

Calais Conservation Commission Meeting Minutes

Juneteenth/2024 – Calais Town Hall and Via Zoom

Present: In person: Chairman Larry Bush, Neal Maker, Mark Brown, Claire Haskell, Paul Olander;
Via Zoom: Stephanie Kaplan;
Guests: Melanie Kehne, Planning Commission member, Eric Sorenson.

Proceedings:

Chairman Larry Bush called the meeting to order at 7:04 pm. There were no changes proposed for the agenda. The minutes from June 5, 2024 were approved as drafted. There was no public comment.

Town Plan

-Larry opened this session of our continuing discussions with his thoughts about the Natural Resources section of the Town Plan, and about the depth to which the TP must go to summarize Vermont Conservation Design and Act 59 for the layperson's consumption. His feeling is maybe we just need to say that our relationship with our landscape is guided by VCD (and give a link), and the TP will focus on what we're doing to conserve our Town.

-Melanie gave us an update from the Planning Commission and said that there is great interest on the PC in the kind of mapping that Neal is working on, of priority conservation and development zones. She said the PC would appreciate a "show-and-tell" when the mapping is ready, and said that Vicky Arthur, a PC volunteer and who is very capable with mapping, has offered to work with Neal. Neal asked Eric if he would look at the map so far and give comments, and Eric agreed.

-Melanie is looking ahead to potential zoning changes and there was discussion about the protections already in the Resource/Recreation and Highland Districts for interior forest blocks, but not for their connections and the need to bring those in. Eric noted that Act 250 will now have IFB and connectivity criteria and that roads into forest blocks will require A250 review. He noted that IFBs we identify are likely to be the same as those shown on State maps, but cautioned that connectivity is more difficult to assess. If we create a Development overlay zone it is possible that might conflict with State determinations of connectivity and wildlife crossings. It is important they agree.

-Eric commented on the passage of H.687, relating to community resilience and biodiversity and land use regulations, and noted that the inventory of conserved lands will now include Ag land, not, he pointed out, the original intent of Act 59, which was biodiversity in forests, wetlands and other non-cultivated spaces.

-Larry wondered then how do we anticipate the changes in State rules that may be coming? Stephanie said A250 changes don't necessarily change municipal zoning laws, to which Larry questioned whether State law would trump Municipal law, and Stephanie responded that nobody knows quite how this will work.

-Mark noted that new zoning for priority, and high priority conservation, and defining development zones, might cause friction with those now planning development. Larry responded that yes, any zoning changes must be voted upon by the whole Town. Stephanie added that the TP is the place to state, for example, that any subdivision in priority conservation blocks must receive Development Review Board review, and zoning regulation changes must follow. Melanie concurred, saying this is the constant evolutionary process of town planning.

-Claire made the point that the current TP Natural Resources section doesn't read well, that it is very chopped up with all the Action Items, and is hard to follow. Larry stated the layout of the compilation Claire and Neal had done for our discussions, with the action items at the end would help to keep together this new version, and asked if we were at the point now of being able to flesh out the outline? Stephanie thought it would really help with our continuing discussion and the group generally agreed.

-Melanie said that she felt the best things we could do to support her work on this section were the detailed map, the priorities for conservation, and the necessary action items, such as why a DRB review should be required for minor subdivision, etc. Mark asked if the "Claire and Neal compilation", fleshed out and

trimmed down from the existing TP Natural Resources section is what she is looking for, and Melanie replied that yes, what is there in just the current outline she found very helpful.

-Larry returned to the importance to the TP of Neal's mapping and asked how it was progressing. Neal is continuing this work, will talk it through with Eric, bring it to the CC in a draft form, and then to the Planning Commission. He said he will contact Vicky Arthur as well.

The discussion turned to fleshing out the outline, the "Claire and Neal compilation".

-Larry noted that the ecological values were all present in VCD, but Act 59, Community Resilience and Biodiversity, needs to be called out in the TP now. Eric said we should emphasize those values important to Calais. Melanie suggested the Vision section could reference A59 but wouldn't have to discuss it in detail. Neal pointed out that conservation items will need to be in the Action Steps section and A59 needs some discussion up front.

-Claire said it seemed we can just take the list of values from the current TP and asked if we could lump those shown in the C&N compilation under Natural Communities together under that one heading. Eric's opinion was no, each of those features – natural communities, young and old forests, in VCD, and deer wintering areas, and rare, threatened and endangered species from the current TP, need to be conserved and addressed separately. He suggested that the topic of Non-native Invasive Species, also not in VCD, be moved to the Action Steps section.

-Melanie asked where Shorelands and Ag soils fit in and was told in the Aquatic Resources section for Shorelands, and Ag soils were in a separate Agriculture section of the TP.

-Melanie noted that the current TP uses some of the old A250 terms and those should be changed or combined with the new VCD terms. Eric said the language is available on the VT Fish and Wildlife website. There was also some discussion about the use of the term "Ecological Values", and Eric said that these are more properly called Ecological Functions, which term the CC will use going forward.

-Eric said it will be especially important to identify where examples of each function are found so that it can be more easily related to our Calais landscape.

-Larry commented that it will be very important to identify Vernal Pools so that the Life Zone (650-foot radius?) around them can be protected from development.

-Claire turned the discussion to the format for the Ecological Functions section – how do we treat each of these and not end up with a 26-page document? Stephanie counseled that we should not worry about length to start with; we need to get the information in there. We can always prune it down when we get it put together, she said. Neal suggested one person could write three sentences on each function and the rest of the information could go in an Appendix. Larry asked Eric's help in the review and Eric repeated that the information on these functions in the current TP is important and needs to be in the TP; it may just need to be pared down somewhat. He said that the VCD summary report has all the info needed for each function: the what it is, why it must be conserved, what we can do to protect it.

-Claire, Neal, Mark, Stephanie and Larry will divide the Functions in Section II and write draft sections for each for the next meeting. Claire will take Interior Forest Blocks, Connectivity Blocks, and Surface Waters and Riparian Area. Neal will take Physical Landscapes, Wildlife Road Crossings and Natural Communities. Mark is working on Young and Old Forests, Aquatic Habitats, and Grasslands and Shrublands. Stephanie is writing the sections on Wetlands and Vernal Pools. Larry is doing Deer Wintering Areas and Rare, Threatened and Endangered Species.

-The next meeting will take up these drafts and begin discussion of Section III, Managed Lands. Stephanie said she had some thoughts about refining that section and Larry asked her to work up a draft of the section for our next meeting.

-Larry asked if Section I, the Vision statement, was finished and there was general agreement that it is (some A59 discussion may be added later).

-The next CC meeting was set for July 3.

The meeting was adjourned at 9:00 pm.