

Williams Township Land Preservation Board (LPB)

Minutes October 22, 2024

Williams Township Community Building

655 Cider Press Rd., Easton, PA 18042

Present: Ken Kodama, Bob Schmidt, Tom Heilman, Lorraine Mineo, Lori Cox, and Alternates Michael Cortright and Nurit Baron; Township Manager/Finance Director Melody Ernst; Board of Supervisor (BOS) Ray Abert; Matt Babbitt of Heritage Conservancy (Heritage); township residents

The meeting was called to order by Chairperson Ken Kodama at 7:00 PM. He called for the Pledge of Allegiance, then a review of the September 24, 2024 minutes. Motion to approve the minutes made by Mineo, seconded by Schmidt. Approved 5-0.

Updates on Preservation Projects:

- 2022-2: For the Met-Ed right-of-way (ROW) title search, Babbitt reported that Heritage, along with their legal representative, connected with Met-Ed about two weeks ago. Met-Ed has a new staff assigned. Heritage reviewed with Met-Ed what documentation they have and what is missing. Multiple power lines and poles are handled by different Met-Ed staff. Babbitt is awaiting further updates from Met-Ed, and though there has been progress, the title search remains incomplete.
- 2023-4: The Met-Ed ROW title search update is the same as noted in 2022-2. LPB is still awaiting the new model easement from Northampton County (NORCO).
- 2023-3: LPB is still waiting for the new model easement from NORCO.
- Babbitt reminded the LPB that NORCO is not the only funding source for land preservation. He noted that there is a federal program with an application deadline at the end of November 2024. The results of the applications will be released in February 2025. The federal program uses Heritage's easement policies rather than NORCO's. Any project with a recent appraisal could potentially be submitted for federal funding. However, discussions should first be held privately with the property owners to confirm their agreement.
- Show of interest:

Kodama sent letters to the landowners of one property with a potential interest in preservation but has not received a response.

Regarding another property, Babbitt reported that there has been no recent contact. Babbitt also noted that there are property line encroachment issues that need to be resolved between the landowner and a neighbor before Heritage can proceed.

Old Business:

- For the map of preserved properties, Schmidt will check on locations for placement, sizing, and obtain a quote so the LPB can request funding from BOS. Heilman emphasized the importance of having the updated map available, particularly for discussions around an open space tax referendum.
- As previously noted, NORCO's new model easement language is not available yet and no timeline for approval has been provided.

New Business:

- For the open space tax referendum, Kodama reviewed that he had a meeting with the Township Manager and Solicitor regarding procedures for placing an Earned Income Tax (EIT) referendum on the ballot to fund conservation easements. Kodama presented two options to LPB: either recommending to the BOS that they authorize the referendum, or presenting a petition from Williams Township residents to the BOS at the next meeting to request the referendum. The LPB favored pursuing a petition.

After discussing the EIT rate, the LPB agreed that a 0.25% EIT would be appropriate and felt the November 2025 election would be the ideal time to place this referendum on the ballot. The LPB also discussed the wording of the petition, strategies for educating township residents on the benefits of the EIT, and previous efforts to gain voter approval for land preservation funding. Heilman made a motion to request BOS approval for circulating a petition for a 0.25% EIT referendum for the November 2025 election, for funds designated for conservation easements. The motion was seconded by Mineo and approved 5-0.

- For properties LPB would like NORCO to consider funding for, new appraisals will be required. These appraisals must be conducted within the last 12 months prior to submitting an application to NORCO. New appraisals would be needed for projects 2023-3 and 2023-4.

There was a discussion about requesting approval from the BOS now, as NORCO's new model easement may become available in the meantime. The approval from the BOS is not time-limited, allowing the LPB to proceed with the next steps as soon as NORCO's new easement is available.

Cox made a motion to request BOS approval for reappraisals on the two properties under consideration (2023-3 and 2023-4), as required for NORCO applications, with a cost not to exceed \$3,000 per property. Heilman seconded, approved 5-0.

Treasurer's Report: Mineo shared the financial report as of October 2024: Checking account \$8,418.64, savings account \$105,058.98, and CD \$1,401,935.47 total \$1,515,413.09.

Announcements: none

Comments from audience:

- An audience member asked if solar panels can be installed on preserved land. Babbitt explained that without NORCO's new model easement, he could not say for certain. However, a limitation on solar farms was discussed at NORCO's workshop. NORCO indicated that this issue would need to be reviewed and approved by the county solicitor.
- Another audience question was about who heads the easement funding process within NORCO. This led to a discussion among audience members about attending NORCO board meetings to express frustration over the lengthy approval process for their new model easement.
- An audience member also inquired about how the map of preserved properties would be updated once it is completed and new properties are conserved. Babbitt shared there will be a way to add or note the new easements on the map.

Meeting was adjourned at 8:33 PM, motion made by Schmidt, seconded by Cox. Approved 5-0.

Next meeting November 26, 2024 @ 7:00 PM, Williams Township Community Building.

Submitted,

Lori Cox, Secretary