

Calais Conservation Commission Meeting Minutes 05/01/2024 – Calais Town Hall and Via Zoom

Present: In person: Chairman Larry Bush, Neal Maker, Walt Amses, Tracy Coolidge, Claire Haskell; Via Zoom: Stephanie Kaplan, Mark Brown, Paul Olander; Guest: Noreen Bryan, representing Calais Lakes and Streams Committee.

Proceedings:

Chairman Larry Bush called the meeting to order at 7:10 pm. There were no changes proposed for the agenda. The minutes from April 3, 2024 were approved as drafted. There was no public comment.

-Calais Lakes and Streams Committee Newsletter – Larry had sent out for review and comment the drafts of two articles written by CLSC members for the upcoming edition of the CLSC Newsletter. There was considerable discussion; in general the CC members were fine with the “Wooded Shorelines” article but some felt the “Zoning Regs Changes” article was too dry. Larry agreed the article is dry but felt that it is critically important that landowners know about the important regulation changes approved at Town Meeting. Noreen said that the Shorelines article will be the lead, with the Regs article a necessary companion piece. Stephanie asked if the Regs article could be condensed further by backing it out to just the 2024 changes; Noreen felt it was “bare bones” now, that the important issues are what is there now, and that the changes needed explanation, but said she would welcome suggestions to try to pare it further. Claire asked if a chart or bullet points could be included to give applicable scenarios that might be encountered and then a reference to the regulation covering that instance. Noreen said it would take far too much copy; the State Handbook, which does that, is 25 pages long.

There was discussion again on the means of distribution of the article; the CLSC Newsletter is typically mailed to all property owners in Calais. Walt asked about using alternative forums, such as FPF to communicate the regs changes and link to the actual regs on the Town website, but it was felt that would not be effective as fewer people would follow links to the regs. Larry added that this issue was intended to act as something of a handy reference guide. Claire asked if the Newsletter could be electronically mailed but Noreen said while the Town has mailing addresses for property owners, the email addresses are not available. Tracy asked if hand delivery is an option, or just posting at the stores and Post Offices, but it was felt that mailing is the best way to get it to everyone.

Stephanie and Walt both offered to work with Noreen to take a cut at making the Regs article more readable. Larry and Noreen noted that the articles as written are about the maximum size that can fit in the six pages allowed; any rewrite must be about the same size. Noreen would like to get the Newsletter mailed out in June in order to avoid the postal rate increase and to reach camp owners at the time when they are opening up camp and might be planning to do something no longer allowed, such as to cut that tree, or mow a new lakeside section. Larry added that after our CC review the CLSC intended for the Planning Commission to review it before it goes to print, so the timeframe for any rewrite is short. In order that the Newsletter doesn’t have to wait until our June meeting for approval it was moved and seconded the CC gives its approval to the two articles, with the understanding there may be some modifications of an editorial nature, not substance. The vote gave unanimous approval.

-Bliss Pond Town Forest Survey – the Selectboard has approved the expenditure of up to \$5000 to have Becky Gilson complete the survey. It was noted that the cost will be less if CC members or other volunteers assist with boundary markers and blazing and painting the flagged lines. Larry said Becky has tentatively scheduled June 27th for this work. Several CC members indicated interest in assisting.

-Invasives – Tracy is ready to hold the first of her guided “Invasives Walks” this year on the Maple Corner “Loop” area Saturday May 11th. The walk will focus on invasive plant identification and what the landowner can do to control them. An FPF announcement has gone out and Tracy will repeat it this week.

Tracy suggested that she could put out an “Invasive of the Week” (or 2 Weeks) articles in FPF during the summer, providing a photo, description of the plant, and potential control methods a landowner could use, with a link to State resources. There was universal appreciation of this idea and Tracy said she will begin the series with Coltsfoot, since it is flowering now.

-Noreen inquired about getting kids involved in cutting phragmites this summer. Mark said that once school is out it will be very hard to get kids involved, but he will check if anyone might be interested.

-Town Plan – the Commission continued our discussion of ways to contribute to the Planning Commission’s current major undertaking, the complete re-write of the Town Plan. Larry wants the CC to work on text concerning the Town’s vision for Natural Resources to contribute to the Town Plan in addition to the expanded version of the map Neal is working on.

-Stephanie contributed her thoughts on what a Town Plan must be: a vision for the future and a path to get there, via zoning regulations. The TP needs to have “shall be”s, instead of just “should be”s. Larry pointed out that the current 2016 TP had some of these, especially in the 2021 amendments, but not all of the Vermont Conservation Design elements, and not the Act 59 and Act 146 changes, and those all need to be brought in.

-Larry expressed concern that there will not be enough Land Trust capacity to conserve the number of acres needed to achieve “30 by 30”, much less “50 by 50”, and that the largest of our Land Trusts, the Vermont LT, is currently limiting parcels of interest to those over 200 acres (or of significant ecological value). Most of Calais properties are smaller than 200 acres. [Note, the Northern Rivers Land Trust out of Hardwick has a 25-acre minimum, unless the parcel adjoins another they have in conservation, or has features of significant ecological value]

-Neal suggested that the TP should have a short “punchy” section upfront that motivates people to conserve land. He stated that Calais has relatively strict zoning which we should only change in smart ways and that we should find ways to incentivize conservation and build an ethos around smart development and conservation. He pointed to the Tree Farm program and their large white-and-green diamond signs that made landowners want to get into the program.

-Stephanie made the point that if we want to achieve our goals to protect core habitat and crossings and vernal pools, etc. we must increase zoning regulations. The biggest threat to habitat she said is not large-scale developments but the parcel-by-parcel “nickel-and-diming” development that takes place over time. She believes one of the biggest problems in that regard is the major/minor subdivision distinction; a minor allows subdivisions of three lots or less to take place upon a review by the Zoning Administrator which is based on set-backs, lot sizes, etc. and does not take into account all of the Natural Resources values that are considered by the Development Review Board in a major permit review.

-Neal spoke to his thoughts on improving the conservation priority map, doing overlays for development priority, agricultural lands, etc. He reiterated the need to find ways to incentivize conservation because in his opinion you can’t tell a landowner they can’t develop their property.

-Larry noted that Melanie Kehne, writing both the Housing and Natural Resources sections of the TP for the PC does not see conservation and housing development as being in conflict, the job is to do it in the

appropriate places. Larry reminded us that the Planning Commission's re-write timetable has held the Natural Resources section for consideration until later this summer, toward the end of the process, in order to give the CC plenty of time for input, such as in the language explaining the Town's values with respect to Natural Resources and other conservation goals.

-Neal suggested that the 60+ "Action Items" in the current TP be pared down five big items to be changed in the new TP. A universal "Amen".

-Larry requested CC members put down a list of bullet point suggestions for the Town Plan. We should begin with a mission statement, an underlying motivation so we can defend our ideas and suggested changes. The references Larry sent out, VCD, Matt Peters' two Calais inventories, etc. will be useful in this work. **CC members are asked to send these lists by 5/22 to Neal** who will organize them and put out a summary. Claire offered to help in this effort.

-Larry said he intends to invite Eric Sorenson back for our June 5th meeting for some "big picture" discussion.

The meeting was adjourned at 8:55 PM