy, the Project Coordinator of the CT Trail Census Program at UConn. Charlie explained that he was hired last year to lead the CTTC. Previously, he worked for the National Parks Service as a Landscape Architect and was familiar with the NRG through discussions with John Monroe, his former officemate.

Charlie gave a [presentation](#) explaining the CTTC program that is collecting data on multiuse trail users across the state. The program grew out of data collection efforts that were undertaken as part of the NRG Economic Impact Study. Today the program is collecting counts of trail uses with infrared pedestrian counters and collecting information about trail users with a survey at 21 locations across the state. The goal of the program is to provide information about how trails are used to help make better informed decisions about how trails are funded, designed, developed and maintained. Data collected is shared openly on the CT Trail Census Website (<https://cttrailcensus.uconn.edu/>) which features an interactive data portal that allows users to explore trail use count data. Charlie pointed out that although it is not a contest, the NRG Trail in Derby has consistently been the busiest of the trails being studied.

The CTTC has been tracking an increase in trail use since the beginning of the lockdown in response to the Covid-19 pandemic, and published a [Covid-19 Trail Impact Report](#) last month which has received a lot of media attention. A comparison of March 2020 and March 2019 trail uses revealed increases on nearly all trails studied, with more than half increasing by more than 100%. With gyms closed and people looking for opportunities to get exercise and get out of their houses, multiuse trails have become a popular destination. The NRG in Derby showed a modest increase at about 15.5% over 2019. Charlie explained that he thought that the lower increase in use in Derby may be due to the higher normal use of the trail and limited carrying capacity - and the fact that people are likely seeking out places with fewer people.

There was some discussion about safety on trails in response to the viral threat. Some trails, including the NRG in Ansonia have been closed due to perceived safety concerns. Jack Walsh said that he has noticed a very small percentage of trail users wearing face masks. He discussed safety with the Mayor, and the City has put up signs about safe use of the trail. Charlie shared a poster developed by the National Park and Recreation Association that has been posted at several trails, explaining safe trail use procedures regarding physical distancing.

Charlie explained that previously, trail user information was collected using intercept surveys that were conducted by trained volunteers. Even before the pandemic, the CTTC had been moving toward a web-based survey that trail users could access independently using a QR code that will be posted at participating trail locations. The new survey will be rolled out later in May and is formatted to be completed using a mobile device.

*"The Naugatuck River from Torrington to Derby is rich with history, stunning scenery and wildlife. Just as the river built and shaped our towns and cities, the Naugatuck River Greenway will be a driving force for the next century and beyond.*

*Our mission is to harness the vitality and protect the health of the river for economic development and quality of life for all."*

Charlie went on to discuss other initiatives that he and the CTTC have been involved with. They are looking at ways to better utilize the IR pedestrian counters to get better estimates of trail network and statewide trail use. UConn has received funding for a study that will be investigating the link between trails and community resilience over the next two years. The CTTC is also working with DOT and DEEP on an exciting new project to develop an official state trail information website. While there are many trail apps and websites out there, most of them are limited in scope or rely on crowdsourced information that is not always accurate or up to date. The new website will be based on the same framework that is being used for the [Maine Trail Finder](#) and the [Vermont New Hampshire Trail Finder](#) websites. The goal is to compile comprehensive information about all trails in the state and publish it in a user-friendly way. It will allow for trail managers to input information about trails that they manage in order to ensure that information presented is authoritative and up to date.

Aaron Budris mentioned that NVCOG had recently purchased its own infrared counters to begin a more thorough count program in the region, and would be using CT Trail Census methods and data to gain a fuller picture of trail use on the NRG trail and other trails in the region. Counters have been installed on the NRG in Ansonia and on the Steele Brook Greenway in Oakville.

Aaron Budris announced that the **NRG Trail Thomaston to Torrington Routing Feasibility Study** report had been endorsed by the NVCOG Board on May 8<sup>th</sup>. The final report with appendices and an interactive project map has been published at the project webpage (<https://nvcogct.gov/nrg-thomaston-to-torrington-routing-study>). Aaron gave a [presentation](#) giving a brief overview of the study and highlighting the response to public comments:

The study was funded by a Responsible Growth and TOD grant from Connecticut Office of Policy and Management. BSC Group served as the project consultant. The project kicked off in 2018 and was overseen by a steering committee made up of municipal representatives from Torrington, Litchfield, Harwinton, and Thomaston, as well as representatives from the Northwest Hills and the Naugatuck Valley COGs, the Army Corps of Engineers and the Naugatuck Railroad. The study was designed to look at the feasibility of a route for the NRG trail between trail sections currently being developed in Torrington and Thomaston.

The purpose was to catalogue the existing conditions of the corridor, inventory and assess all potential routes for the NRG Trail, and ultimately identify a single preferred route with input from stakeholders and the public. The report is meant to detail that preferred route and provide information to local officials so they can make informed decisions about trail development and be prepared for future funding opportunities. More than 80 possible trail route segments were assessed, and a single preferred route was ultimately selected by the project steering committee by consensus. The report breaks out the corridor into 7 sections and provides detailed routing for the trail along with trail layout concepts, cost estimates, and phasing options for each. It also provides details on all options studied – not just the preferred route - in order to provide flexibility as local needs or conditions change in the future. The report also discusses trail development considerations like potential funding sources, permitting, maintenance, safety and signage that might be useful for any town developing a multiuse trail, not just those along the NRG

NVCOG published a draft report for public comment in February and received nearly 400 comments in response, mainly from off highway vehicle (OHV) Riders at Thomaston Dam, focusing on a very small part of the overall preferred route presented in the report. The most widely expressed (paraphrased) sentiments were:

- Do not eliminate or alter the exclusive OHV use area at Thomaston Dam.
- Motorized and non-motorized uses cannot safely co-exist.
- They also explained the importance of Thomaston Dam as one of the only public areas to ride OHVs in the state, while there are already plenty of non motorized trails.

The comments received and the project team's responses to them are detailed in appendix H of the report which is posted on the project webpage. There has been a very well-organized effort to push back against the study by the New England Trail Rider Association (NETRA) and other OHV groups. Aaron explained how the concerns raised have been addressed throughout the study.

The controversy was focused on USACE land at Thomaston Dam. The Corps owns or controls through flowage easements about 7 miles of river corridor between the dam and Route 118, and they manage a large multiuse recreation area north of the dam on federal property. In part of that recreation area west of the River, OHVs are permitted. The OHV area stretches about 4 and a half miles from the dam to Spruce Brook. The area is popular with motorized users, but it is not an exclusive use area. Non-motorized recreation is also allowed.

An abandoned railbed and paved sections of old Route 8, parts of which traverse the OHV area, were identified early in the study as potential routes for the NRG Trail. They were attractive options because they would require little improvement, they are on public land, and they are already open to pedestrians and cyclists. Those route options, among others, were presented at a series of public information meetings in 2019. There was a large turnout of OHV riders at those meetings, and their comments were very similar to those received in 2020. Following those meetings in 2019, the project team met with Army Corps of Engineers and OHV representatives and conducted additional site walks to gain a better understanding of how OHV riders use the Thomaston Dam property. The project team learned that the OHV area contains over 26 miles of mapped trails, most of which are one-way single-track trails. Route 8 and the abandoned railbed generally split the area in half and are used for two-way travel to access various parts of the trail network, and as a return path to a parking area at the dam. The project team also looked at additional options that could avoid the OHV area.

The input from the OHV riders and the Army Corps were taken into consideration, and it is reflected in the report's recommendations. Wherever there was a feasible alternative, the preferred route completely avoids the OHV area, despite greater construction costs and difficulty in many cases. The preferred route completely avoids the narrower abandoned railbed where safe separation would have been difficult. But, between Valley Road in Harwinton and Thomaston Dam, there is no viable route to avoid the OHV area. East of the river, terrain and several large private properties make development of a multiuse trail difficult and prohibitively expensive.

On the West side of the River in that same corridor section, the wide paved Old Route 8 is already open to pedestrians and bicyclists in addition to OHVs. To address the issue of safety, the project team worked directly with Army Corps and OHV representatives to develop a concept for the safe separation of motorized and non-motorized users along Old Route 8. A portion of the paved old route 8 will carry non-motorized NRG Trail traffic, and new one-way single-track trails will be built parallel to carry OHV traffic. The uses will be separated physically with vegetation where possible, and with guardrail where space is constrained. No shared use of single-track trails was suggested.

Routing of the NRG trail through the OHV area solely on a 2 mile stretch of old Route 8 using this separation concept was agreed to be feasible by the OHV and USACE representatives. It was ultimately selected as the preferred route and is presented in the report. The concepts developed provide for the safe enjoyment of the Thomaston Dam Recreation Area by all permitted users.

This was a high-level routing feasibility study. The routing and concepts presented in the study are suggestions based on a thorough study of existing information. The Army Corps and municipalities are not bound to them. The Corps has the sole discretion to develop or not develop a multiuse trail on federal land at Thomaston dam. The area of contention was a very small part of the overall preferred route presented in the report, although it will be a vital connection between Torrington and the rest of the trail. The overall routing and everything included in the report was approved by the project steering committee by consensus.

Aaron explained that NHCOCG will be considering endorsing the report at an upcoming meeting. Suzanne Stitch asked if local approvals were necessary. Aaron said that it would be up to each individual municipality, but every endorsement adds weight to the report, and COG staff would be happy to present to local boards or committees.

On a motion by Kevin Zak, seconded by Roy Cavanaugh, the **committee voted unanimously to endorse the final NRG Trail Thomaston to Torrington Routing Feasibility Study Report.**

Aaron and Mark discussed an upcoming **update to the [2015 NRG Project Priorities document](#)** that NVCOG developed with the NRGSC. The document has been helpful in supporting funding requests since it was published, but it is now almost 5 years old, and progress has been made on many of the highlighted priorities. NVCOG is currently working on an update to the document to reflect that progress and incorporate recently developed routing and data. A [draft updated spreadsheet](#) breaking out all NRG trail segments was shared with the committee. Aaron explained that all the trail sections described in the THOM-TORR report were added to the spreadsheet, and the information for all other sections was updated to reflect progress over the last 5 years, and to show the best available information. Aaron asked that municipal representatives review the spreadsheet and let him know if there is better information that can be added. The purpose of the document will be to present regional priorities, but there should be consistency with local priorities as well. COG staff will be reaching out to municipal representatives to ensure that local priorities are incorporated. The update will include updates to NRG mapping, and Aaron said that he is working to update the GIS data so that it can be displayed for different purposes including to show priorities, to highlight route progress, and so it can also be used to promote open sections of trail.

Some specifics were discussed for sections in towns that had a representative present. In Harwinton, the section of trail proposed in the Thomaston to Torrington routing study report along Valley Road sticks out as low hanging fruit. That section is proposed to be a shared use roadway since motor vehicle volumes and speeds are very low. With signage and possible pavement markings, a substantial section could be deemed complete for a very small investment. Suzanne Stitch said that she will bring that request to the town. Roy Cavanaugh confirmed that the town's priority remains the section of trail from Branch Brook to Frost Bridge Road. Jack Walsh said that the at grade crossing at Division Street remains a safety concern and developing a connection under the Division Street bridge should remain a priority.

Jack Walsh commented that the work presented was valuable and clearly shows that there has been progress since 2015. He said that the focus of the August meeting should be getting into the details and discussing those priorities, and that representatives from all towns should be encouraged to be there.

Mark Nielsen discussed the **Watertown Thomaston Design and Construction project**, reporting that the project is hung up waiting on DOT approvals of the two [LoTCIP](#) applications that Thomaston and Watertown have submitted. VHB completed design of the new trail section in Thomaston and the pedestrian bridge over Branch Brook, posted to the [project webpage](#). A Federal Rec Trails Grant was originally intended to be used to design and construct the trail from a trailhead parking lot on Old Waterbury Road, around the Thomaston WPCA to an existing old trolley bridge over Branch Brook. After the condition of the trolley bridge was studied, it was determined that constructing a new pedestrian bridge would be more cost effective than rehabilitating the existing span. NVCOG worked with DEEP to alter the Rec Trails scope to shift construction funding to design of the new span. Thomaston applied to the Local Transportation Capital improvement Program (LoTCIP) to fund Construction of the trailhead, trail and bridge at a cost of approximately \$600,000. Watertown applied for LoTCIP funding to construct the adjacent section of trail to Frost Bridge Road. At a meeting with DOT in February, the department expressed concern about constructing the trail in Watertown since it will be near a City of Waterbury Drinking water supply main for much of the route, and disturbance of the City's main would be a

major issue. Watertown has committed to a geotechnical engineering review of the route to appease the department's concerns.

Jack briefly discussed **membership and attendance** and noted that the turnout to the meeting was not very good. The next meeting in August will likely also be held virtually. Aaron said that he had heard from others that were expected to be present but were not on the call/meeting. He said that virtual meetings he had attended over the past couple months seemed to be hit or miss. Virtual meetings are much easier to attend, so some seem to be better attended than in person meetings, but he wondered if holding meetings virtually takes away from the importance. Jack said that he thought in person meetings seem to work better, especially when they are combined with a "field visit".

Kevin Zak discussed efforts to improve fish passage at **Kinneytown Dam**. He explained that ENEL, a worldwide energy company based in Italy operates the dam as a hydroelectric facility. A fish ladder was installed at the dam several years ago as a condition of their license that they allow for "safe, timely, and effective" fish passage at the dam. The fish ladder it is not functioning properly, however, and only passes about 3% of fish. In comparison, modern standards for east coast rivers can require up to 90% fish passage at a 1st dam like Kinneytown. He said that even with the fish ladder, the dam represents the only significant barrier for fish between the Long Island Sound and Thomaston Dam. The return on the substantial investment made upstream at the Tingle Dam bypass will not be realized if fish are blocked at the Kinneytown Dam like they currently are. Kevin said that the Dam once served a vital function, but that the small amount of energy it currently produces is not worth the environmental and economic cost to towns upstream.

ENEL has an Exempt Small Hydro License from Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERC), which exempts them from relicensing in perpetuity, but the USFWS and DEEP have retained their prescriptive oversight, and they have authority to demand that Enel remedy the lack of fish passage. There are serious problems with Kinneytown's physical condition as well. There are horizontal and vertical cracks and spalling concrete with rebar exposed in the dam's spillway that may be a threat to people fishing below the dam and walking along the derby greenway at O'Sullivan's Island. Last year FERC sent Enel a letter asking that they address this recently discovered condition. Kevin explained that [Save The Sound](#) (formerly CT Fund for the Environment) has taken the lead with help from the Naugatuck River Revival Group (NRRG) to assist the FWS and DEEP to execute their authority to compel Enel to improve fish passage.

### **Roundtable Discussion**

**Derby** – Mark Nielsen said that the design for pedestrian and bicycle improvements on the Derby Shelton Bridge will be complete in August, with construction expected in early 2021. The improvements will connect the NRG Trail in Derby to the Shelton Riverwalk. He said that the project had been expanded to include a trail section along one of the Bridge Street access ramps connecting to the Shelton Riverwalk.

**Ansonia** – Mark also discussed progress in Ansonia, where the city is close to final design on sections of trail on the east bank of the river. H said that there have been some delays in getting approval for use of part of the Target parking lot adjacent to the trail location. He also said that the City had received a Rec Trails grant to study routing north to the Seymour line, and they are currently working on getting a consultant on board.

**Next Regular Meeting: August 12th, 2020 at 9:00 am**  
**Location – TBD (Likely Virtual)**

# Naugatuck River Greenway Steering Committee

## Municipal Representatives

<b>Torrington</b>	Rista Malanca* Jeremy Leifert
<b>Litchfield</b>	<b>Cleve Fuessenich</b>
<b>Harwinton</b>	<b>Suzanne Stitch</b> Joan Kirchner
<b>Thomaston</b>	<b>Stacey Sefcik</b>
<b>Watertown</b>	Roy Cavanaugh
<b>Waterbury</b>	Kenny Curran Judy Mancini
<b>Naugatuck</b>	Jim Stewart
<b>Beacon Falls</b>	Liz Falzone Josh Carey
<b>Seymour</b>	Rory Burke
<b>Ansonia</b>	Sheila O'Malley
<b>Derby</b>	<b>Jack Walsh*</b>

## Stakeholder Representatives

**Aaron Budris** – Naugatuck Valley Council of Governments  
Bill Purcell – Valley Chamber  
Bob Gregorski - Naugatuck River Watershed Association & Trout Unlimited  
Christopher Way - US Army Corps of Engineers  
Chuck Berger – Retired Watertown Town Engineer  
Clifford Cooper - Litchfield Community Greenway  
Courteny Morehouse – Housatonic Valley Association  
Dave Faber –Naugatuck Valley Outdoors Club  
**Jennifer Reilly** – CT DOT  
Jim MacBroom – Milone and MacBroom  
Jim O'Rourke - Waterbury Y  
Jolene Podgorski - Watertown DPW  
Josh Carey – Connecticut Community Foundation  
**Kevin Zak** – **Naugatuck River Revival Group**  
Laurie Giannotti - CT DEEP Greenways  
**Mark Nielsen** – Naugatuck Valley Council of Governments  
Melanie Zimyeski – CT DOT  
Rick Lynn – Northwest Hills Council of Governments  
Steve Casey – Railroad Museum of New England  
**Susan Peterson** - CT DEEP Watershed Program  
Vicki Barnes - Watertown - Steele Brook Rangers

## Also Present

**Charlie Tracy (CT Trail Census)**  
**Richard Crowther (NVCOG)**