**Heath Parks and Recreation Annual Report:**

*Committee Members: Michael Cucchiara, Chair, Shahid Jalil, Jenna Day, Bob Dane, Chelsea Jordan-Merkley, Ex-Officio Members: Patricia McGain, Lyra Johnson.*

The Parks and Recreation (P&R) Committee had a productive year with many recreational endeavors bearing fruit. Key to the success of the P&R in 2023 has been our ongoing partnership with the Massachusetts Executive Office of Energy and Environmental Affairs (EOEEA) Northeast Massachusetts Woodlands Partnership (MWTP) grant program. The MWTP grant program is geared toward enhancement of forestry-based economic development in the Northwestern Massachusetts region, which specifically includes improvement of forest-based recreational areas for participating towns. Since 2019, Heath has been the beneficiary of six MWTP grants awards which have provided the Town with $165,000 in funding for outdoor recreation projects geared toward promoting public access and improving recreational infrastructure. These grant funds have enabled the P&R to undertake many improvements to the Shapiro Conservation Area, including the creation of the Burnt Hill- Catamount (BHC) Trail, which someday will be incorporated into a regional trail network.

Beginning in 2023, the P&R partnered with the Rowe Parks Commission on an exciting multi-year initiate known as the Deerfield Highlands Trail Project. This project is geared toward creating a regional hiking trail through Heath and Rowe from the Catamount State Forest in the East to the Mohawk State Forest in the West. The hope is that the Deerfield Highlands Trail Project will eventually be integrated with existing public trails and result in a public trail corridor from the Deerfield River to the Taconic Range in Berkshire County.

In 2023 a MWTP grant awarded to Heath and Rowe in the amount of $45,000 funds enabled the P&R to hire the Franklin County Regional Council of Governments (FRCOG) to undertake a major GIS mapping project to identify a conceptual trail route. This mapping project comprised Phase I of Deerfield Highlands Trail Project and focused on identifying a possible trail route using existing public land and privately protected lands through Heath and Rowe. The FRCOG mapping project will have enabled the Heath and Rowe to embark of Phase II of the Project which will focus on implementation and trail development. Phase II of the Project has been funded by a $50,000 MWTP grant. This grant has allowed Heath and Rowe to procure the Franklin Land Trust (FLT) to work on behalf of both town’s Parks entities to undertake outreach to prospective partner landowners in an effort to secure public access for the hiking trail either through easements or licenses.

The creation of the first of these public trail easements appears on this year’s Town Warrant. Under the proposed Warrant Article, the Town of Heath will acquire using MWTP funds, a perpetual public trail easement across a property located at 47 Vincent Road on the border with Rowe. The acquisition of this first trail easement forms the lynchpin of the proposed trail route by creating a direct public easement connection between Heath and the Rowe Town Forest in Rowe. All of the costs of acquiring this trail easement will be paid for with MWTP grant funds from the Commonwealth at no cost to the Town of Heath taxpayer. To that end, the Parks and Recreation Committee strongly urges Town Meeting to support the Warrant Article as it represents an opportunity to create new public recreational access in our Town for future generations.

In closing, on behalf of the Parks and Recreation Committee I would like to thank the dedicated Committee members, the Town Coordinator, the Conservation Commission, the Select Board and most importantly our volunteers who have given of their free time and energy for the betterment of our community. If you’d like to get involved or volunteer a couple of hours, please get in touch – there’s always lots of work to go around!

We have many great plans for 2024 and look forward to seeing you out on the trails!

Respectfully submitted,

*Michael Cucchiara, Committee Chair*