

Governor's Snowmobile Council
February 3, 2021
Minutes – Final – Approved March 3, 2021

Present:

Pat Poulin, Chairman
Trevor Carbo, Vermont State Police
Paul Doucette, Southern Vermont Wilderness Search and Rescue
Sean Fowler, Vermont Fish & Wildlife Department
Dick Jewett, Governor Appointee
Cindy Locke, VAST Executive Director
Mike Mutascio, (sitting in for Governor Appointee Kenny Gammel)
Gary Nolan, VAST Law Enforcement Committee
Star Poulin, Governor Appointee
Michael Smith, Vermont Department of Motor Vehicles

VAST Staff Present:

Ken Brown, VAST Trails Manager
Matt Tetreault, VAST Trails Administrator

Guests:

Stan Choiniere, Safety Committee
Tara Thomas, Vermont State Police

The meeting was convened at 3:04 PM via Zoom.

Approval of Minutes

Motion:

Dick Jewett moved that the minutes of the January 6, 2021 be approved as circulated, seconded by Gary Nolan. ***Motion carried.***

SSTP Financial Report

Motion:

Cindy moved acceptance of the SSTP Financial Report as circulated, seconded by Star Poulin. ***Motion carried.***

Agency Reports

Vermont State Police

Trevor Carbo reported that safety education online numbers to date are 1,513, just 100 less than last year's total.

He said officers like the new Trail Patrol system better as it has less paperwork and more actual inspections. In general, there has been good public compliance with snowmobile regs. VAST's willingness, with the online TMA system, to be flexible in accepting varied forms of sled registration proof has been a big help.

Fish & Wildlife

Sean Fowler reported on an active trail patrol by Fish & Wildlife. He noted that 34 warnings were issued for state registration and TMA sticker display – folks who have the documentation with them but just aren't displaying it on the sled. Sean reported that there were 1500 safety inspections over the last couple of weeks. The shared calendar for law enforcement coverage is up and running.

Sheriff's Association

Not present.

Southern Vermont Wilderness Search & Rescue

Paul Doucette reported that law enforcement is encountering new people from different states who seem to have a more negative attitude toward law enforcement on the trail. Rumor has it among riders that there are no enforcement patrols because of COVID, so noncompliant riders are unpleasantly surprised when they get stopped. Lots of people are riding without insurance. There has been an increase in tickets issued during night patrols when people don't expect law enforcement to be out.

There have been four significant snowmobile crashes, including one fatality and others requiring airlift to hospital.

Many people are riding without decals; he encourages officers to write the tickets since riders have had the decals for weeks now.

Law enforcement is getting complaints about people parking where they shouldn't.

This coming free weekend is expected to generate a lot of snowmobile traffic.

Department of Motor Vehicles

Mike Smith and Sean Fowler reported 2021 snowmobile registrations through August of 2020 (last year) were 18,954. This compares with 18,881 registrations to date with \$478,679 in total revenue.

Forest, Parks & Recreation

No report.

VAST

TMA Status

Cindy Locke reported we are 20 ahead of where we were last year in TMA sales, with 21,249 TMAs to date, of which 14,260 were in-state. Again, the gap between number of registered sleds with the DMV and number of TMAs issued shows there are many machines operating on our trail system without TMAs.

At request of Board member Roger Gosselin, VAST evaluated a trail mapping app, Polaris Ride Command, that is not as accurate or as complete as VAST's own. Polaris would post a link to our mapping system if we also made theirs available. Both systems are offered at no charge. Polaris will send us a proposal that will be shared with the Board.

Ice Crossings and Insurance

The Board had previously given clubs whose trails cross frozen bodies of water several years to reroute trails around them, but some clubs have taken no action, so the Board discussed the issue again last month. Subsequently, VAST met with the nine or ten clubs whose trails have ice crossings. As Cindy Locke notes, only one insurance company will cover VAST, and every year the cost goes up, and not enforcing the ice crossing prohibition doesn't help control that cost. Brian Smith was present at the meeting with clubs and told Cindy he would check to see if the state would be willing to insure VAST. Act 250 provisions are already costing VAST a lot of money, which, Cindy noted, might be tenable if the state would indemnify VAST and other trail organizations for ice crossings. Cindy predicts it will take more than a year to work out all the insurance issues, and the Long Range Planning Committee is working on identifying various options, but it is agreed that the ice crossing issue needs address now. Rerouting would mean only about six miles for the club most affected by ice crossings.

Law Enforcement Committee

Gary Nolan reported that the committee is pleased with the reports they've been getting from law enforcement agencies; in the second day of enforcement, they did 22 contacts and 20 inspections in two hours. As Paul Doucette also reported, there have been problems with people not displaying stickers but who could produce paper or phone registrations on their person, indicating that most people seem to be riding legal. Lots of New Hampshire sleds have been observed as there has been less snow cover in that state. Riders are beginning to get the message that law enforcement is visible and active and not always in predictable spots.

VAST Safety Committee

Stan Choiniere reported that the committee went to the Board to get approval for signage for helicopter landing zones, and the Board approved the proposal. Signs are being ordered.

People using hand signals while riding, risking loss of control of their sled, is still a problem and needs continual education. This sometimes seems an uphill battle after all the education VAST has already done on this. People still insist it's a law to use the hand signals, and it's difficult to convince them otherwise.

Action Taken

Cindy said VAST will offer the "Get a Grip" signs to the clubs for free (currently charged at \$3 per sign).

SSTP Trail Report

Matt Tetreault reports the majority of the state is now open for riding as all areas have sufficient snow, although some central areas are still soft. Increased plowing of parking lots in the southern part of the state is using up much of the plowing budget. When lots weren't plowed, riders would just drive trailers as far in as they could then leave them where they stopped or would park them at neighboring businesses, consistent with Paul Doucette's report on parking violations. Matt said parking lots are in much better shape now.

Legislative Report

Cindy Locke reported that legislation is being contemplated to allow motorized bikes on trails including the LVRT, and VAST is monitoring this closely.

VTrans is looking at selling some historic buildings along rail routes.

Commerce trail access by out of state riders without insurance has become a potential problem. If people are riding on these trails from states that don't require insurance, what are the liability issues for the sledder in case of accident? Paul indicated this would be handled in the same way as an uninsured motorist, who would be subject to suit if he/she injures someone.

Action Taken

It was recommended that VAST look into requiring insurance to ride on a commerce trail in Vermont.

Appointee Reports

Northwest

Star Poulin reports, "We got snow!" Groomers have been out, occasionally getting stuck in watery areas. Clubs are being vigilant about making sure signs are up.

Williston area has a big problem with people working from home and walking their dogs on VAST trails: not cleaning up after the dog, dog being aggressive, dog off leash, etc. This could be a problem for snowmobiling if landowners shut down their land to all traffic because of dog problems, and there has already been at least one altercation between a landowner and dog walkers. We need to continue emphasizing that people must ask for landowner permission for other uses of trails on their land besides snowmobiling. Many people have the impression that open land is public land. Mike Mutascio suggested that signs saying that trails are open to snowmobiling only and/or that others need landowner permission to use the trails have on the sign a number to call to make it easier to comply with asking permission for uses other than snowmobiling.

Northeast

Mike Mutascio said he had a conversation with Kenny Gammell, who is focusing his attention on family, especially his grandchildren.

Snowfall has been inconsistent in the Northeast Kingdom. Clubs have been able to build a base but are a little concerned about thaws. There is a lot of logging activity in Essex County that may require trail workarounds. People seem to be doing a good job of observing COVID precautions.

A helicopter landing zone directly under power lines needs to be removed. There have been discussions with VELCO about numbering the power towers to assist in first responders locating riders in trouble.

Generally, there has been lots of traffic in the Northeast Kingdom. A New Hampshire rider, when asked why he likes to snowmobile in Vermont, told Mike, "The signs are awesome!" Someone else who contacted Mike will be towing his sled all the way from Illinois. Two couples even got engaged on the trails!

Off-trail riding continues to be a problem. Caledonia County reports they, too, are seeing a lack of registration stickers on sleds.

Clubs in this region are asking about current use tax breaks for property owners who allow snowmobile access; VAST's question is how to fund it. The mountain bike community is also interested in this current use idea.

Central

Tim Mills sent a message that the central part of the state has snow cover and good riding.

There being no further business to come before the Council, the meeting was adjourned at 4:26 PM. The next meeting of the Council is scheduled for March 3rd at 3:00 PM.

Respectfully submitted,

Peggy Whiteneck
Recording Secretary