

Calais Conservation Commission Minutes

11/1/2023 - Calais Town Office

Present: Larry Bush, Paul Olander - recorder, Stephanie Kaplan, Neal Maker, and via Zoom: Tracy Coolidge.

Guests: Eric Sorenson, and via Zoom: Melanie Kehne, Calais Planning Commission, and Scott Bassage

Proceedings:

Anna Matheson of Friends of Calais stopped by at the beginning of the meeting to deliver snacks to the meeting in appreciation for the work the Commission does. The members and guests enjoyed the snacks and appreciate being appreciated.

Chairman Larry Bush called the meeting to order at 7:06 pm. There were no changes to the published agenda.

The minutes from October 4, 2023 were approved as drafted.

Town Plan

Larry introduced Melanie Kehne and the central topic for the evening, the Planning Commission's revision of the Town Plan. Melanie is the designated PC member responsible for the re-write of the Natural Resources section. Larry stated he felt that in light of the conservation initiatives in the last few years this section needs significant additions and had enlisted the aid of Eric Sorenson, one of the principal contributors to the Natural Resources section of the current Town Plan, to help the CC do that for the PC.

Larry asked if the CC should provide a draft of the Natural Resources section to the PC. Melanie said a full draft wasn't necessary but that any language and input the CC wanted to provide would be welcome. She would share an initial draft for CC comment when it is ready, and said that her goal is to pare the document down and update it to address current law and issues. The draft should help to focus further discussions.

There followed some discussion of the nature of a TP, whether it was intended only to be "aspirational", that is, what the Town envisions for the future in rather general terms, or a document with specific protection goals in order to be enforceable, as both Act 250 and the Calais Zoning Regulations require "conformance with the TP". The CC is in favor of the latter type. Such a specific document will also serve as the basis for moving forward the needed zoning changes.

Eric Sorenson discussed the recently adopted Municipal Development Plan statute. The extensive requirements and the framework for "Natural Resources" sections of municipal plans in the statute come from the ANR's "Vermont Conservation Design" reference document, to which he was a primary contributor. He urged that the re-write stick to the concepts in VCD as much as possible.

The CC agrees with the PC that the extensive “action items” call-outs in the current Plan are excessive and were overly ambitious. The CC was charged, in whole or part, with 62 action items, of which ten were related to inventorying the Town’s resources, and the rest mostly related to education, outreach and assistance to landowners on various conservation topics, and the establishment of a program to encourage and facilitate conservation easements. Stephanie noted, and we all agreed, that while the call out boxes could be removed, the action items they contain serve to specify how the stated Goals of the Plan will be implemented, and should be retained.

We agreed that the task of land conservation is coming increasingly to the fore in light of the Act 59 goal to have 30% of Vermont land in conservation within the next 6 years, while only 10% of Calais is currently conserved. Neal and Eric discussed the fact that the Town Plan will need to address the need for more housing while protecting and conserving our resources – to provide a guide for zoning that will allow Calais to develop higher densities in the “right places”, the established Village Centers and using “best practices” in other areas, while actively conserving those areas in Town that most need protection – that balance between Housing and Conservation.

Melanie thanked us for our input and said she would welcome CC input and any additional suggestions for what we feel should be added, but reiterated that a complete CC version of a re-write was not necessary. She had no firm timeframe for when the draft would be available for CC review, but will keep in touch.

At the end of the meeting the CC took up Neal’s comments on the work that we as a Commission could be doing. We agreed we need to be conducting more info and outreach. Stephanie suggested we set up interesting forums for our residents on conservation topics on a regular basis. We could draw on our members and outside experts to present these. We agreed that efforts on Invasives should continue to be a part of our world but we need to discuss future steps.

Hawkins Pond Property

We closed with a brief touch on the Hawkins Pond property. We have learned that several land trusts are very interested in conserving this property. The Northeast Wilderness Trust is currently negotiating with the landowners, the Weisbarts, on a sale that would add this 500-acre property to the Trust’s Woodbury wilderness tract. The CC is gratified the Weisbarts are interested in conserving this parcel of such a significant ecological value.

The meeting adjourned at 8:56 PM.