

## **Report of the Conservation Commission**

The Conservation Commission was established in accordance with Revised Statutes Annotated (RSA) 36-A for the proper use and protection of Jaffrey's natural resources and watersheds. The Commission provides a focal point within the Town and town government for environmental concerns, joined in 2007 by the new Energy Committee. The Commission may advise the Planning Board and other local bodies on conservation matters. The Commission may act more directly to protect natural resources by acquiring land, either outright or through easements, with the approval of the Selectmen. The Commission may then manage these conservation areas. The Commission also manages designated Town forests. 2007 was a busy year for the Jaffrey Commission, highlighted by several key initiatives. Much was accomplished; but completion of a Natural Resources Inventory remains an important piece of unfinished business.

### **NATURAL RESOURCES INVENTORY (NRI)**

NRIs are the empirical foundation for much land-use decision making, and all conservation commissions in New Hampshire are mandated to produce one.

After repeated attempts to produce an NRI in-house, the Commission has decided to hire an environmental firm to complete the mapping and produce the final product in dialogue with the Commission. This turns out to be a common practice, as many commissions – ours included -- lack manpower with the time and skills required to produce a quality document. The services provided will be paid for out of Conservation Fund, with financial assistance from a grant by the state's Mooseplate Program.

Request for Qualifications (RFQs) have been solicited from six firms with the required experience. When received, bids will be ranked, interviews conducted, and a contract awarded. Every effort will be made to have a completed NRI in the hands of Town officials before Summer 2008.

### **ONE YEAR IN THE LIFE OF A COMMISSION**

The Commission regularly reviews and signs off on citizen applications to the NH Department of Environmental Services (DES) to dredge and

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fill and otherwise impact wetlands. There were many such cases in 2007, including clearance for the School District to build the new track facilities below Conant High School, a wetlands crossing to enable access to a new home off Parker Road, a dock permit on Gilson Pond, and a culvert crossing on Red Gate Road.

In addition, the Commission in 2007 advised and otherwise assisted Jaffrey citizens on more than 20 projects, large and small, one example entailing maintenance of The Swale in Jaffrey Center. Most of these projects involved wetlands, but some concerned ponds, roads, and trees. A particularly exciting focus of the past year has been to enhance protections on privately owned lands, including farmland and specific properties astride Sanders Road and upper Woodbury Hill Road, where the potential exists to conserve more than 1,000 acres of unfragmented land and wildlife corridors east of Thorndike Pond, including adjacent lands in Dublin and Peterborough. The Commission also finalized securing a conservation easement, to be administered by The Monadnock Conservancy, for Children's Woods in exchange for DES approval of the new baseball field's minor intrusion on wetlands bordering the Contoocook River below Blake Street. Such exchanges benefit the Town and are becoming an increasingly common means of combining needed development with the attainment of conservation goals.

A related approach is for the Commission to pay transaction costs (as for surveys and appraisals) to facilitate placing private lands in conservation easement. In 2007 the Commission assisted The Monadnock Conservancy in helping the McKelvie family to preserve more than 2,000 feet of shoreline on Frost Pond and is currently working on several other possibilities. The McKelvie easement will protect water quality while creating opportunities for public recreation.

In an example of regional cooperation, the Commission in 2007 was consulted by the Northeast Wilderness Trust concerning its Wapack Wilderness Conservation Campaign to purchase 1,400 acres along the Wapack Trail in New Ipswich and Rindge previously owned by Hampshire Country School. This purchase by the Trust is within the Quabbin (MA) to Cardigan (NH) corridor earmarked for preservation by numerous conservation groups.

### **Cheshire Pond Conservation Area (CPCA): Purchase and Management Plan**

The most consequential use of the Conservation Fund is the outright purchase of significant conservation land. At Town Meeting in March 2007 Jaffrey citizens voted to ratify the Commission's decision to purchase 60 acres behind the northwestern shore of Cheshire Pond. Purchase, closing costs, and attorney's fees totaled circa \$180K, with most of the total coming from the Conservation Fund, supplemented by citizen donations. Benefits to the Town include securing contiguous wooded open space on the north side of downtown, complementing Children's Woods/Carey Park to the south; providing recreational opportunities close to the Town center; protecting the water quality and fish habitats of the Contoocook River and Cheshire Pond; and protecting the large aquifer underneath the CPCA on which much of the Town's water supply depends.

Since purchase, much of the Commission's attention has been devoted to developing a management plan for the new **Cheshire Pond Conservation Area (CPCA)**. Between August and November, six publicly announced meetings were held to consider options and decide on permitted and prohibited uses. To facilitate the process, the Commission hired an Antioch student intern, **Elizabeth Scotten Finn**, who researched state law, identified practices in other towns, and recruited expert testimony (notably by Jaffrey Chief of Police William Oswalt and by Sergeant Craig Morocco of NH Fish & Game). The management plan nears completion as this report goes to press. The Commission hopes to have the CPCA ready for the public's enjoyment by Spring/Summer 2008.

### **Children's Woods**

In a related development, the Commission turned its attention to Children's Woods, thanks in large part to the enterprise of **David Edscorn**, a Jaffrey high school student and Eagle Scout candidate. David proposed – and the Commission approved – creation of new trails and signage, plus a general clean-up, in the Woods, with David and teams he organized doing the work in September/October.

The results are spectacular. The new trails will facilitate access to the Woods by the elderly and infirm, while adding to everyone's enjoyment of

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this beautiful natural park so close to the downtown area. David's accomplishment was recognized by the Selectmen in December, and the Commission was reminded that its own oversight of Children's Woods and other Town forests needs invigoration (see below).

The project received financial support from the Commission-administered Gordon Trust Fund (a fund created by **Robert Gordon** specifically for maintenance and enhancement of Children's Woods and Carey Park). Technical assistance, especially for the elegant new trail signs, was provided by the Jaffrey Parks and Recreation Department.

### **Other Activities**

The Commission is proactive in staying abreast of real estate offerings affecting open space. When appropriate, the Commission discusses alternative plans for land set-asides with owners, developers, and agents. These discussions are not intended to prevent land from being developed but, rather, to explore options for incorporating conservation criteria and goals into development that is likely to occur in any event. Negotiations on two significant properties – on Dublin Road and Squantum Road – began in 2007 and will continue.

As in the past, the Commission participated in the 2007 Riverfest in June, co-sponsored two Jaffrey students to attend Wildwood Camp in Rindge, and offered advisory opinions to the Planning Board and ZBA on several applications. Individual members also served on other bodies, including the Contoocook River Advisory Committee, the Jaffrey Center Village Improvement Society, and committees established by the Planning Board to consider changes to the Jaffrey Land Use Plan. In 2007 the Commission agreed to pay the purchase price for river-identification signs for the two main bridges in Jaffrey that crosses the Contoocook River (a request by the Rivers Management Program, in cooperation with DES). The Commission used the Conservation Fund to obtain the signs.

During the past year, the Commission sponsored two public presentations of note:

- A workshop presented by **Carolyn Russell** of the NH Department of Environmental Services on "Minimizing the Impact of Development Using Conservation Subdivision Design", held at the Meetinghouse

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in May. This event was intended to assist the Planning Board's ordinance review and is part of a new effort by the Commission to reconcile development and conservation goals.

- “An Evening on Watersheds” featuring a video (“After the Storm”) prepared by the Environmental Protection Agency and the Weather Channel, held at the Jaffrey Public Library in June (co-sponsored by the Department of Public Works). This program highlighted the negative consequences to human populations of neglecting and/or abusing riparian systems.

In addition, members of the Commission attended several conferences organized by others in an on-going effort to improve the Commission's capabilities. These included, in 2007, the NH Land Conservation Coalition's meeting in Concord focusing on open space development; Saving Special Places 2007 in Londonderry addressing easements and other land protection options; the NH Association of Conservation Commissions' 37th Annual Meeting in Concord updating ConCom mandates, procedures, and opportunities; and the Municipal Law Lecture Series in Jaffrey reviewing state law and recent court rulings.

In September 2007 **Brenda Bhatti** presented a proposal to the Selectmen that the Town hire a part-time **Natural Resources/Land Use Agent** (title TBD). Jaffrey has a growing need for professional-level assistance to monitor, manage, and advise the Town on a broad range of issues, from GIS mapping and land acquisitions to site reviews and liaison with regional and state organizations. The proposal is timely given the emphasis in the Master Plan Update on environmental protection and maintaining rural character in the face of mounting pressures on both. The Commission believes that other Town boards would also benefit from such a position, and it is anticipated that much of the salary obligation associated with it would be covered by grants that the Agent would attract. This proposal is under discussion.

Finally, the Commission worked hard in 2007 to improve its own deliberation and voting procedures, expense authorizations, financial oversight, and record keeping. These improvements are intended to ensure compli-

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ance with state law and otherwise increase transparency and accountability. Also in place is a new policy to share the Commission's agendas and minutes with the Planning Board, ZBA, Selectmen, and Town Manager.

### **LOOKING AHEAD: PRIORITIES FOR 2008**

- First and foremost: Complete the Natural Resources Inventory.
- Finalize the CPCA management plan and take practical steps to make this community resource effectively available for public enjoyment.
- Upgrade oversight of Children's Woods and other Town forests. Discussions are underway with the Jaffrey Middle School to establish a student Conservation Corps to help monitor and provide remedial attention.
- Correct wetlands mapping on the Town's tax maps.
- Continue the dialogue among Town boards to assess the merit of adding a Natural Resources/Land Use Agent to the payroll.
- Explore opportunities to strengthen the Conservation Fund.
- Update and improve the Commission's website.

### **TRANSITIONS**

The Commission experienced a significant change in personnel in 2007. After four years of extraordinary leadership, **Brenda Bhatti** resigned as Chair of the Commission at the end of June and was succeeded by **John O. Field**. Brenda continues to serve on the Commission as Treasurer and technical expert on wetlands and land preservation. Leaving the Commission in 2007 were **Birgit Johanson** and **John Zimardo**, both valued members whose many contributions will be missed. Joining the Commission were **Carolyn D. Garretson**, **William J. Graf**, and **James R. Bearce**, all of whom bring new skills that promise to enhance the Commission's capacity in the years ahead.

Respectfully submitted,

John O. Field, Chair  
James R. Bearce  
Brenda Bhatti  
Nora Barton Bryant  
Carolyn D. Garretson  
William J. Graf  
Ronald H. Rogstad, Alternate