

DRAFT CONSERVATION COMMISSION MINUTES
March 15, 2021
ZOOM MEETING, 7:00 p.m.

PRESENT: Steve Moffatt, Chair; Diane Morgan, Treasurer; June Cook, Secretary; Susie Houston, Select Board Liaison; Farley Brown, Carol Maroni, Ashley Nunery, Elinor Osborn, Heidi Rich

GUESTS: Jens Hilke, Conservation Planner, Fish & Wildlife; Brian Machesney

Steve introduced Jens Hilke who presented an overview of ACT 171 and ramifications affecting municipalities and town plans.

Hilke explained his services are free to communities. Their office is able to help with presentations, workshops, mapping, and other conservation related issues. His presentation covered three points: Forest Planning, Craftsbury Town Plan, ACT 171 examples.

He explained the benefits of conserving large forest blocks: clean air and water; scenic vistas; hunting and fishing; wildlife watching; sequestering carbon; wildlife habitat and corridors; forest products, more biological and ecological diversity. Fewer tick borne illnesses are seen in large forest blocks. Forest blocks are important aspects of Vermont's recreation and tourism industry, besides providing forestry products. Healthy forests lead to healthy communities and healthy economy.

Maps from 1962, 1980, and 2011 showed the changing forest/landscape. The North/South forest connections have not been impacted to the degree as the West/East patterns of forest blocks. Craftsbury is important in the network of forest connectivities.

Five steps to follow: community assessment, develop shared vision, identify goals and objectives, map future vision, identify priorities and objectives. Maintaining and improving forest blocks and habitat connectors requires Town Plan and Regional Plan to (1) identify important forest blocks and habitat connectors and (2) plan for land development in those areas to minimize forest fragmentation.

Mapping future land development and maintaining forest blocks is important to Craftsbury as there are some large blocks and some that are micro connectors, riparian networks, stream and habitat connectors.

The question was raised as to how much control does a town's Planning Commission have or authority to limit land development in a community without zoning. The Town Plan offers a minimum of regulatory constraints which can be interpreted under the ACT 250 process. The language in the Town Plan would have

to speak to regulating private property rights versus land development. The new Craftsbury Conservation Fund is an important tool that can help with easements.

A large portion of Craftsbury is in current land use and is an incentive that has helped to keep forest blocks interconnected. A land parcelization map showed the loss of larger blocks and gaining of 1- and 2-acre parcels. Craftsbury lost 6.2% of 50-acre or more woodland parcels and 13% of 200-acre or bigger parcels. The 1- and 2-acre parcels gained 8.8%. The biggest threat is urban sprawl and fragmentation.

Municipalities won't be subject to ACT 171 until 2024. Craftsbury could have more in its town plan regarding forestland and its impact. Nothing in town plan addresses development sprawl. Hilke indicated that the town is leaving it up to landowners to determine what the future will look like. The Vermont Brand actually is driving urban sprawl. Every New Jersey transit urges, "Come to Vermont."

Town maps need updating as no forest blocks or habitat connectors on natural resources constraints maps. There is no future vision depicted in town mapping. A bigger conversation is needed in town about balance between private property rights and future land use.

The Commission has worked on the Town Plan's Natural Heritage section and ACT 171 is forcing the town to look at this statute and its impacts. Forest blocks can be areas of natural cover surrounded by agriculture and development. Local forest blocks can be different from state mapping. The Newfane Town Plan shows forest sections and scenic sections. Wolcott and Hyde Park have ACT 171 mapping.

Steve raised the concern of people of average means being able to afford to live in the community. From 2004 to 2016, land value has increased 232% (?). Conservation of land isn't driving that but immigration into Vermont is driving that exponential increase. Defining where a town wants growth can identify affordable housing as well.

Susie raised the issue of the Standing Tree initiatives and pro-forest development. Old forests have greater biological diversities and more layers of growth. Younger forests are "grabbing carbon" and old forests are "keeping carbon."

The next meeting of the Commission will be held at 7:00 p.m. on April 19.

Submitted by June Pichel Cook, Secretary