

**Calais Conservation Commission Meeting Minutes**  
**Via Zoom Call**  
**Wednesday, May 5, 2021, 7:00 pm**

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

**Guests:** Katie Lane-Karnas (recording minutes), Kyle Booth, Tom Cronin, Eric Sorenson, Danielle Laquerre, Jay Laquerre, Scott Bassage, Gary Root, Gerry Booth

1. The Chair called the meeting to order at 7 pm.
2. Agenda revisions or additions: None.
3. Conservation Fund Balance: \$71,939.38.
4. Approve minutes: Larry Bush moved and Julie Hand seconded to approve the minutes of the April 7, 2021 meeting, as edited. The motion was voted and passed.
5. Town Plan Revision: The North Calais Memorial Hall Association is applying for village center designation, which would result in being eligible for significant grant qualifications. This requires a change to the Calais Town Plan, which is an impetus for the Conservation Commission to offer a revision in the Natural Resources section of the Plan.

Gary Root, Planning Commission member, noted that the process for town plan revisions includes a public hearing, then submittal to the Selectboard and a public hearing, each of which must be warned; if it is accepted by the Selectboard, they submit it to the regional planning commission, and ultimately to the State.

The area being discussed for revision is around the critical nature of forest blocks that function as diverse habitat and include wildlife corridors and work in harmony to connect up with other areas to provide species habitat and transportation. Eric Sorenson (Vermont Fish and Wildlife; Calais resident) shared maps of habitat blocks that the Town has pledged to prioritize in the existing town plan. He then contrasted with more recently created maps that color code the priority levels and function of different blocks. He noted that Calais is a hotspot for “physical landscape diversity blocks,” forest blocks that represent some kind of unique physical characteristic (in Calais, calcium-rich bedrock that therefore contribute to unique ecology like a fen). Those features are a specialty of Calais that are of highest importance and statewide significance. Eric recommended that the town plan revision replace the existing town plan maps with more current maps. The features to represent in four distinct maps are:

- interior forest blocks,
- connectivity blocks,
- physical landscape diversity blocks, and
- likely road crossings.

Julie supported including more maps to add clarity (rather than condensing these four aspects into a single, layered map) in the town plan revision. Gary commented that people who have been involved in these ongoing discussions are aware that larger blocks are better for biodiversity, but this newer information about calcium-rich bedrock will be new information

for most people; adding more maps to clarify would be optimal. Eric shared language for “guidelines for maintaining ecological function” that could be modified for use in the town plan. Eric will send language and maps to the Conservation Commission and subcommittee of Julie, Larry, Stephanie will review and work on the language if need be and run it by the rest of the Commission before sending it to the Planning Commission for their June 1 meeting. Planning Commission will review to ensure the revision is not in conflict with any other area of the Town Plan.

6. Chapin Town Forest: The Chair explained that recently a few Conservation Commission members met with surveyor Paul Hannan and the Road Commissioner at the area where they are proposing to have a parking area created in the Chapin Town Forest to provide access for the public (there is no where to park yet). Abutting landowners joined them there and the Chair reported a productive conversation was had.

The road turns from class three to class four at the mailboxes and the class four section is maintained by the residents of the Blackberry Ridge subdivision. When the Blackberry Ridge subdivision was developed, normally the Town would require the road be upgraded from class four to class three; the developer instead had the deeds require the homeowners maintain the class four section of the road up to their private road and driveway. Chapin Road turns into the forest and goes all the way to the Pekin Brook Road on what has become a rough trail. Consideration for the proposed parking area will include whether the access to it would be plowed in the wintertime (including turnaround for the plow); an area for no more than six cars has been the idea. Any tree cutting would be kept to the Town side of the road (for the purpose of widening the road to accommodate a snowplow). The Conservation Commission manages the town forests by statute, but the Selectboard would need to have an agenda item to hear about this proposal and ultimately approve any expenditures.

Landowner Kyle Booth asked to learn the mission of the Commission. The Chair explained the statutorily defined purposes of the Commission that includes managing the natural resources of the town by making recommendations to the Planning Commission and Selectboard and by managing the town forests; managing the Conservation Fund to help purchase land that has important natural resources. The effort at Chapin Town Forest would be to make it more accessible by creating parking and trails. We are conscious of the importance of public access to public land; it has been difficult at this location. Kyle asked what the plan is for making trails and commented that it is premature to put a parking lot before trails. He noted there is wetland, wildlife, and native plants and asked what the impact would be of more people walking through there without trails. Pat emphasized the balance between use and preservation, and that in order for people to care about the land, they have to go on it to know about it and value it and be invested in protecting it. Larry commented that the trail layout at Bliss Town Forest included Eric Sorenson and careful review and assistance to make sure it was done with minimum harm to the environment. The Chair mentioned the Town’s creation of trails demonstrate this planning. The Selectboard will have a public meeting about the Commission’s recommendation.

The Laquerres (abutting landowners) commented that the parking lot should be elsewhere such as on the Pekin Brook Road. One problem for access from the Pekin is traversing a ravine

that would make it impassible for some residents and add significant cost. Kyle suggested allocating funds for a Pekin entry rather than a parking lot. The Chair reiterated that adjoining landowners live next to Town owned-land that does allow Town use. Tom Cronin asked if Bliss Pond has trails currently but no parking, and why the Commission is starting with parking and following with trails; also, if anecdotally we don't expect the parking area to fill with lots of cars, what the thinking is for six cars in this area. The Chair noted the Chickering Bog parking area is a reasonable size and has room for six and the question of size has not been decided. Mark added that if the parking area were too small, cars may park on the side of the road, like Bliss Pond, but it would completely block resident access on the road; again, the area needs to be big enough for the plow to turn around. Neal explained that very preliminary flagging was used to delineate a potential parking area, and he supports bringing discussion to a Selectboard meeting.

Julie Hand made a motion that the Commission go to the Selectboard with a proposal for a potential parking area for the Chapin Town Forest. Neal Maker seconded.

Jay Laquerre asked who carries the liability for partiers, squatters, trash; he expressed his concern for his young daughter's safety in the woods on their land. Larry appreciated his concern and related that he lives next door to the Bliss Town Forest and none of the concerns noted ever happen, but is rather used by neighboring landowners and relatively little by the public. Neal added that the Robinson Hill Trails, only available by allowance of private landowners, are used for hiking/skiing/biking and also hasn't experienced these concerns. The Town has a Trails Committee that works to develop trails in public and private lands in Calais. At the point of developing trails, Eric and the Trails Committee's expertise would be relied on. The Chair suggested concerned neighbors contact the Trails Committee to talk about their experiences developing trails.

Kyle asked how the proposed parking lot will be funded. The Road Commissioner gave a ballpark materials estimate (gravel, water runoff diversion, etc.) and labor would be completed by the Highway Department. The Chair will follow up for a firm estimate from the Road Commissioner. Larry asked whether the Commission prefers to be drafting a somewhat detailed proposal of the details involved; or rather, a general explanation of the proposal would allow people in the community to discuss it and the Selectboard to give its go-ahead to proceed with developing the details. The group discussed its preference for the latter.

The original motion was voted and passed unanimously.

7. Roadside Vegetation: Over the years, roadside vegetation and trees' importance has been addressed in a number of ways. In 2014, upset residents in Adamant noticed 70 trees marked with flagging to be cut by the road crew. As a result, a Roads Committee was appointed. At the same time, AOT had sent road and bridge standards to all towns and Calais Selectboard wanted a more attuned-to-Calais standard than the blanket document provided. Public meetings followed and specific standards were developed and the Selectboard adopted the Calais Road Standards as an ordinance.

The Roads Committee addressed the intersection of environmental impact and road practices and ANR, AOT, and the Selectboard approved them. Maintaining roadside trees and canopy is a factor in the Standards; later, Joanne Garton's Resilient Roadside Report also addressed roadside vegetation. Discussion continued about addressing roadside vegetation in the Road Standards, the Resilient Roadside Report, and/or the Tree Plan and Ordinance.

Members of the original Roads Committee fell away over time and the Chair expressed her dismay and frustration about the lack of adherence on the part of the road crew and lack of accountability on the part of the Selectboard. For example, the Road Standards limit deep ditching and require vegetated verges (aesthetics and safety). Narrower roads also tend to slow cars down. Discussion continued about prioritizing overarching Commission efforts and gaining cohesion on workload and future agendas.

There is the potential of Act 171 implementation support (Eric shared names of two people); Julie will follow up. Mark considered the Bliss Town Forest process and a timeline and proposed structuring a subcommittee to begin planning. Neal and Larry agreed to join.

8. Other business: Larry invited anyone able to come help make trail markers tomorrow morning at 10 am with the Trails Committee who are lending expertise and assistance. This goes along with their continuing efforts to make the classic Calais trail markers.

Calais is receiving two more purple sticky traps to monitor emerald ash tree borer activity. Members will think about where to locate them near the Plainfield border.

9. Public comment: None.

10. Adjournment: The motion adjourned at 9:07 pm.

Date: 5/5/2021 Respectfully Submitted, Katie Lane-Karnas

*Approved by the Conservation Commission at the 9/8/2021 meeting*