



“What is a Conservation Commission and Why does my Town Need One?”

January 30, 2008

Rockport Town Office

5:30 p.m. - 7:30 p.m.

Meeting Summary

Introduction:

Jane Lafleur, Executive Director of Friends of Midcoast Maine welcomed the 50 + attendees who represent 22 towns, and five organizations.

Jane summarized the evening and noted that “the conservation commission has been called the environmental conscience of the community”. The Conservation Commissions exist to “identify conservation problems, to lay the issues before the people, to organize public support and then to take the initiative to solve the problem.” (Stewart Udall, former US Secretary of the Interior)

Overview

Bob Shafto, Director of the Maine Association of Conservation Commissions, presented a power point presentation summarizing the statutory duties and broad range of tasks undertaken by Maine’s conservation commissions. (Find the powerpoint presentation at www.meacc.net or www.friendsmidcoast.org.)

Panel Discussion

Bremen: (population 782) Dennis Prior from the Bremen Conservation Commission summarized his Conservation Commission. Bremen has a clear mission to protect water resources, to focus on open land and wildlife habitat and to protect the rural character of the town. The town is surrounded by Medomak River and lakes and they have a strong and vibrant working waterfront. One woman, concerned about the loss of working farms, established the first conservation commission a few years ago. They have five regular members and as many associate members as they need and want. They work to include as many people as possible, including the Beginning with Habitat program, the Maine Audubon program, the Medomak Valley Land Trust and the Pemaquid Watershed Association. They hold public forums for residents to help identify favorite/special places in town. They received a grant from Sheepscot Valley Conservation Association (SVCA) and Paul Hoffman, the GIS coordinator, to map the wildlife habitat areas and add easements, undeveloped spaces, and housing densities. One goal is to “protect the rural character” in town. They have a town-wide growth cap of 8 building permits per year. The CC was given a budget of \$250 last year and is requesting \$655 this year. Their public forums have been well attended with 25 at the first and 40 at the second. They work hard to make their meetings productive and non-threatening.

Rockport: (Population: 3209) Steve McAllister from the Rockport Conservation Commission summarized the Rockport Commission which began in 1974, upon the recommendation of the Planning Board. They have 6 active members currently. They used to have a budget when they were tied in with the parks department and were responsible for the maintenance of parks and flower beds. Eventually they had no time for other projects and the public works department took over the park maintenance. Today they concentrate on land use issues. Currently, they are working on water

quality issues and the pollution of Clam Cove on Route One towards Rockland. The cove has been closed to shell fishing, wading and swimming due to pollution. They conduct water sampling and are working to pin point the source of pollution in the watershed.

They have worked with the Beginning with Habitat people on identifying habitats and wildlife corridors. They are working with surrounding towns on parcels that are on town borders. They are a watch dog organization and follow planning board activities. They recently got involved in a large subdivision review on the coast and found they were able to raise issues that are not generally under the purview of the planning board such as water quality, scenic issues, and wild life corridors. They can be interpreters of these issues for the planning board and open discussions where the planning board may not be able to open alone. Steve recommends working with the planning board and the zoning board of appeals. They have also worked on "rural character" issues and the widening of roads, and the loss of scenic quality, old stone walls, etc.

Finally, they are looking into the Fund for Rockport's Future to fund acquisition of easements and land, to attract donations, bequests, gifts and grants and to relieve the town of this responsibility. This recommendation is explicitly contained in the Town's comprehensive plan. The current selectmen have not supported this idea because they are worried about the tax implications of taking land off the tax roles. Steve suggested that more research should be disseminated about the tax benefits of open space.

Rockport CC has no budget currently. A previous initiative to raise money to purchase land along the harbor and a little beach was successful when the conservation commission established the Friends of Rockport Harbor. They negotiated a sale with the owner and the town raised half the price (\$200,000) and the Friends raised the other half. Recently, members are involved with Maine Coast Heritage Trust, Maine Farmland Trust and Friends of Midcoast Maine in purchasing the Erickson Farm on Route 90 in Rockport. A fundraising effort for that is beginning.

They have also spent time researching rights-of-way that have been used by the public for so long that they are prescriptive rights-or-way. But the town leaders have not supported taking the necessary steps through the courts to confirm these for public use.

The challenges of a CC are politics, time and expertise. He recommends having a diverse commission in order to have the respect and positive influence in the town. He noted that Rockport has 3200 year round citizens and has support from the seasonal population as well. He reiterated that it is a myth that development supports the town. In the long term, open space keeps taxes down and does not drive taxes up.

Bob Shafto commented that in 64 New Hampshire have supported \$94 million in bonding for acquisition of land and easements. He also noted that in some towns taking land off the tax role increases your school aid from the state.

Steve suggested that conservation commissions collaborate with the code enforcement officer with water monitoring issues, with the town planning board, the comp plan committee, and the ordinance revision committee.

Jane Lafleur suggested using the comprehensive plan to help develop your list of responsibilities. Those tasks should be delineated in the towns' comprehensive plan with specific town staff and/or committees tagged with the responsibility of doing this job.

Camden: (Population 5254) Doug Johnson from the Camden Conservation Commission noted that the commission began in 1973, involved with parks and beaches and maintenance of Curtis Island in the harbor. They were involved with Dutch Elm disease, the Garden Club, the tree warden and the department of forestry. Camden has a tree planning program with the town, the homeowner and the garden club each paying 1/3. The Camden CC advises the planning board in decision making. They are appointed by the Board of Selectmen, and people must apply to serve. He noted it is important to take minutes at meetings and have a punctual secretary. They have a selectman's liaison who comes to their meetings. The agenda is sent to town and the clerk sends it out to everyone. They have a budget of \$500 to \$1000 annually.

Camden has been a Tree City USA for 12 years. One dozen towns in Maine hold this title. The Conservation Commission completed a tree inventory and several years ago MBNA contributed \$50,000 towards 340 new trees after they presented their report on condition and maintenance needs.

The Camden CC works on erosion control projects and recently helped with a public access/erosion control project abutting the harbor. The voters approved \$50,000 for erosion control but the project got tied up with a property owner who disputed ownership lines. It has now been settled and the work is underway.

Camden CC also worked with the Route One reconstruction project and the widening of Route One. Friends of Midcoast Maine was asked by both the protestors and MDOT to orchestrate a tree-to-tree site walk that resulted in saving numerous trees that were slated for cutting.

The Camden CC recently got involved in town acquisition of land adjacent to the Town Bog and successfully got voters to approve acquiring 5.5 acres adjacent to the 2 acre town bog. This was also specifically mentioned in the Comprehensive plan.

They worked on a natural lands inventory and open space planning and maps. They have been involved in a cell tower ordinance and the upkeep of the Curtis Island light house. They collaborate with the Knox-Lincoln Extension, Soil and Water Conservation service, Coastal Mountains Land Trust, Beginning with Habitat, Inland Fisheries and Wildlife, and the parks and recreation department in Camden.

Obstacles have been lawsuits and bureaucracy. Doug suggested having a variety of people and interests on the commission. He suggested using the press and letters to the editor on important issues, spread out the work load and do not expect to be asked for your opinion. A CC must stay involved and offer its' opinion, keep their eye out for important issues and pick one issue each year to tackle.

In the future, Doug believes a natural lands investment fund is needed for the future. Jane suggested that she would put language from Rockport for setting up this fund on the website www.friendsmidcoast.org.

Next steps: suggestions for *future* activities, collaboration, technical assistance needs and workshops.

Participants asked how to solicit ideas from a variety of people, not just preaching to the choir. Jane suggested people look at the presentation on how to improve public participation on the FMM website, holding constant conversation, having contact with a variety of people, going to people for one-on-one conversations, rather than expecting people to come out to meetings, etc.

People wanted factual information on easements, the financial benefits and case studies of how some of these have worked. Tell stories of successes and progress. Tell which strategies have been successful in negotiating.

People asked for a bibliography of written resources on conservation subjects.
The meeting closed at 7:45 p.m.