

**Calais Conservation Commission Meeting Minutes**  
**Via Zoom**  
**Wednesday, February 3, 2021, 7:00 pm**

**Present:** Stephanie Kaplan, Larry Bush, Neal Maker, Julie Hand, Pat Johnson, Mark Brown

**Guests:** Katie Lane-Karnas (recording minutes), Rowan Jacobsen, Scott Bassage, John Brabant, Eric Sorenson, Cindy Gardner-Morse, Tom Cronin

1. The Chair called the meeting to order at 7:08 pm.
2. Agenda revisions or additions: After ten years on the Commission, Drew Lamb has resigned. The group discussed seeking new members who have a natural resources background.
3. Approve minutes: Larry Bush moved to approve the minutes of the December 2, 2020 meeting. The motion was seconded, voted, and passed unanimously.
4. Conservation Fund Balance: The Fund balance is \$79,939.38.
5. Forest Blocks: Eric Sorenson, Vermont Natural Community Ecologist, was invited to the meeting to discuss his efforts at the state level around conservation design, and how these principles integrate at the town level. Eric is a Calais resident and noted he'd served on the Commission for seven years. The Natural Resources section of the Calais Town Plan was revised with a significant amount of work, years ago. The Planning Commission had included the Conservation Commission's work into the Town Plan. When we did the Town Plan (first draft in 2010 and adopted in 2016), there included a list of things to do. The Commission will be revisiting this section of the plan for both 1) identifying action steps that the Commission was going to undertake, and 2) identify new conservation information learned since the last revision of the plan and consider revision.

Eric presented a PowerPoint, *Vermont Conservation Design: A Vision for an Ecologically Functional Landscape*. It covered threats to biological life, starting with climate change. He emphasized that species shift independently and the need to conserve "nature's stage," or the unique physical landscape. There are an estimated 24-43.5K species in Vermont. Protecting these species, through the Vermont Conservation Design, is about a practical, scientific vision for sustaining ecologically functional landscape by applying a courser filter approach. Rather than focusing on individual species and how to protect each, a "courser filter" looks at protecting shared aspects of the environment that in turn protects many species.

Eric identified course filters at three scales: *landscapes, natural communities, and species*. He defined *Landscape* as composed of: interior forest blocks, connectivity blocks, surface waters, riparian areas/riparian connectivity, physical landscape diversity, and wildlife road crossings and identified the ecological functions of each. He showed images of some of the 97 *Natural Communities* examples, which includes young and old forests, aquatic habitats, wetlands, grasslands and shrublands, underground habitats. The course filer *Species* is to

cover very rare species who would not be covered by the coarser filters *Landscapes* and *Natural Communities* such as the spiny softshell turtle.

Eric explained that the natural resources are important for much more than biodiversity, including social and economic values. The “teeth” of this project are really through local town and landowner decisions. If it’s going to work, all of these features need to be balanced and worked on as a whole in an effort to unify conservation. According to this research, *sixty-seven percent* of Vermont should be conserved; the challenge is in how to go about doing it. Eric noted they are working on how to incorporate this into the current use (use value appraisal program) program (currently in Vermont, you cannot opt to leave any of your land wild—it must be managed to be eligible for tax reduction; Vermont is the only northeast state lacking inclusion of wild). State organizations are adopting the conservation approach and it is becoming standard. When landowners see how their parcel fits into a larger parcel, they tend to be very interested. Stephanie reiterated that the town plan includes actions to take to work with landowners. John Brabant noted the interconnection between conservation and farmland.

The group reviewed maps, beginning with layers for biophysical regions and towns, and “regional flows”—where species can move across the landscape. Calais has lots of physical landscape diversity, more than anywhere else around. Calais has a feature called “Waitsriver formation,” or calcium rich bedrock which is exceptionally rich in Vermont. This is something Vermont has a responsibility to protect because of their importance. Identification of this feature is a refinement since the time of the town plan creation. Calais’s waterways are a really important feature of connectivity. There has been an increase in the identification of rare species as a result of Matt Peters’ work. An additional map showed marked areas of roadways that are good for connectivity and how those crossings interact with larger natural areas. Eric noted there is a lot in the town plan that stands relevant, and there are some areas that can be incorporated since the creation of the town plan.

6. New Tree Warden Law, Tree Preservation Plan, Ordinance & Tree Cte.: Neal updated that as noted in the last meeting, the tree warden law has changed so the new law puts it on the town to decide which trees in particular, through adoption of an ordinance, will have oversight and which will not. He and Drew met to discuss trying to identify or characterize trees that should be subject to oversight. The trees that are not covered in the town ordinance would be able to be cut by landowners or the road crew without the tree warden’s permission. He noted a one-size-fits-all tree plan is not ideal because there are nuances such as specific stands of small saplings that might be desirable for future growth. They suggest it makes sense to have a simpler definition, such as trees above a certain size, and perhaps a standard whereby before cutting more than a certain number of saplings in one location, the road crew would need to contact the tree warden.

Scott Bassage noted that his greatest concern is in regard to roadway tree canopies because of their importance. He inquired if a defined tree canopy can be included in such a restriction. Neal agreed that it could. He will be checking in with Joanne Garton about working through Calais’s tree ordinance in consideration of the roadside work she did. John

Brabant inquired about the tree ordinance including in its purpose the re-planting to create a canopy where one has been lost. John added that from a road maintenance protection standpoint the Conservation Commission could make recommendations about what sections of roads need re-canopying to protect the road bed, reduce the amount of fine materials sent into the atmosphere, and reduce dust for bicyclists. The ordinance could potentially recognize landowners signing up for reestablishment for roadside trees that would see protections afforded through the tree ordinance. The group agreed that the aim is an overall thoughtful process, for example, as when cutting the canopy is warranted as for winter and mud season improvement along Lightening Ridge in the 1970s.

Neal pointed out the Commission has discussed trying to put together a tree committee under its auspices; Stephanie added that her inquiry around such a focused and specific group of people interested in trees and roadsides had almost no response to a Front Porch Forum announcement, but we should try again.

Next steps are: Neal and Drew to draft the proposal further and create a draft to present to the Commission at the next meeting. The law requires the Selectboard to hold a hearing on the Preservation Plan as an early part of this process toward an ordinance.

7. Memorial Hall: Rowan Jacobsen is a member of the NCMHA. They have received necessary easements that allowed them to draft the Interim Management Plan for the Memorial Hall property, which he is here to discuss. He noted that the Conservation Fund contribution to the project has been essential to getting the NCMHA to the finish line. The arrangement with VHCB includes creation of an Interim Management Plan to qualify them to begin restoration in the spring.

Stephanie noted that when the Selectboard approved giving the \$50,000 to the NCMHA, a condition was included to have an advisory group put together to work on the Interim Management Plan, which was supposed to include several members of the Conservation Commission. Rowan noted they are meeting that condition by submitting the plan to the Commission for feedback on the Plan. Stephanie asked about the role of the advisory group, which was supposed to include members of the Conservation Commission. He said he was attempting to avoid more Zoom meetings. The Commission members had reviewed the Plan he had submitted by email ahead of the meeting, and each asked their questions.

Notes on the Plan:

- RE: the conservation easement—the red language is from where? Answer: From the VHCB.
- “seek general public input...” refers to what? Answer: It is for the final management plan, not the interim plan. Should you set out what sort of public input plan you will have? Answer: Yes.
- The documents refer to both “No 10 Pond” and “Mirror Lake” when referring to the water body because there was no consensus about which name to use.

- Parking proposals on the Memorial Hall grounds: is it for the public at all times, or only at private events? Answer: That is what has always been there and has in the past been for only at events (there is a barrier when not an event).
- Is the future parking area indicated on the site plan in the forest across from the Hall actually proposed? Larry noted his preference trees in the forest not be cut for event parking and Stephanie agreed, pointing out that there was strong opposition when creating a parking lot in that location had been proposed in the past. Rowan said it was not likely to happen, and would need DRB approval if it were proposed.
- How will snowmobiles be addressed? Answer: No motorized vehicles, no snowmobiles.
- Is the point going to be conserved or for swimming?: Answer: the whole lakeshore is open to the public for swimming. Use has increased over the last few years, and is likely to increase in use. VHCB decided to call the point an “ecological protection zone” where conservation priorities rule above all else. But public access will be maintained, either the existing trail, along the lakeshore, or a new way there). There is a public access easement covering the whole property, and within the ecological protection zone, conservation *could* trump public access. Stephanie agreed that there is a potential real overuse problem, but perhaps the document could be more clear as Rowan just explained. Stephanie and Rowan will communicate by email about language.
- In various places in the easement, it talks about being “consistent with...” lots of things, but water quality is left out. Could this be added? Answer: It’s in the easement under 1-2-D, but we can ask VHCB to step that up more and add it to the management plan.
- Signs: would educational signs (such as explaining about erosion problems) be qualified in the list of signs that are allowed? Answer: Rowan will find out.
- Page 3, #3: “grantor would have the right to make the following uses...” but then it follows up as “the public would have...” Answer: It refers to the grantor allowing the public to.
- You won’t be charging people for swimming there, will you? Answer: No, not for swimming. Rental fees would be allowed to be charged for events.
- Events, max. 24 days and times when the event is happening the Hall is closed to the public. What about the shoreline around the Hall? Answer: the public’s access to the entire shoreline point would never be cut off
- Addressing erosion: how will that be done? Answer: the section right along the road drops off steeply to the water and is susceptible to erosion, especially when trying to social distance. If it continues to be a problem, they will do a more serious job roping it off and putting up a sign.
- Would a trash receptacle be put at the beach? Answer: there are volunteers who pick up trash every weekend. If you put a receptacle there, you get even more trash and have to deal with it.
- Will the building be kept locked or open? Answer: it will be locked and various people with access to a key. Contact information will be on the website.
- “...will always be accessible...” may be the place to indicate “except when...” to indicate needing to temporarily close off areas because of erosion, for example.

Answer: Hopefully it gets enough use that is done well to create pressure for other people to use it well.

- What is the status of GAR Road and the hedge? Answer: Rowan did a deep dive into Calais road law history and learned the Town owned the road since the 1950s and has been maintaining it ever since. The hedge is going to be cut down as soon as possible as part of construction and something else will be used to calm traffic.
- Other beautiful old white buildings in town have some kinds of long-term plans and funds for repairs and needed renovation. Will final management plan include addressing the fact that yearly funds will be needed for these purposes? Answer: 24 events a year will raise funds for maintenance of the Hall (this is the only cost in addition to insurance).
- Will there be security lighting for nighttime? Answer: This will be considered. A motion sensor light may be useful. There is strong opposition to night lighting there.

Rowan asked additional feedback be provided in the next week. This document will then go to the Selectboard.

8. 2021 Work Plan: This item was tabled until a subsequent meeting.
9. Other business: Stephanie contacted Jan Ohlsson, Chair of the Planning Commission, about the Shoreland Zoning revisions, which they are still working on. Larry noted the Planning Commission considered the Conservation Commission's comments and that Lakes and Streams has sent several comment letters to them as well.
10. Public comment: None.
11. Adjournment: The meeting adjourned at 9:19 pm.

Date: 2/4/2021 Respectfully Submitted, Katie Lane-Karnas

*Approved by the Conservation Commission at the 3/3/2021 meeting*