

## — *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 its government for environmental concerns, joined in 2007 by the 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.

2008 was a busy and productive year for the Jaffrey Commission. Much was accomplished; and several initiatives launched in 2008, or earlier, are sufficiently advanced that they should be completed by Town Meeting in March 2009. Among the highlights:

The Commission completed purchase of a conservation easement on 56 acres of meadow and woods off Squantum Road known as Gray Goose Farm. This property is a watershed vital to protecting the aquifer that sustains the existing town well and a prospective new town well on its downside. The Commission also funded a baseline survey documenting the property's natural features. When completed, in January 2009, the survey will assist the Commission in its annual monitoring of the property to ensure future compliance with terms of the easement. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first time that the Commission will assume responsibility for managing an easement on behalf of the town.

- The Commission completed its management plan for the new Cheshire Pond Conservation Area (CPCA), the 66-acre parcel purchased by the Commission in 2007. This property also protects a large aquifer on which much of the town's water supply depends, while protecting water quality and fish habitats of the Contoocook River and Cheshire Pond and providing recreational opportunities close to the town center. The product of a lengthy process of public deliberation, the management plan lists permitted and not permitted uses; it may be found on the town website.
- Most importantly, the Commission expects to complete, at long last, Jaffrey's first Natural Resource Inventory (NRI) in February 2009.

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This has been a major preoccupation in 2008, especially working with the contractor on preparation of maps locating natural features of significance. Completion of the report will be accompanied by a public rollout. It is hoped that the NRI will serve as a strong foundation for deliberation, in 2009 and beyond, concerning the town's priorities in land preservation and potential new ways of funding land acquisition. When finalized, the NRI will be posted on the town website.

An important responsibility is assistance to property owners. The Commission regularly reviews and signs off on citizen applications to the NH Department of Environmental Services (DES), and this often involves extensive discussion with owners concerning options and a preferred course of action. There were eight such instances in 2008, ranging from wetlands crossings to tree removal and placement of a retaining wall. Additional cases entailed possible violations. The Commission also deliberated with the Selectmen on issues ranging from rights of public access to land coming under easement to the status of a wilderness road no longer in use and repeal of a 1987 ordinance restricting the discharge of firearms. Similarly, it sent advisory letters to the Planning Board and Zoning Board on several proposals having environmental impact, the most significant of which urged upholding the wetlands ordinance in a case involving shore frontage requirements.

In a development having broad implications, the Commission in 2008 began interacting with citizens and officials in neighboring towns, mostly to protect lands whose ecosystems cross town lines and/or comprise a contiguous expanse of unfragmented wilderness. The Commission encouraged initiatives in Dublin and Peterborough that have a direct bearing on land in Jaffrey. The Commission also advised its counterpart in Peterborough on pitfalls to avoid in doing a natural resource inventory, and it shared project documents on Jaffrey's NRI with the Selectmen of Troy. Inter-town collaboration is likely to expand in the future, something the Commission views as a definite plus for all concerned.

In 2008, as in previous years, the Commission contributed to Riverfest, manning a booth with maps and photographs of interest, plus informational handouts on watersheds, pressures on land, ticks and wildlife-related diseases. The Commission also sponsored a nature walk in Children's

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Woods led by Paul St. Pierre. Again this year the Commission provided scholarship support for two Jaffrey students to attend Camp Wildwood, an educational program in Rindge sponsored by Mass Audubon.

Other developments of note include arranging with the Town Clerk to ensure that any conditions in DES-approved projects are brought to the attention of the Building Inspector so that he can monitor compliance, and clarification with the Town Manager of what is and is not permitted under the new Right-to-Know Law concerning use of email communications in the conduct of the Commission's work. The latter is one of several initiatives to streamline operations. Others include improved management of the Conservation Fund, specifically with regard to tracking revenues, commitments, and expenditures associated with different projects; centralization of project files at the Town Offices to bring previously disparate documents (surveys, appraisals, environmental assessments, deeds, etc.) together and thereby facilitate ease of access; posting more materials of public interest on the town website and keeping them current; and otherwise enhancing visibility and accountability to the larger community.

The Commission held its first-ever retreat in April, facilitated by Brenda Bhatti. Members of the Commission also attended the annual "Saving Special Places" symposium, which brings together leading conservation organizations throughout New Hampshire, and six other conferences in 2008. Subject matter covered in these meetings include the state's Wildlife Action Plan, changes to the Shoreland Protection Act, the new round of Moose Plate grants, and requirements of the updated Right-to-Know Law passed this year. Especially valuable was a "Land Conservation Leadership Training Program" sponsored by The Monadnock Conservancy (MC), the Society for the Protection of New Hampshire Forests, and other organizations, which featured five three-hour sessions from October to December on easement acquisition and management, the work of land trusts, outreach to landowners, selection criteria, and program evaluation. This training program will culminate in a "Land Summit" of towns in the Monadnock region at the end of January 2009, followed by extension of MC's Community Conservation Partnership to towns south and east of the mountain, potentially including Jaffrey.

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As we enter 2009, the Commission is working on an action plan to enhance public access to and enjoyment of the Cheshire Pond Conservation Area. A similar effort is underway to improve the Commission's management of Children's Woods, including possible creation of a school-based conservation corps for trail maintenance and ecological studies. Clarification of the Commission's responsibility for managing other town forests is also on the agenda, as is the possibility of using "Leave No Child Inside" legislation to leverage funding that could link easements, farmland, and other open space to educational opportunities for children. The Commission has also begun to examine offering support to other organizations whose conservation work on the ground – for example, protecting Jaffrey's lakes and ponds from invasive species of exotic aquatic plants – is of clear benefit to the town.

Looking ahead, completion of the NRI is an opportunity for Jaffrey to think more ambitiously and plan more consciously for land preservation in the years ahead. Among the options for consideration are the following:

- Establishment of an Open Space Committee comprised of town officials and citizens to prioritize lands for protection and to develop a strategy of engagement with owners of high-value conservation property. Negotiations are currently underway to place easements on several strategically located properties in Jaffrey, making it all the more important that the town's own priorities come into play.
- Creation of a Land Acquisition Capital Reserve Fund to enable purchase of high-value land when on the market and possibly to secure easements on land remaining in the same hands. The Conservation Commission's ability to pursue these objectives via the Conservation Fund has been greatly diminished by recent purchases (CPCA and Gray Goose; total of \$340K) and by the loss of 50% of timber cut revenues in the coming decade. Projecting past revenues from timber cuts to this time period suggests an aggregate loss to the Conservation Fund of \$122.2K between 2008 and 2018. The Conservation Fund currently has only \$7.6K in uncommitted funds available for discretionary spending. Revenues from the Land Use Change Tax will help; but they have averaged only \$40.7K per year over the past six years, an annual flow insufficient to permit costly acquisitions more than once or twice a decade.
- Participation in The Monadnock Conservancy's Community

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Conservation Partnership to access professional advice and organizational capacity, augment available resources, share cost burdens, and coordinate with adjacent towns participating in the Partnership.

Transitions: The Commission bade farewell to Brenda Bhatti in 2008. Brenda was a long-time member, chair, resident expert, and friend whose vision, skill, and tenacity brought the Commission to new heights of achievement. She is now applying her extraordinary energy to the preservation of Jaffrey's farmland. The Commission welcomed Patricia T. Weiner as a new Alternate Member, and her presence has already been felt in a most positive way. Joining the Commission's deliberations in 2008 as the Selectmen's Representative is Donald A. MacIsaac. Don's guidance and advice have been very helpful in reality-checking ideas big and small. Another welcome resource is Jo Anne Carr, whose arrival in August as the town's Director of Planning and Economic Development has been of tremendous benefit to the Commission. An internal development of significance is the willingness of Carolyn D. Garretson to replace Brenda Bhatti as the Commission's Financial Officer, in which capacity she has already made huge contributions in a short time.

Respectfully submitted,

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