



Warner's Pond Task Force
Wednesday, April 16, 2025 at 7:00 pm

Meeting Minutes

Task Force members:

- Vickie Alani
- Paul Boehm
- Malcolm Bryant
- Ann Clifford
- Jeff Collins
- Bruce Curliss
- Christine Denaro
- Keith Hannon
- Mark Howell
- Delia Kaye/Bert Comins
- Bill Kemeza
- Liz Morrison Howe
- David Owen
- Samiksha Poudel
- Jeff Quick
- Sven Weber

The Warner's Pond Task Force held its 19th meeting on April 16, 2025 beginning at 7:02 pm online via Zoom. Task Force members and members of the public were in attendance. The meeting agenda, slides, and video recording are available on the [Warner's Pond Task Force website](#).

Welcome and Updates

Christine Denaro, Task Force co-chair, opened the meeting at 7:02 p.m. and took a roll call of members. The following members were present: Vickie Alani, Paul Boehm, Malcolm Bryant, Jeff Collins, Christine Denaro, Keith Hannon, Mark Howell, Delia Kaye, Bert Comins, Bill Kemeza, Liz Morrison-Howe, Samiksha Poudel, Sven Weber, and Jeff Quick. Ann Clifford, Bruce Curliss, and David Owen were absent. Chris identified the main goals for the meeting: to identify takeaways from the recent public meeting/forum and to define the pathway forward for the Task Force's deliberation and consensus-building process. She briefly reviewed the agenda items for the evening.

Approve January 16 and February 11, 2025 Minutes

Christine Denaro asked for a motion to approve the minutes from the Task Force meetings held on January 16, 2025, and February 11, 2025. Liz Morrison-Howe moved that the Task Force approve the January 16 and February 11 minutes as written. Sven Weber seconded the motion. A roll call vote was taken. The motion passed unanimously, and the minutes from January 16, 2025, and February 11, 2025, were approved.

Public Comment (First Session)

Bill Kemeza invited members of the public to offer comments, reminding attendees of the ground rules: comments should be kept to two minutes, and speakers should refrain from personal attacks. Rachel Freed explained the hand-raising procedure for attendees joining via the Zoom webinar format. It was noted that eight members of the public were currently in attendance. No members of the public raised their hands to speak during this first public comment period.

Discussion on Feedback from Public Forum

Rachel Freed initiated and facilitated a discussion among Task Force members regarding their reflections and takeaways from the recent public forum. She prompted the discussion with two questions: “What struck you from the public meeting?” and “What are your takeaways for the Task Force as it moves into the deliberative process?” Task Force members shared the following perspectives:

- Paul Boehm opened the discussion, stating his observation that the public appeared quite split on the options presented. He noted that the quantity of comments and questions related to dam removal, particularly regarding uncertainties about what the area would look like afterward (wildlife, marsh, residual pond), suggested this option carried larger uncertainty for the public compared to dredging or enhanced management. He felt these observations, while predictable beforehand, were reinforced by the public comments received.
- Liz Morrison-Howe felt the public forum was valuable for highlighting specific areas of public concern, particularly regarding the unknowns of the dam removal proposal. She identified several takeaways for areas needing better explanation or detail: the nature of the deep pool, impacts on fishing, the specifics of adaptive management, and how it relates to invasive species concerns. She expressed a desire to work further on these points but noted the limited number of remaining meetings presented a challenge. She also flagged a public comment indicating the public felt unaware of the comments the Task Force was receiving, prompting a need to address transparency. Additionally, she appreciated hearing new and younger voices at the forum, noting a specific comment about paddling challenges for young children as something needing further thought and consideration. She also mentioned climate resilience as an area needing further exploration.
- Chris Denaro responded to Liz Morrison-Howe's point about comment visibility, confirming that the planning team had discussed this concern. She explained the new process: Delia Kaye or Bert Comins will compile public comments received via the website into a PDF each week, which will then be posted online via a link on the Task Force website, similar to the Select Board's practice. This process began the prior Monday, making comments accessible to the public.
- Malcolm Bryant raised concerns about the lack of a mechanism to respond to the many questions and potential misinformation present in the public comments submitted online; simply making them visible doesn't address the content. He also expressed strong concern about the atmosphere at the public forum, specifically citing repeated applause for speakers supporting pond retention, which he characterized as "raucous." He shared that five people had told him afterward they felt intimidated and unsafe to speak or even post comments online due to this atmosphere. He felt the Task Force erred in not managing this better. Later in the discussion, Malcolm presented a detailed analysis of the 142 comments submitted via the online portal (representing 105 individuals, minus non-residents/anonymous submitters). His breakdown showed that among the 38 respondents identified as abutters (living within ~2500 ft), 87% favored retaining the pond, while only 5% favored removal. Looking at all West Concord residents (including abutters), 71% favored retention. However, among Concord residents who were *not* abutters (30 people), opinion was split, with 43% favoring retention and 47% favoring removal. Non-West Concord residents showed a slight majority for retention (41%) vs. removal (32%), but

notably, 26% took no position or asked questions. He concluded that removing abutters left a very split opinion overall and highlighted the significant number of questions from those outside West Concord, suggesting a failure to adequately reach or educate that population. He noted a specific concern about expert Bryan Windmiller being cut off during his comments on turtles and biodiversity, and then being insulted by a subsequent speaker.

- Paul Boehm briefly interjected regarding the atmosphere, acknowledging applause occurred but questioning if "raucous" was the right characterization.
- Bill Kemeza responded to Malcolm Bryant's point on applause, stating that while the Task Force could have been stricter, completely stopping people from applauding, even at Town Meeting, is very difficult. Bill also responded to Malcolm's point about cutting off Bryan Windmiller, explaining that while they recognized his expertise and gave him more than the allotted two minutes, pressure mounted to move on, and signals weren't being received, necessitating the interruption. He noted Peter Alden was similarly managed. Bill also later apologized to Jeff Collins for initially dismissing the concern about intimidation.
- Jeff Collins stated he agreed with Malcolm Bryant regarding the meeting atmosphere and the need to manage applause better, echoing that he also heard from someone who felt intimidated and chose not to speak despite attending. He expressed appreciation for comments from young people and others connecting with nature at the site, adding his view that none of the proposals remove opportunities for nature connection within town-owned boundaries. His key takeaway was the need for the Task Force to decide how to weigh public comment, especially if the majority leans one way (e.g., retaining the pond, based on his impression of roughly two-thirds support in comments) while the Task Force might reach a different conclusion based on its charge. He stressed the need for clarity on this process to avoid public frustration. He agreed with Paul Boehm and Liz Morrison-Howe on the need to better visualize and explain the restored stream scenario to address apprehension. Jeff reiterated the reality of intimidation, sharing personal experiences of being called "the enemy" and having his integrity questioned in emails related to his Task Force role, emphasizing that people felt reluctant to speak up and the Task Force has a duty to make the best decision for the entire town according to its charge.
- Vickie Alani expressed appreciation for the high turnout and engagement at the public forum, commending the public's commitment. She shared her tally of online comments received *since* the forum: 21 from abutters and 67 from non-abutters (showing significant non-abutter interest). Among these commenters (counting individuals once), her tally showed 24 favored dam removal and 64 favored keeping the pond. She acknowledged Jeff Collins' point about potentially going against the numbers and the need to address that if it happens. Responding to the intimidation discussion, Vickie stated that while she felt bad people were intimidated at the forum, intimidation has unfortunately been experienced by people on various sides throughout the process (at meetings, on the pond, etc.) due to the divisive nature of the issue. She highlighted the resilience of the young speaker who persisted despite nervousness. She argued that the public forum and the feedback received were primary goals of the Task Force's work, actively sought after, and therefore cannot be dismissed now that it has been received. She noted hearing new or emphasized information regarding the Webelos issue, the level of support for the Task Force's work, the use of the pond by very young children, and the expressed interest from local Scouts in potential future stewardship activities. She noted it was regrettable that the Webelos issue did not come out prior to the meeting, so the Task Force could have thought more about it.

- Sven Weber voiced issues with tallying comments, arguing the forum wasn't designed as a vote or popularity contest, and doing counts in hindsight is problematic, especially if the room was "stacked" by a particular interest group. He felt this situation highlighted the potential value of an earlier suggestion by Malcolm Bryant for a more independent survey. He also expressed concern about post-forum "spinning," particularly regarding the dredging options, where he heard people minimizing the cost difference between the cheapest dredging option and dam removal without acknowledging the significantly reduced scope of the \$6M dredging plan. He firmly reiterated that the Task Force's charter requires them to evaluate facts and options based on the best interests of the entire town, not just follow the loudest voices or numerical counts, drawing parallels to Town Meeting dynamics. He also noted the timing of the forum near a contested election likely affected attendance patterns. Sven also emphasized the need to identify remaining information gaps (like funding sources) and move towards a resolution based on the evaluated options.
- Bill Kemeza argued that the strong presence of West Concord residents at the forum was natural and important, citing the principle of subsidiarity – those most affected by a decision should be listened to carefully. He asserted that the purpose of the forum *was* to hear the public, and he was surprised by the overwhelming sentiment he perceived in favor of keeping the pond/dam in some form. He expressed skepticism that gathering more information at this stage would significantly change people's fundamental positions, feeling that most issues raised were variations of previously discussed topics.
- Chris Denaro agreed with Bill Kemeza and Jeff Collins that personal interest drives participation. Addressing funding, she noted the \$2.6 million in CPA and capital funds previously allocated partially to dredging/restoration, and the need to clarify funding sources. She stressed the importance of communicating how projects might be funded without direct tax increases, suggesting creativity through further CPC requests, fundraising, and leveraging anticipated tax revenue from new developments (MCI, NOVO, Thoreau Club). She also pointed out unanswered questions regarding potential costs if the stream channel shifts unexpectedly under the dam removal scenario.
- Paul Boehm reiterated his view that the forum was intended as an information session, not a referendum. He questioned how, or even if, the Task Force should incorporate the public feedback directly into their deliberations, noting that "public feedback" itself is not one of the five established decision-making criteria (though elements are embedded within them: History/Character, Livability/Values, Mobility/Accessibility, Ecological Sustainability, Fiscal Sustainability). He felt the feedback and statistics presented (referencing Malcolm's analysis) were largely predictable and urged the group to focus on applying the established criteria to their task. Later, Paul strongly advocated for discussing the criteria weighting based on the survey members took, emphasizing the need to understand relative priorities (e.g., cost vs. character) sooner rather than later to guide deliberations.
- Liz Morrison-Howe suggested that public feedback naturally aligns with and informs criteria such as Livability & Values and History & Character, particularly reflecting the perspectives of those most impacted, but also encompassing broader town values.
- Mark Howell shared that he *did* hear new things at the forum, including specific feedback indicating people were learning about unfamiliar options and hearing expressions of support and confidence in the Task Force's thorough process. He acknowledged the hard work ahead, framing the forum as informing the public before the Task Force moves to refine options into a decision. He stressed that the larger the ask (whether financial or

environmental change), the more investment needed in building consensus. He urged the Task Force to take expressed concerns seriously and consider proposing a "roadmap" for achieving community understanding around the eventual recommendation, rather than just deciding something quickly.

- Malcolm Bryant, responding to Chris Denaro's comments on funding, questioned the feasibility of avoiding tax impacts for \$9 million or \$12 million options. He also reiterated the key takeaway from his data analysis: the need to better educate residents outside West Concord, as evidenced by the high percentage of non-committal/questioning responses from that group. He again raised the issue of intimidation at the public forum, expressing apology if his own actions contributed but stressing the negative impact on participation.
- Sven Weber shifted to looking forward. Addressing Chris Denaro, he requested that if alternative financing methods exist (outside tax revenue) for the \$6M-\$12M options, they be brought forward clearly to the Task Force, noting that new tax revenue from development is still tax revenue. He urged the group to identify remaining critical information gaps (like funding) and move toward evaluating the "two plus three" options (viewing dredging as three distinct options) side-by-side to reach a recommendation, feeling most information was now available.
- Vickie Alani interjected, noting she had re-listened to the forum recording. She emphasized that Toby repeatedly told attendees to submit comments/questions online, promising they would be incorporated into the final report or responded to. She stressed the Task Force must honor this commitment, perhaps by clearly showing how concerns were addressed or influenced the final report/proposal, to avoid dismissing the public's input after soliciting it.
- Rachel Freed assured Vickie Alani that no one was suggesting dismissing comments, framing the question as how to incorporate them appropriately.
- Paul Boehm strongly advocated moving the discussion toward the decision-making criteria. He referenced the criteria weighting survey members took and expressed eagerness to discuss those results, arguing the Task Force needs to understand the relative importance of criteria (e.g., cost vs. character vs. ecology) sooner rather than later to guide deliberations effectively.

Next Steps for Task Force Deliberations

Rachel Freed summarized key themes from the discussion and introduced CBI's proposed framework for the next phase. She explained CBI had framed a deliberation process built on evaluating the proposals against the criteria. How members value public input would factor into how they weigh criteria. She described the goal as achieving maximum alignment (aiming for >75% consensus) using an evaluative approach that yields qualitative and quantitative insights, avoiding simple voting until the very end to allow exploration of shared values, trade-offs, and consensus-building spaces. She mentioned the SurveyMonkey poll, acknowledging CBI's usual preference against voting but seeing it as a useful "icebreaker" for the deliberative phase.

Rachel then described CBI's proposed evaluation process: Task Force members will individually complete a survey evaluating the five alternatives (3 dredging scenarios, dam removal, enhanced management) against the five established criteria. This survey allows for detailed rationale, ranking, exploration of values, and identification of information gaps or conditions that might change one's view. Voting members must complete it; non-voting members' participation is

optional.

The goal is to achieve at least 75% consensus on a final recommendation. The survey results will be compiled and shared (non-anonymously) with all members prior to the next meeting. The next meeting will be dedicated to discussing these results, exploring areas of alignment and difference, identifying shared values and potential trade-offs, and beginning to build consensus toward a final recommendation or "single text" document. Rachel explained the "single text" approach, where facilitators draft a potential recommendation based on the group's input, which the group then refines, avoiding multiple competing versions. The final recommendation could be multifaceted or include a pathway forward.

After confirming members were agreeable to discussing the poll results publicly and recognizing that some members did not want their names to be shown, Rachel orally summarized the anonymous results from the nine respondents. Key points included: fiscal and ecological sustainability received high weightings from some; two respondents weighted all five criteria equally; mobility/accessibility received the lowest overall weighting; livability/values was never ranked lowest. She cautioned against over-interpreting due to the small sample size and variation. Discussion noted the small sample size and potential for gaming such polls.

Logistics for the next meeting were discussed. It will need to be an extended session (approx. 3-3.5 hours) and held in person. Starting earlier (e.g., 5:30 or 6:00 PM) was proposed. Adequate time (~1 week) is needed between receiving the compiled evaluation results and the meeting for review. Dates remain to be determined; the Planning Team will circulate options considering member availability constraints (Vickie Alani away May 5-14, Paul Boehm away May 8-20). Members expressed trust in CBI's proposed process. Mark Howell reminded members of the upcoming MCI Advisory Board public outreach meeting on April 30th.

Task Force members offered several comments and questions on the proposed process:

- Paul Boehm asked if results would be anonymous; Rachel confirmed they would not be anonymous, as transparency is crucial for the process.
- Jeff Collins asked how the alternatives, particularly the dredging scenarios versus the dam removal components (Scenario A/B), would be presented for weighing; Rachel clarified all five (3 dredge, 1 removal, 1 mgmt) would be evaluated distinctly.
- Liz Morrison-Howe asked how to handle situations where lack of information or conflicting facts impede evaluation; Rachel explained the survey allows space to articulate this, and these points become key discussion items at the next meeting to see if resolution is possible or if uncertainty needs to be incorporated into the recommendation.
- Mark Howell asked if members would present their own survey results at the meeting; Rachel indicated the format was flexible but members would have seen results beforehand. Mark also asked if the survey allowed for proposing hybrid solutions; Rachel Freed confirmed the process aims toward a final recommendation which could indeed be multifaceted or outline a path forward, and the survey allows space to begin outlining such ideas.
- Vickie Alani expressed concern about members retreating to corners and suggested focusing the survey on proposing a path forward that could achieve group agreement, given all learned information; Rachel positioned the structured evaluation as the method

- to arrive at that outcome, not a simple vote.
- Malcolm Bryant raised questions about financial unknowns, specifically the impact of dredging to 12 feet vs. 9 feet on dredge area/cost, and the uncertainty of stream channel behavior post-dam removal, asking if these needed resolution before evaluation. Delia Kaye offered a technical explanation suggesting the dredge area might not decrease proportionally due to shallow side slopes. Sven Weber argued that decisions often rely on incomplete information, urging trust in CBI's process and suggesting members document critical uncertainties in their survey responses for group discussion, rather than indefinitely delaying the process seeking perfect information.
- Bill Kemeza expressed readiness to trust the process and move forward.

Task Force Member Topics of Interest

The agenda included time for members to raise specific topics.

- **CPA Funds:** Chris Denaro reintroduced the topic, highlighting the potential applicability of Community Preservation Act funds to elements of any chosen path (fitting categories like Open Space, Recreation, Historic Preservation) and noting the September application deadline. Paul Boehm, serving on the CPC, provided context: CPC welcomes applications, significant funds are currently available (~\$1.5M reserve + ~\$1.5-1.8M new funding expected), the process involves applications (often sponsored by town departments/committees) reviewed against criteria, and the \$2.6M previously allocated for Warner's Pond dredging is still held but might need reapplication if the project changes significantly (potentially moved to an open space reserve). Liz Morrison-Howe asked about competitiveness; Paul Boehm and Delia Kaye explained it varies yearly based on application volume versus available funds (~\$2M/year locally + state match, currently low ~14%), but the next cycle isn't expected to be overly competitive, though good applications are needed. Mark Howell mentioned other potential demands on CPC funds: a possible re-application for the school amenities building and the likely Phase 2 application for the Gerow water access improvements (following a current study recommended for funding by CPC). Bill Kemeza reminded the group that CPC typically funds capital projects or specific initiatives, not ongoing operational expenses. Keith Hannon asked if activities like herbicide application could be funded; Delia indicated it might be possible if structured appropriately within CPC guidelines.
- **Bathymetric Survey:** Chris Denaro strongly advocated for proceeding with the bathymetric survey discussed previously, arguing the data (pond water depth) is valuable for all scenarios (dredging, dam removal, management) and delaying would likely increase the cost from the fall estimate. Delia Kaye reported she had contacted the vendor, who confirmed availability to conduct the survey the week of May 19th for \$18,600. Bill Kemeza initiated discussion about the measurement (water surface to top of soft sediment) and the potential value of adding sediment thickness measurements concurrently. Delia confirmed this addition was feasible for approximately \$2,000 extra (covering sampling and data processing), noting existing sediment data is several years old. Bill supported collecting both datasets together. Mark Howell moved to authorize proceeding with the bathymetric survey *including* the additional sediment sampling and analysis, for a total cost not to exceed \$20,600. Vickie Alani seconded. Jeff Collins asked if spring timing (high water) posed issues; Delia and Mark confirmed water levels would be recorded and early

vegetation wasn't expected to impede sonar readings significantly. Chris called a roll call vote. All voting members present voted Yes and the motion passed unanimously. Delia stated she would initiate the work.

- **Public Comment Portal Questions / Clarification on Bias:** Delia Kaye proactively addressed a comment received via the online portal alleging bias in the 2022 dredging RFP process regarding the North Fields disposal site. She detailed the reasons the site wasn't pursued: identified by DOC only *after* the bid was issued; restricted size (1.7 acres offered, expansion denied); significant new engineering needed (comparable to original 22-ft high sediment pile plan); potential Route 2 stormwater impacts requiring mitigation (further reducing usable area); conflict with MassDOT drainage pipe access; and aesthetic concerns (large mound blocking views). She reminded the group the 2023 Alternatives Analysis (leading to dam removal as preferred then) involved public input. She restated her position: dam removal is ecologically best but maybe not right for Warner's Pond overall, a decision for residents. She also explained why experimental drawdowns are typically not permitted by the state due to wildlife impacts without clear project benefit, especially for small achievable drawdowns.
- **OARS Website Statement:** Following Delia's comments, Chris Denaro raised concern about the OARS website statement supporting dam removal based on the now-superseded 2023 Alternatives Analysis Report, feeling it could mislead the public. Sven Weber cautioned against singling out the OARS representative (Jeff Collins) and noted other groups (like Friends of Warner's Pond) also have positions, emphasizing members must act in the town's best interest during deliberations. Jeff Collins acknowledged the concern, noted website update lags, and agreed to review the content. Chris thanked him and clarified no personal attack was intended.

Public Comment (Second Session)

Bill Kemeza opened the second public comment period with the standard rules.

Connie Levine (Stow St.).

She strongly recommended the Task Force conduct "benchmarking" by researching and contacting other towns or entities that have implemented similar projects (dredging, invasive treatments, dam removal). She suggested gathering practical information on their methods, costs, timing, success factors, challenges, and contractors used, believing this real-world data could fill information gaps the Task Force faces. She also suggested re-examining past studies commissioned for Warner's Pond to potentially extract useful guidance and save costs on new consultants, referencing a specific page in a prior report. She linked this to a feeling the pond has been neglected, with funds often spent on studies rather than action. Bill Kemeza acknowledged her point and stated some research into other towns' experiences had been done, though perhaps not exhaustively.

No other members of the public sought to comment.

Adjournment

There being no further business before the Task Force, Co-chair Christine Denaro adjourned the meeting at 9:21 pm.