Jackson Dam Steering Committee
Draft Minutes
September 10, 2026 | Memorial Building | 2 pm to 3:40 pm

The steering committee serves in an advisory capacity. No motions or votes were taken. These minutes document the discussion and follow up for public transparency.

Recording available at: https://us06web.zoom.us/rec/share/A2mi4ctVFGZYtUCat5vEMrj5qaXqiGGIGwlGaiWRc0fM2eC2b951CszjcTWq7XSH.iIjV81FdSQakzdlI
Passcode: %Crv2VZM

In attendance: Emily Finnegan, CC NRCD; Reg Phelps; Norma Wiesen; Dave Gross; and Kristen Leahy, Town of Hardwick

Absent: Derek Richardson; Lesa Cathcart; Renaud Demers; and Jake Lester

Meeting started at 2:00 pm.

Project status and design funding

Emily Finnegan explained that the feasibility study was coordinated with the broader river modeling work already underway in Hardwick. SLR was selected through a competitive procurement process to complete the next phase of preliminary design. The Caledonia County Natural Resources Conservation District has assembled three funding sources for design work, including Partners for U.S. Fish and Wildlife funding, a State Wildlife Grant, and a Watersheds United Vermont clean water grant. The Watersheds United Vermont award is expected to provide approximately $270,000 and, based on SLR's estimate, could support the project through final design. The funding includes review points and remains contingent on regulatory and project requirements.

SLR has begun survey work and coordination with landowners. A wetland delineation is planned before the annual drawdown so existing conditions can be documented. If the process continues, the winter drawdown may be extended into spring to observe where sediment remains stable and where active management may be needed. The current scope does not include a structural assessment of the existing dam, a dam breach analysis, or design of repairs. Existing dam inspection records can help explain current conditions, but the available design funding is directed toward evaluating removal and associated restoration.

Public information and decision process

The committee discussed the need to be clear about where the Town is in the process. The feasibility study identified removal as the preferred engineering alternative, but the public has not decided about removal. Preliminary design is intended to provide enough information for voters to understand the benefits, drawbacks, costs, sediment issues, and downstream effects before being asked to decide whether the project should continue.

The anticipated March 2027 vote was discussed as the public decision point before moving into full design. Any ballot language will need to address both removal of the dam and management of the accumulated sediment. Members emphasized that accepting design funding is not the same as committing local taxpayers to a particular construction cost. At the same time, the group should avoid promising that no local funding will ever be needed because future project costs and funding packages are not yet known. The project is also subject to state and federal regulatory authority.

The committee agreed that the public process should focus on education and informed participation, not on producing consensus. Information should be clear enough for people without technical backgrounds to understand and explain to others. The committee's role is to serve as a sounding board, identify language or information that may be confusing, raise concerns before materials are released, and help residents find reliable answers. Members may hold different views about the dam, but public messaging should consistently explain that the process is open, that questions are welcome, and that voters will have an opportunity to weigh in.

Survey themes

Kristen Leahy reviewed the recent community survey. The survey asked what people know about Jackson Dam, what they want to understand, and which issues matter most. It did not ask respondents to support or oppose removal. The strongest themes were flooding and flood risk, project costs and funding, downstream effects, dam safety, sediment, fish and wildlife, and the range of future options. Responses reflected conflicting beliefs about whether the dam reduces or worsens flooding, reinforcing the need to begin with the findings from the feasibility study and river modeling.

The committee discussed presenting Jackson Dam as one part of Hardwick's larger flood management system. Public materials should show how the dam relates to other work in the corridor, including Granite Street, the downtown corridor, the confluence area, the Lamoille Valley Rail Trail embankment and bridge, ice related flooding, and the wastewater treatment

facility. Engineering and river behavior need to be considered together even when the individual projects have separate funding sources.

Public engagement approach

The first public presentation is scheduled for Monday, October 5 at 6:00 p.m. at the Memorial Building, with Zoom access. SLR will present what the feasibility study and river modeling already tell us about flooding and Jackson Dam. The committee supported limiting the first meeting to a manageable amount of information rather than attempting to cover every topic at once. Recording the presentation through HCTV was identified as important so residents can watch later. (*Scheduled – Kristen 9-14-26)*

The committee discussed additional ways to reach people who may not attend a formal evening meeting:

- Create a simple project overview that links to the full documents and the Jackson Dam project page.
- Use photographs, diagrams, short facts, and QR codes in displays placed where people already spend time, including local businesses, banks, community events, and school activities.
- Work with the elementary school and Hazen Union when an age-appropriate connection can be made, both to engage students and to reach busy families.
- Offer opportunities for residents to submit questions in writing or by email and use those questions to guide future sessions.
- Break longer presentations into short clips or concise summaries that can be shared separately.
- Competition to guess the number of cubic yards of sediment are behind the dam.
- Plan future conversations on dam safety, downstream effects, fish and wildlife, costs, sediment, and the practical responsibilities associated with keeping or removing the dam.

Follow up

- Kristen will prepare a public summary of the survey results and continue updating the Jackson Dam project page.
- Kristen and Emily will work with SLR to shape the October 5 presentation and ask that the information be distilled into clear, accessible language and visuals.
- Kristen will continue coordinating with HCTV regarding recording and Zoom access for the October 5 meeting. (Done)
- Possible future speakers include dam safety staff, fisheries biologists, wetlands staff, and municipal representatives who can explain the Town's responsibilities and financial considerations.

- The group will continue developing a one-page project overview and simple displays that can be used in several locations and settings.
- Kristen and Emily will poll the committee for a late September meeting to review the October 5 content before the public presentation.

Meeting ended at 3:40 p.m.

Respectfully submitted by Kristen Leahy, Town of Hardwick