

Calais Conservation Commission  
Minutes  
November 12, 2015

The meeting was convened at 7:00 p.m., at the Calais Town Hall. Commission members present were: Stephanie Kaplan; Drew Lamb; Neal Maker; Julie Hand; Mat Barewicz, and Larry Bush (recorder). Grant Orenstein was absent. Other persons present were: Jon Ramsey (Vermont Land Trust); Jan Ohlsson (Calais Planning Commission and Lister); Richard Maizell; Charles Burbank, Jr., and Jeremiah Eckhaus.

1. The Armstrong farm—Jon Ramsey, a representative of the Vermont Land Trust (VLT), was present to inform the Commission about the process for the potential purchase of the property known as the Armstrong farm located on Pekin Brook Road.

Introducing the discussion, Stephanie Kaplan reported upon a site visit that she had attended on the farm on October 16. Others present at the site visit were: Liz Thompson, VLT biologist; Ben Gabos, Vermont Agriculture Agency; Gretchen Alexander, Department of Environmental Conservation Watershed Management Division; someone from the Federal Fish & Wildlife Agency; Eric Sorenson, Vermont state ecologist and neighbor to the Armstrong farm; and Eric's wife Cathy Kashanski who works for the state's Watershed Management Division. The group walked around the property on the west side of the Pekin Brook and after Stephanie left they walked on the farmhouse side of the property. One question of interest was how much farmland would be available after appropriate buffer zones were established along the Pekin Brook and the unnamed tributaries. Calais officials, the Friends of the Winooski River and local residents have been interested in obtaining protection of the streams on the farm for quite some time.

Jon Ramsey explained that the VLT had begun investigating the possibility of purchasing the farm after local resident Eric Sorenson had informed him that the property owner, Ella Armstrong, intended to sell it. Jon spoke with Ms. Armstrong and learned that she might be open to a transaction that would result in the purchase of the farm for the purpose of establishing a conservation easement on the land and preserving its use in agriculture, provided that she could receive an acceptable sale price.

Jon explained that the VLT has hired an appraiser for the farm property and that he believes the appraisal has been done and he is waiting for the result. He said the agricultural advisory committee of the Vermont Housing & Conservation Board (VHCB) will meet next week and decide whether the purchase of the farm is worth pursuing, based on three criteria: 1) whether more than 35% of the property contains prime or statewide agricultural soils; 2) whether there are other important natural resources on the site; and 3) whether there are qualified people interested in farming the property. The property meets the first two criteria: 40% of the soils are either prime or statewide, and the Pekin Brook and tributaries are important riparian resources on the property. It is too early in the process to know whether the third criterion would be met, and the VHCB committee understands that. If the committee approves the preliminary application, the VLT would be able to seek funding for this project from the VHCB in the future.

If the VHCB committee approves the preliminary application, and if after seeing the appraised value Ms. Armstrong is interested in selling her property to the VLT for that amount, the VLT would offer to buy it from her. The envisioned process would be to purchase the property in fee simple from Ms. Armstrong, attach appropriate conservation easements to it and offer the land, thus encumbered, for sale to someone who would be committed to farming it.

The members of the Commission and Jon discussed ways in which the VLT could work with the Commission and the Calais Selectboard in pursuing the goal of protecting the Armstrong property. This could include a meeting with Liz Thompson and the CC and Selectboard to discuss her report of the property's ecological values and for the town to provide input on the town's interests in the conservation of the property. Jon mentioned that the town may want to consider possible public access provisions. At some point the town will have to determine the extent of financial contribution to the project.

2. The minutes of the Commission meeting of October 7, 2015 were unanimously approved with slight amendments. Neal Maker moved approval and Drew Lamb seconded the motion.
3. The current balance of the Calais Conservation Fund is \$\$78,673.91.
4. The Commission deliberated regarding proposed revisions to the draft Town Plan's "Regulatory Implementation" provisions in the Natural Resources section. The Selectboard had requested the Commission to revisit the regulatory directives in light of the public input at the Selectboard's October 5, 2015, Town Plan Public Hearing. The Commission discussed and revised or deleted several of the provisions to provide better specificity and clarity.
5. The members of the Commissions briefly discussed the changes to the Town's shoreland zoning provisions, as prepared by the Planning Commission. Planning Commission member Jan Ohlsson indicated that the original proposals were being revised to a certain extent and would be available as revised in the near future. The Commission deferred further consideration of this matter.
6. The meeting adjourned at 9:50 p.m.

Submitted by Larry Bush