

Governor's Snowmobile Council Meeting Minutes, September 2, 2020

Members Present:

Pat Poulin, Chair
Trevor Carbo, Vermont State Police
Mike Smith
Cindy Locke, VAST
Gary Nolin, Law Enforcement Committee
Star Poulin, Governor Appointee
Jessica Savage, Forest, Parks & Recreation
Dick Jewett, Governor Appointee

VAST staff present: Matt Tetreault, Ken Brown, Peggy Whiteneck

Guests:

Stan Choiniere, Safety Council; Tara Thomas, Vermont State Police

Chairman Pat Poulin convened the meeting at 3:05 PM. The meeting was held via Zoom.

APPROVAL OF PREVIOUS MEETING MINUTES

MOTION: Star Poulin moved that the Council approve the minutes of the June 3, 2020, 2020 meeting. Gary Nolan seconded. *Motion carried.*

SSTP FINANCIAL REPORT

Matt indicated the August invoice will be approximately \$14,000, but VAST is still working on the grant as a prerequisite to invoice.

AGENCY REPORTS

Vermont State Police

Trevor Carbo reported that what classroom course will look like in the midst of Covid is still pending. They anticipate auxiliary units and additional troopers will augment part-time staff and that a total of about 30 people will be involved in snowmobile enforcement.

DMV

Mike Smith reported snowmobile registration data through August: 14,131 residents and 6,243 non-residents, for a total of 20,374. This compares to last year at this time with 14,249 VT registrations and 6,477 non-resident, for a total of 20,726. This is 352

less than last year at this time but not bad at all under the circumstances of the Covid pandemic. Also, renewal notices don't go out until the 1st of August, so these are 2019/2020 numbers.

Forest, Parks & Recreation

Jessica Savage reported that Covid response and recovery efforts have been at the forefront of department concerns. She expressed a desire to talk more with VAST and trails groups about the winter season and will be in touch with Cindy and Matt about that soon. The grant agreement has been sent back to Cindy and Matt for review; she said she has significantly expanded the scope of work in the agreement so that it more closely aligns with the budget. Jessica indicated that most of the other changes are in the nature of housekeeping and clarification. Cindy and Matt are currently reviewing the grant agreement.

VAST

Cindy Locke reported that VAST has been working with the governor on expectations for the upcoming snowmobile season. "VAST's goal," she said, "is to stay open and ride safe." Old-style riding will be the norm: pack in, pack out in anticipation that there will be no place to stop for provisions.

The organization is also gearing up for transition to a totally online TMA system.

Clubs will not be able to congregate for traditional fundraiser events, so VAST is shepherding its reserves should help be needed.

Trails liability insurance is up an additional \$42,000 this year. VAST is covering the bill this time out of its reserves, but Cindy noted this is not sustainable if the rates keep doubling every year, so this item may have to move to the SSTP budget.

Safety Ambassadors will be assisting with Annual Meeting at Farris Field on Sept. 12 and helping to ensure that Covid safety guidelines are adhered to. Cindy reviewed the specific changes that will be made to the meeting format to assure adherence.

Maximum capacity for the rented tent is 150, but there are only 100 registrations so far. People will also be able to participate from their cars via FM radio transmission. Sound system and FM station access will be handled by a company hired for the purpose.

LVRT

Ken Brown reported that state construction starts on the Swanton to Sheldon section tomorrow since planning and permitting had already been completed for that section. VAST remains in charge of the Hardwick section, which has gotten hung up by

various permitting and review issues. Bridge decking is complete, however, and can allow for some use of the trail in that sector.

The state will take over the interactive map on the LVRT web site so that it can be kept up to date in view of state progress on the trail. Cindy, Matt, and Peggy will meet tomorrow to talk about revising the LVRT web site to reflect its change in funding status.

Law Enforcement Committee

Committee chairman Gary Nolan reported that the committee has met a couple of times during the summer in what have been fruitful separate meetings with F&W and State Police, working out best use of sheriffs and local law enforcement during the snowmobile season. Cooperation between the agencies seems much better this year than last.

SSTP

Matt Tetreault reported work is just starting with clubs preparing for the season. The Rutland area was hit hard with flash flooding from torrential rains last week, but we have not yet received a report on that from local clubs. As clubs begin their pre-season prep of the trails, they are locating some significant issues. The Waterbury suspension bridge needs work. Lewis Creek bridge abutments are undermined. There have been lots of landowner changes. Matt reported that clubs have been fairly responsive to these challenges.

Legislative Report

Legislators were not present because of the legislature is still in session.

Act 250 Status

Cindy Locke reported on House Bill 926 concerning Act 250. The VT Trails Alliance is working with Commissioners Snyder from FP&R and Porter from F&W and others to work out an alternative plan to Act 250. The preference is an opt-in alternative to Act 250 using mountain biker groups as a pilot. VAST supports their efforts.

Cindy expressed uncertainty about what will happen with this bill. There is controversy over municipal and water treatment exemptions. The usual behind the scenes wheeling and dealing can create last minute changes. Cindy noted the main goal for VAST is to protect private landowners from onerous regulatory requirements in opening their land for snowmobiling.

Changes to Snowmobile Laws

Pat Poulin reported no new action yet in changes to snowmobile laws for next session. He said he was surprised to learn that the state does not require snowmobile accident investigation by law enforcement.

Trail Safety

Cindy Locke updated the Council on the Safety Ambassador program. A majority of first season ambassadors are returning for the coming season, with some new recruits. Orientation is slated for some time in October. After this year (2020-21), ambassadors will have to go through an actual application process in order to be admitted to the program. Focus going forward is on further strengthening the program and its code of ethics in light of first year experience. The Safety Ambassador program will be added to the VAST web site, replacing the LVRT as a menu item. Cindy reported on ambassador gear upgrades for first aid and other needs. She noted this program has great potential as a model for other states. In response to a question, Cindy confirmed that Ambassadors will be functioning in such a manner as to comply with and model Covid safety guidelines.

APPOINTEE REPORTS

Northwest

Star Poulin reported that the region is seeking a county meeting venue, which is challenging with so many venues still closed or only partially open because of the Covid epidemic. In the meantime, clubs are starting to focus on what needs to be done for the coming season.

Southern

Dick Jewett said the first county meeting is scheduled for Wednesday night Sept. 9 and that clubs are gearing up for pre-season projects. The county meeting will be held at the fire station, with attendees six feet apart and with Zoom also available.

Other Business

Stan Choiniere noted the gap between last year's snowmobile registrations in Vermont and the number of TMAs sold. It is estimated that 2,000 to 4,000 registered snowmobiles are operating illegally, i.e., without TMAs. This discrepancy has been a primary driver for VAST in its efforts to strengthen snowmobile law enforcement.

The meeting was adjourned at 3:54. PM.

Respectfully submitted,

Peggy Whiteneck, recording secretary