

North River Commission – Minutes

Proposed Float By-Law Public Meeting – May 14, 2026

Norwell Town Offices, 93 Longwater Circle, Norwell, MA

Present: Boulter (Pembroke), Jones (Hanover), Leonard (Marshfield), Lynch (Norwell), Gallagher (Scituate), Simpson (Norwell – A),

Absent: Heine (Hanson), Kemmett (Hanson – A), Cyrus (Marshfield – A), Lalone (Scituate – A)

Call to Order

Commission Chairman Willard Boulter called the meeting to order at 7:00 P.M. Mr. Boulter welcomed those in attendance and introduced the purpose of the meeting. He recognized the work of Commission members Steve Lynch and Adria Gallagher in preparing the proposed Float By-Law for public review. Mr. Boulter turned the proceedings over to Mr. Lynch to introduce and present the proposed by-law

Introduction of the Proposed By-Law

Mr. Lynch presented the proposed Float By-Law on behalf of the Commission. He explained that the proposed by-law establishes a single shared framework across all six corridor communities, providing applicants with a clear starting point regardless of their location along the river. The by-law reflects input and collaboration gathered during a completed 60-day review period involving all six towns' boards and officials. He acknowledged the input received from those towns as particularly meaningful given the challenge of building regional consensus.

The proposal includes a default float dimension of 10 feet by 20 feet, engineering and safety standards, permitting procedures, and compliance provisions. Mr. Lynch emphasized that the Commission's decisions remain rooted in the scope of the Protective Order and any related by-laws adopted pursuant to it. He invited members of the public to comment, requesting that speakers provide their name and address.

Public Comment

Keith Walo, 200 Country Way, Scituate (Harbor Mooring)

Mr. Walo identified himself as the owner of Harbor Mooring, a company that manages approximately 152 docks on the North River, South River, and Cohasset. He submitted a six-page written document for Commission review.

Mr. Walo stated that the proposed 10×20-foot default float dimension is acceptable for most customers but raised concern about approximately 10–12 customers who presently hold permits for two floats or oversize floats that have grown over time to accommodate larger vessels. His

primary question concerned whether previously permitted structures that have since grown beyond their original permitted dimensions would be grandfathered under the new by-law or subject to its compliance provisions.

Commission members noted that the by-law is intended to establish a baseline framework, improve documentation of existing conditions, and provide a process for reviewing nonstandard situations on a case-by-case basis.

Mr. Walo raised the following additional issues:

- **Anchorage Methods:** Use of structural ramp anchoring systems that do not use mooring stones or chains dragging on the riverbed. He has employed this method for approximately 17 of his 19 seasons in business. He suggested that the Commission consider addressing approved anchorage methods in the by-law, encouraging practices that minimize impact to the riverbed.
- **Float Storage on the Salt Marsh:** Mr. Walo noted that Chapter 91 prohibits float storage on the marsh but that this provision has not been enforced in Marshfield or elsewhere. He argued that requiring off-marsh storage would impose significant additional costs on property owners (estimated at approximately \$4,000 per season per customer), and that his current seasonal removal and reinstallation schedule – October/November removal, April/May reinstallation – corresponds with marsh dormancy periods and, to his knowledge, has not caused visible harm over 50–60 years. He acknowledged he is aware of the legal standard but questioned its practical basis.
- **Dock Height Requirements:** Barlow noted that Marine Fisheries and Army Corps have recently changed the dock height standard from a 1:1 ratio to a 1.5:1 ratio, resulting in docks now being constructed six to seven feet or higher above the marsh surface. He expressed concern about safety and visual impact, and noted this change occurred without input from working contractors.

Members noted that while the Commission can issue permits, there is a need to coordinate with applicable state and federal regulations. The Commission expects that float and pier construction be structurally sound and appropriate to the vessel size, and may require engineering documentation when larger structures or larger vessels are involved.

Alex Clark, 67 Bridge Street, Norwell

Mr. Clark identified himself as a holder of a dock permit issued around 2000, with a 20-foot float that has since been expanded to 30 feet to safely accommodate a large boat given strong currents on the east side of Bridge Street bridge. He requested clarification regarding future approvals and whether existing conditions would require additional review and whether doing so would trigger a requirement to re-engage the State and Federal Authorities.

Members responded that the by-law's intent is to invite property owners with existing structures to come before the Commission, document their situations, and have those circumstances reviewed – not necessarily to force costly federal permit processes. Members noted that site-specific circumstances, safety considerations, and engineering information would continue to be evaluated individually.

Samantha Woods, Executive Director, North and South Rivers Watershed Association

Ms. Woods offered an environmental perspective with particular focus on salt marsh storage.

On the question of float storage on the salt marsh, Ms. Woods noted that while visual evidence of damage may be limited, not all damage is visible. She cited potential impacts including compression of peat, alteration of marsh hydrology, and prevention of sediment deposition needed for accretion. She acknowledged uncertainty in the science but emphasized the precautionary principle used in conservation practice: avoid where possible, minimize where unavoidable, and mitigate where necessary.

Ms. Woods also noted that the salt marshes are under increasing stress from sea level rise – approximately six inches over the past 25 years – and that planning for future vulnerability is important even if current impacts are unclear.

Ms. Woods raised two additional issues for potential inclusion in the by-law:

- **Lighting:** Ms. Woods noted increasing light pollution on the river and suggested the Commission consider including a stipulation regarding dock and float lighting, particularly requiring lights to be off when not needed for safety, in order to protect nocturnal habitat.
- **Float Identification:** Ms. Woods recommended that floats be required to carry identification information (such as owner name or contact number) so that floats that break free and become navigational hazards can be traced to their owners.

Craig Hannifin, Chair, Marshfield Conservation Commission (via Zoom)

Ms. Hannifin participated as an observer via Zoom. She acknowledged conflicts between Marshfield's town by-law and Chapter 91 regarding marsh storage, and noted that while enforcement has historically not occurred, aerial and drone mapping technology now makes enforcement more feasible. She observed that there is no current scientific evidence of harm from float storage on the marsh, but that the absence of evidence is not evidence of absence. She encouraged review of available scientific studies regarding salt marsh resources. Speaking in her personal capacity as both a Conservation Commissioner and a watershed board member, she stated that her own float is removed from the marsh.

Rick Mayfield, 60 Bridge Street, Norwell

Mr. Mayfield identified himself as a North and South River Watershed Association board member of more than ten years and a river resident of twenty years. He stressed the importance of balancing environmental protection with practical implementation and enforcement. He expressed concern that regulations are most effective when accompanied by clear oversight and accountability mechanisms. He noted that his Chapter 91 license prohibits marsh storage but that a Conservation Commission special notation permits it under seasonal conditions, and that this contradiction has gone unaddressed for 30 years. He called for a clear enforcement philosophy to accompany any new regulations.

Samantha Woods (Second Comment)

Ms. Woods returned to note that the dock height rule change (from 1:1 to 1.5:1 ratio) was based on a scientific study conducted by the Division of Marine Fisheries on the North River in 2013, validated in 2017, examining the impact of shading from docks on the marsh. She offered to share this study with the Commission and interested parties.

Keith Walo (Second Comment)

Mr. Walo returned to comment on the DMF study and questioned the basis for the subsequent change from a 1:1 to a 1.5:1 dock height standard in the absence of more recent studies. He also noted that the Scituate Harbormaster already requires identification plaques on docks, citing this as an existing precedent supporting Woods' recommendation for float identification requirements.

Commission Discussion

Mr. Lynch summarized the key themes raised during the hearing and noted the Commission's intent to take a 30-day review period to assess all public feedback received.

Key topics flagged for further consideration included: (1) clarification of grandfathering and compliance provisions for existing structures; (2) the Section 2 float storage provision and its relationship to existing Chapter 91 requirements and local conservation commission practice; (3) the potential to require a minimum setback of 20 feet from the river edge for stored floats; (4) the practicability and potential requirement for float identification; (5) the question of dock lighting and whether it falls within the scope of this by-law or is better addressed elsewhere; and (6) the need for an enforcement philosophy to accompany the regulations.

Next Steps

The Commission announced that written comments would continue to be accepted through June 14, 2026. Commissioners stated that all testimony and written submissions would be reviewed prior to further consideration of the proposed by-law. Following the comment period, the Commission will determine whether revisions are warranted and whether additional review or public process will be necessary before adoption.

Close of Public Hearing

Action: Motion to close the public hearing. (Leonard/Gallagher) – Vote 5-0.

Adjournment

Action: Motion to close the meeting. (Lynch/Jones) – Vote 5-0.