

Mad River Valley Conservation and Recreation Visioning (CRV) Project Update – April 2024

The Mad River Valley Conservation and Recreation Visioning (CRV) Project began in Summer 2022 with funding from the Vermont Outdoor Recreation Economic Collaborative (VOREC). Other funders include the Fayston Conservation Commission, the Mad River Valley Recreation District (MRVRD), Lawson's Finest Liquids, the Windham Foundation, the Lintilhac Foundation and the Lake Champlain Basin Program. Representatives from 15 different local recreation and conservation groups have been meeting frequently with the ultimate goal of developing a set of maps, shared goals, guiding principles, and best practices that will provide a well-supported vision for balancing ecological integrity with recreation and trails across the Valley. An important aspect of CRV is making it an inclusive community process. The Mad River Valley Recreation District (MRVRD) is the sponsor of the VOREC grant and this link offers regular updates: <https://www.mrvrd.org/about-crv>

CRV Recap

CRV is led by a Steering Committee consisting of 15 representatives of diverse interests (a list of participants and the organizations they represent can be found at the above link). The CRV Leadership team includes the Co-Chairs of the Steering Committee (Laura Arnesen of MRVRD and Phil Huffman of the Waitsfield Conservation Commission) and Ira Shadis of Friends of the Mad River. Alice Rodgers (MRVRD Board Chair) and CRV Project Manager Emily Friedman act in advisory capacities. Steering Committee members participate in one of two Working Groups: Environmental Integrity or Recreation & Trails. The Working Groups have been meeting monthly with the full Steering Committee meeting quarterly, although that frequency is now picking up. The Leadership Team meets twice monthly.

As part of the VOREC grant, CRV has committed to specific deliverables. The first of these is a set of Opportunity Area(s) Maps. These maps, which are actually data sets, illustrate the CRV vision geographically. They will identify possible areas of opportunity for outdoor recreation, alongside key natural resources. The maps will be supported by a written document articulating shared goals, guiding principles, and best practices. This document will provide context for the mapping and describe its intended uses. Beyond these final products, CRV has set goals related to community engagement. These include commitments to developing a Community Engagement Plan (drafted in April 2023), hosting a minimum of 3 Community Forums and identification of an organization and/or partners to maintain this vision for balancing ecological integrity and recreation in the MRV moving forward.

VOREC funding for CRV ends on 12/31/24, when our grant deliverables are due, but CRV will continue well after 2024. This grant-funded period is the first step in an on-going effort in the MRV to harmonize outdoor recreation and ecological integrity. The Draft Opportunities Area Map and Guiding Principles (grant deliverables) will be a key step forward in balancing recreation and trails with a healthy, vibrant ecological setting in the Valley into the future.

Last June, the CRV Steering Committee hosted the first in a series of Community Forums. The second one will take place on Weds., May 29 at the Lareau Farm Pavilion. Many thanks to our friends at Lareau for sharing their space. The event starts with a potluck at 5 pm and the meeting is 6 - 8 pm. This will be a key opportunity for community members to learn more about the project and provide input to the Steering Committee. More information will be forthcoming in the next few weeks.

During the winter, CRV hosted two well-attended Community Learning Sessions at the Valley Players Theater. Many thanks to MRV TV for recording these important sessions. On 12/7/23 there was an

Overview of Recreation and Ecology with two speakers: Gus Goodwin of The Nature Conservancy and Drew Pollak-Bruce of CRO: Communities, Recreation, Open Space Planning and Design.

https://archive.org/details/Community_Learning_Session_12-7-23x. On 2/6/24 The Effect of Trails on Wildlife by Meredith Naughton of the Green Mountain National Forest: https://archive.org/details/CRV-Wildlife_and_Trails_2-6-24.

Last fall Arrowwood Environmental, a consulting firm in Huntington, VT, was hired to compile ecological and recreational information as part of Phase 1. That information includes research and studies from other states, natural resource inventories here in the MRV, maps of existing trails, recreational use data, and more. Some of these resources are listed on the CRV page at mrvrd.org. Using that content, Arrowwood has assembled a preliminary series of data layers (map format), an online tool to view them individually or in different combinations, informational summaries, and a list of sensitive ecological features present in our watershed.

This information will be shared with the public at the May 29th public forum, along with a written summary of current conditions related to ecological attributes and recreational resources that is being developed by the Steering Committee. The Current Conditions document includes ecological features, trails (including information provided by the local organizations participating on the Steering Committee and other pertinent data) and acts as a snapshot in time about what currently exists. CRV participants will use the Current Conditions Document as we embark on Phase 2 of this work: articulating a shared vision for the future and draft opportunity areas map(s) that help convey that vision spatially.

Approach

Instead of creating a process from scratch, the CRV Leadership decided to use an approach developed by federal land managers called the Visitor Use Management Planning process (VUMP). VUMP is used throughout the country and we are adapting it to our needs. It is based on stating current conditions, developing future desired conditions, then discussing and integrating goals through the use of management techniques to develop a plan to achieve the desired conditions. Example from the Rec & Trails Working Group:

Current condition: MRV trail system lacks beginner mt. bike trails

Desired condition: MRV trail system desires a balance of trails at all difficulty levels

Management technique: When planning and building new mt. bike trails, look for opportunities to provide new beginner level trails; review current trails to see if any could be adjusted to make them easier.

Timing

After the May 29 second Community Forum, as the work shifts into discussing desired future conditions and management techniques for achieving them, the full Steering Committee will start meeting together monthly. As a group, we will discuss, draft and ultimately author the components of the grant deliverables. During this phase SC members will bring drafts back to their organizations and drafts will be made available to the public so that input from the community can be fully considered. We anticipate having a third Community Forum in late summer or early fall with frequent updates in the Valley Reporter and links on mrvrd.org.

At the end of the VOREC grant process, Dec. 2024, a community-wide agreement will have been drafted. That agreement will be the foundation of the next chapter of work that goes beyond 2024. As we have stated from the beginning, CRV is a good faith agreement between recreation and conservation groups and the MRV community at large to set priorities for the future. There is much work ahead and we invite

you to be part of it. For more information or to sign up for the CRV email list, please contact our Community Project Manager, Emily Friedman, at madrivercrv@gmail.com.