

## **What Are Conservation Commissions?**

In Vermont, conservation commissions are advisory bodies that exist in many towns across the state. Broadly, they are established to help communities protect and enhance their natural resources. In 1977, Vermont passed the enabling legislation (24 V.S.A. 4501) to establish municipal conservation commissions. By 1996, 96 Vermont towns had conservation commissions or similar committees. Today there are just over 100 conservation commissions in Vermont.

## **How Are Conservation Commissions Established?**

According to state law, "A conservation commission may be created at any time when a municipality votes to create one, or, if the charter of a municipality permits it, when the legislative body of the municipality votes to create one."

This means that either the selectboard (or in some cases a city council) may create a conservation commission or, alternatively, voters at town meeting may vote to create one.

## **What Can Conservation Commissions Do?**

Under state law, municipal conservation commissions may do things like make inventories of the town's natural resources including lands that have agricultural, scientific, historical, educational, or cultural value or important, or provide ecosystem services like groundwater recharge, stormwater control, flood protection, wildlife habitat and other values; receive gifts of land for conservation purposes; assist and advise the local planning commission and select board on natural resource issues; and encouraging

the public's understanding of their local environment through educational activities. Conservation commissions do not have regulatory power as do some other bodies, like select boards or planning commissions; conservation commissions are advisory boards only.

### **What Types of Projects Can Conservation Commissions Undertake?**

The projects that a town conservation commission can become involved in will vary depending on the needs of the community. The following is only a partial list of the typical conservation commission activities:

- Work for the protection of wetlands, forests, or agricultural land
- Test the water quality of lakes, streams, and rivers
- Manage town-owned lands
- Encourage energy conservation development of renewable energy
- Work with the planning commission on the town plan
- Develop a resource guide to conservation options
- Purchase land for the town's conservation needs
- Encourage the establishment of a land conservation fund
- Organize education workshops, walks and talks series for local citizens or in local schools

### **What's the Relationship between Conservation Commissions and Planning Commissions?**

Conservation commissions can work effectively with local planning commissions and other local, regional, and state organizations and agencies. Often planning commissions are overburdened with the details of

other town work. A conservation commission can focus its energies on that town's natural resources and thereby ensure that the conservation interests of its community are being addressed. Conservation commissions can also assist planning commissions with the review and evaluation of development proposals. The mere presence of conservation commissions has encouraged residents to approach commissions with conservation concerns and goals to protect or donate their land.

### **How Are Conservation Commissions Funded?**

Many commissions in Vermont have annual appropriations from their towns' budgets for operating expenses, usually ranging from \$1,000 to \$2,000 per year. However, many commissions have operated successfully for years with no budget. Conservation commissions can carry out fundraisers or seek public or private funds. Grants are also available for a wide variety of projects from private organizations or state and federal agencies. The AVCC also offers the annual Tiny Grant program for conservation commissions that are members of AVCC