

Gates Mills Tree Canopy Subcommittee
Minutes of Organizational Meeting
June 7, 2024

Subcommittee members present: David Atton, Sandra Turner, Lucy Chamberlain, Nat Smith, Erick Carlson, Holly Mathews (arrived 5:32 p.m.). Absent: Mitch Bass.

Mayor Steve Siemborski was present. Sharon Bodker recorded minutes.

David Atton began the meeting at 5:20 p.m. and introduced Mayor Steve Siemborski.

Mayor Siemborski explained the origin and the focus of the Tree Canopy subcommittee. Villagers have indicated that they want our environment protected, preserved and enhanced. To achieve this, three subcommittees have been formed: Tree Canopy, Waterways and Wildlife. *(Holly Mathews arrived.)*

Earlier this year, the members of the committee (David Atton, Mitch Bass, Nat Smith and Sandra Turner) along with Mayor Siemborski met with the Ohio Department of Natural Resources and learned about the many ways the ODNR can provide support for the Village's tree canopy effort.

Mayor Siemborski described several things he wanted the Tree Canopy subcommittee to accomplish.

- Help create an educational resource for residents to be able to assess the health of their trees.
- Create a fact and science-based tree plan for the Village.
- Create a plan to put the tree plan into action.
- Review the Village's tree ordinances using outside help and identify ways they can be improved. The ODNR has been asked to review our tree and hillside ordinances. This review will be part of the next subcommittee meeting on June 10.

This effort will take a number of years to accomplish.

Mayor Siemborski stated he has a number of goals that he would like to be actualized outcomes by the time he leaves office.

- 1) The Village's forests, yards and parks are healthy.
- 2) Residents are educated on the importance of healthy trees and know how to care for them.
- 3) Arrange for residents to have professionals develop plans to care for their properties. Holly Mathews noted that soon after she moved to Gates Mills, she had the ODNR walk her property with her so she would better understand how to care for it.
- 4) Better maintain the Village parks (Founders Field, Feller Field, the Village Arboretum, Marston Park, the Village Green and the park north of the Gates Mills Library).
- 5) Recognition across the state and county as a leader on how to care for trees, waterways and wildlife.
- 6) Establish stronger ties between the Village and the Gates Mills Land Conservancy, eliminating the bad blood that came about a couple of years ago.
- 7) Recognition as a leader in many successful environmental collaborations with organizations (eg Chagrin River Watershed Partners), clubs (eg Gates Mills Garden Club) and other resources (eg ODNR).

David Atton agreed that we should aspire to be regarded as the model or "world class" for protecting and preserving our resources, noting that Nature has put us in the right place.

Committee members introduced themselves.

Sandra Turner: Moved to Gates Mills in 1989. In the early 2000's, she was approached by an oil & gas driller to put a well in the area -- that started her on a path for activism. She chaired a regional oil & gas well committee. She concluded that education of residents was more effective than legislative efforts, politics, etc. People were empowered to say "no" to gas wells. She was appointed to the Chagrin River Watershed Partners Board in 2014 and the Gates Mills Land Conservancy Board in 2019. She is passionate about conservation and has established many contacts.

It was noted there are three Gates Mills Land Conservancy Board members on the Tree Canopy Subcommittee: Sandra Turner, Nat Smith and Mitch Bass.

Erick Carlson: Moved to Gates Mills 4 years ago. He and his wife have 4 children under the age of 10. He has a PhD in Ecology, taught as a professor of botany and now teaches at University School.

He uses a 3 bin approach to trees in his yard which he'd like to apply to the Village as a whole -- "preserve, protect and play" or "forests, yards and parks".

Nat Smith: Has served on the Board of the Gates Mills Land Conservancy for over 15 years. He has lived in Gates Mills on and off since 1968. The GMLC's interest in the tree canopy issue came about as a result of the Comprehensive Plan's Advisory Committee discussion of the Village's tree canopy loss.

He was previously President of the Board of the Cleveland Museum of Natural History and Chair of the Natural Areas program. He has observed how CMNH manages its properties. He described how CMNH uses 8 foot tall fences to keep deer out of some of its forested lands. In those areas where deer were kept out by the fences, lush greenery along the floor of the forest appeared. Overpopulation of deer is a problem and the Village will have to reach out to other communities if it wants to address the issue. He believes this is a 20 to 30 year process and GMLC, as a 501(c)(3) organization will exist in perpetuity and will be around to participate in the effort.

David Atton noted that the Village's Wildlife subcommittee might have something to say about efforts targeted at deer.

Lucy Chamberlain: Has an undergraduate degree in biology with a concentration in botany and a master of science degree in landscape ecology. She worked for the Brooklyn Botanical Garden, the New York City Street Tree Consortium and the Port Authority of New Jersey. She was sent to Kent State for training in Urban Forestry. She has a longstanding interest in arboriculture.

Her family owned the farm at the top of Sherman Road. It was named "Beacon Oak Farm" after a large old oak tree which is no longer there. She believes the tree canopy preservation effort should be future-driven so we can pass it onto future generations. Our effort should serve as a model and a resource for others. We, as a Village, have a huge opportunity here and are on the right track now.

Holly Mathews: Worked at the Wildlife Center at the Cleveland Museum of Natural History. Owns a 12 acre property in Gates Mills with fields, woodlands, ravines and a vernal pond. In the years she's lived here, she has seen changes to her property and they're not good things. For example, the stormwater runoff is pulling trees down the hill.

David Atton: Is a retired businessman and a trained scientist. Has spent the last 20 years as a volunteer teaching in schools and serving on boards. He worked in an organization that was very good at planning. He agrees that residents want things to stay the same but using a "let nature to take its course" approach will not get the Village there. He noted that the county's tree canopy assessment was last done in 2017 and believes we need to establish a more current baseline for our effort.

Lucy Chamberlain said she spoke to George Meany at the Cuyahoga County Planning Department about a tree canopy assessment update. He said they were thinking about doing one in 2025 but it would be a couple of years before the report would be issued. She also contacted PlanIt Geo who uses an AI-driven approach in contrast to the LIDAR approach used by the county.

Erick Carlson said he has worked with the assessment technology over the course of his career and, given Gates Mills relatively small size (9 square miles), a reassessment of the Village's tree canopy could be done in about 8 hours.

David Atton noted the material circulated prior to this meeting helps demonstrate the breadth of the subject. The exhibit "How's Our Program Functioning?" by the ODNR is a valuable self-assessment tool which identifies different components to consider in a tree program. The "How's Our Program Functioning?" tool will be useful in helping us create a framework for the Village's program.

Erick Carlson noted that the Village is more rural than developed and the Waterville tree plan example provided to members was more developed, more urban. Managing an area with street trees is very different from managing a forested area. It might not be a good example to use for our Village.

David Atton agreed that Waterville was not really similar to Gates Mills. The specifics of the Waterville plan weren't important but the categories used to develop the framework of the plan were. He added ODNR stresses each community is unique and must develop its own plan.

It was agreed that we would ask the ODNR for examples of communities more like Gates Mills that were getting it right.

Lucy Chamberlain spoke about the Tree Commission Academy. It was started by the ODNR and designed to give citizens who are in advisory positions (such as serving on a tree commission) the knowledge necessary to help fulfill the municipality's urban forestry mission. It puts people on a common plane and gives them a common language. It is designed to train people in a short amount of time. It gets into soils, politics, ordinances – many things. She has already taken the course and passed her course binder around for committee members to examine.

David Atton said we should talk to the ODNR about the course at our meeting with them on Monday.

Erick Carlson asked what time commitment was required.

Lucy Chamberlain said it was 4 one-day sessions over a one year period. She added it would be useful to include people not currently serving on the subcommittee, younger people especially, to develop future tree commission members. She also said the Mayor can take the course for free.

Erick Carlson suggested we invite the head groundskeepers from nearby schools.

Lucy Chamberlain suggested we attempt to get Alan Siewert to conduct the course for us. He is retired ODNR and worked very closely with the Tree City USA communities from Northeast Ohio.

Nat Smith asked if we had to go to Columbus for the course. Lucy Chamberlain responded, no. They host the program much closer to us. They may also tailor the program to the Village's needs. For example, for Hiram College, they did all four courses on a compressed basis.

Lucy Chamberlain again recommended the Tree Commission Academy program and stressed that it's a fundamental credibility issue.

Sandra Turner said the City of Euclid did it. She said they have a great program and they recommend the Tree Commission Academy.

Mayor Siemborski said he would be leaving soon. Sandra Turner said she wanted to talk about the way the committee meets before he leaves, specifically addressing live-streaming and zoom.

Sandra Turner said none of the other Village committees are live-streamed. Council is live-streamed. The Comprehensive Plan Advisory Committee meetings were live-streamed. Live-streaming requires staff assistance and if a meeting is held after 5 p.m., staff are on overtime.

Nat Smith asked if zooming into a meeting while he was out-of-town was a burden to staff. Sandra Turner said it was not.

Nat Smith stated he thought it was fine to have the meetings open to anyone who wanted to come, but was opposed to live-streaming.

Sandra Turner said she opposed live-streaming as well. She cited a cyber security issue which has changed some aspects of Council's live-streamed meetings. She added there didn't appear to be much interest in live-streamed events and viewers tended to watch short segments of the meetings. She noted that there are sometimes disagreements and conflicts in meetings which aren't helpful. She thought some committee members might be reluctant to express their views if meetings were live-streamed.

David Atton disagreed with Sandra Turner. He said good communication is fundamental to developing engagement, and engagement and education are fundamental to the success of our tree canopy program. He added disagreements are part of productive discussion.

Nat Smith suggested sending out a recap of the tree canopy committee activities in the Gates Mills Land Conservancy newsletter which is online and sent by email three times each year.

Lucy Chamberlain disagreed with Nat Smith and said the tree canopy communication should be community-wide, not just to those on the GMLC mailing list. She added that she thought the committee would have some wonderful meetings that should be widely shared with the community. She stressed the need for buy-in to make the program a success.

Mayor Siemborski said privacy is the issue and experts have told us we put too much information out there. He added if the committee wants to live-stream, the meetings must be held between 9 and 5.

Nat Smith suggested we focus on live-streaming those meetings that will generate community interest.

Erick Carlson raised the distinction between "live-streaming" and "record and post". When teaching, he typically encountered technical issues with live-streaming. In contrast, recording a lesson and posting it later, perhaps with editing, worked smoothly.

He suggested the committee hold a summary meeting three times per year, recorded or streamed, for the community to tune-in.

Mayor Siemborski said the consensus seemed to be to live-stream meetings if the topic or speaker would be of interest to more residents, but that it was not necessary to stream every meeting.

Sharon Bodker, the person taking minutes at this meeting, suggested that each meeting be audio recorded and transcribed electronically. The technical aspects of some of the discussion is difficult to minute effectively. Members of other subcommittees might need to hear the detail in the discussions to fully-understand where issues might affect them.

Mayor Siemborski surveyed the committee members and it was decided that the committee will meet on the second Tuesday of each month at 5:00 p.m. The next meeting (after the June 10th meeting) will be held on July 9th at 5:00 p.m. Erick Carlson said he would probably have to participate via Zoom.

David Atton summarized the actions coming from this meeting for discussion at the July meeting.

- Have a clear view of our participation in the ODNR Tree Commission Academy certification
- Visit the County Planning Department regarding a tree canopy reassessment (Atton, Carlson, Chamberlain)

The Committee will ask ODNR to identify municipalities that are more like Gates Mills (forested vs urban) and have good tree programs.

Sandra Turner will talk about Sunshine Laws at Monday's meeting.

Erick Carlson spoke about tree management (lightly managed, heavily managed and no management) and stressed that "nature's not holding its own."

Lucy Chamberlain thanked David Atton and Sharon Bodker for creating the agenda and pulling resources together for the committee to review.

Sandra Turner said the person who was going to serve as the individual project manager for administrative support this summer backed out.

The meeting disbanded at 6:45 p.m.

Submitted by Sharon Bodker
June 9, 2024