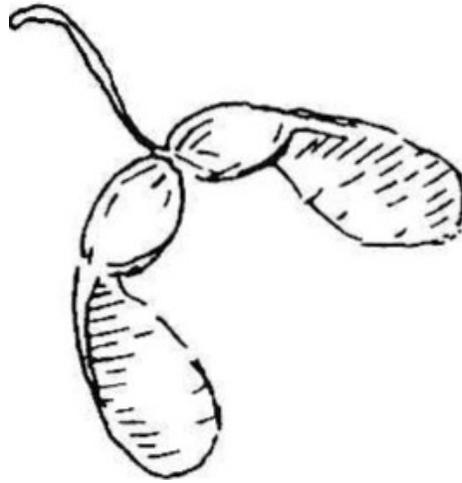


VERMONT CONSERVATION COMMISSION HANDBOOK



2021 Edition:

Association of Vermont Conservation Commissions

1998 Edition:

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Special thanks to all the authors of conservation success stories. This work is featured as case studies throughout the document.

AVCC also acknowledges and honors Vermont's dedicated conservation commissioners -the individuals who sow seeds for Vermont's future. Through grassroots stewardship of their town's natural and cultural resources, conservation commissions work for the health and survival of the natural world we all depend on.

FOREWORD

Town conservation commissions play a vital role in the interconnected web of partners that make conservation happen in Vermont. These dedicated volunteers are the “boots on the ground” folks who know their own communities – both the land and the people - the best. Local conservation commissions help assess natural and cultural resources in their communities. They provide education and learning opportunities about the environment to interested members of the public. Conservation commissions also help towns acquire, protect, manage and/or steward properties important to their communities. The Association of Vermont Conservation Commissions is the glue that brings these town-level groups of volunteers together, providing support and resources so that local commissions can achieve their goals.

This updated handbook is a wonderful and much-needed how-to manual for existing conservation commissions, and for those interested in forming a new commission in their town. The handbook provides comprehensive information about how to form, operate, fund, and achieve success as a conservation commission, within the context of the broader conservation goals and landscape of the state. The numerous case studies and success stories included further demonstrate the varied ways that committed, local volunteers have made a difference in their towns.

The lockdowns and social distancing required by the COVID-19 pandemic have highlighted the importance of safe, local conservation areas accessible and available to the public for dispersed outdoor recreation. And with each passing year, we feel the growing impact of our changing climate, reinforcing the critical importance of protecting the rivers, wetlands, forests and meadows that provide such myriad benefits to all of us: wildlife habitat, carbon sequestration, clean water and air, to name just a few. Conservation has never felt more urgent – and this handbook will help inspire and support the people who help make it happen. As Margaret Mead so famously said: *Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful committed citizens can change the world: indeed it's the only thing that ever has.*

Nancy Everhart

Former AVCC Board Chair

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

1-1 What Is a Conservation Commission?

In 1977, Vermont passed the enabling legislation (24 VS.A. §4501) that allows municipalities to establish conservation commissions. A conservation commission is a citizen advisory board whose purpose is to promote the stewardship of natural and cultural resources in the community. Conservation commissions derive their strength from being an official arm of local government. Thus, they are a recognized and effective way for citizens to accomplish community-based conservation.

A conservation commission is comprised of three to nine members who are appointed by the town's legislative body. Conservation commissioners serve as volunteers who are organized to speak on behalf of the environment. The state enabling legislation establishes Conservation commissions as advisory, not regulatory, bodies and recommends but does not mandate activities of a commission. Therefore, each conservation commission can tailor its projects and activities to the needs and interests of its municipality and its unique set of natural and cultural resources.

These activities can include both short-term, discrete projects as well as long-term, on-going projects. An important aspect of conservation commissions is that they promote long-term stewardship of their town's natural and cultural resources for the benefit of present and future generations. A key activity of conservation commissions is often the inventory and study of the natural and cultural resources in town. Activities that flow from inventories include rewrites of sections of the town plan, land conservation projects, and the establishment of local land conservation funds. Commissions also can be instrumental in conserving the working landscapes of their communities by encouraging sustainable agricultural and forestry land uses.

Another important role of conservation commissions is education of local government officials and townspeople about local resources. An environmentally informed citizenry broadens the base of support for stewardship and conservation. Conservation commissions also help communities maintain their sense of place and community. A sense of community and a sense of place are based on local familiarity, rootedness, neighborliness, belonging, and pride. They influence how people relate to and modify their natural and built landscapes. Commissions also work to revive the tradition of community-based activity.

Given the breadth of conservation commissions' area of concern, it is clear that conservation commissions are more than the sum of their projects. These municipal commissions touch the lives of Vermonters and of future generations by helping to shape and implement a vision for their communities. Each conservation commission leaves a legacy of its stewardship of the natural and cultural resources in town. As of 2021, 120 towns have established conservation commissions or similar committees (see [map on page 5](#)). That is 44% of Vermont's 267 municipal entities. (Note: that includes towns as well as villages or cities that plan separately e.g. Enosburgh & Enosburg Falls). These commissions are working at the grassroots level to build and maintain environmentally healthy and sustainable communities.

1-2 The Purpose of This Handbook

Conservation commissioners have been asking for this handbook for many years. Why? Because compiling clear background information in one convenient place helps commissions fulfill their duties and responsibilities and understand their place in town government. It also identifies resources and strategies to help commissions organize themselves, build confidence and support, and conduct their work.

We hope that this handbook will help motivate and inspire present conservation commissioners and will encourage the formation of new commissions in Vermont.

Originally formatted in a loose-leaf binder, this publication has been updated to digital format. The PDF version is hyperlinked & bookmarked. Although the information in this handbook is accurate at the time of publication, laws, regulations, and other information can change. Any person using this handbook should check the current version of statutes, regulations, and other documents for up-to-the-date information.

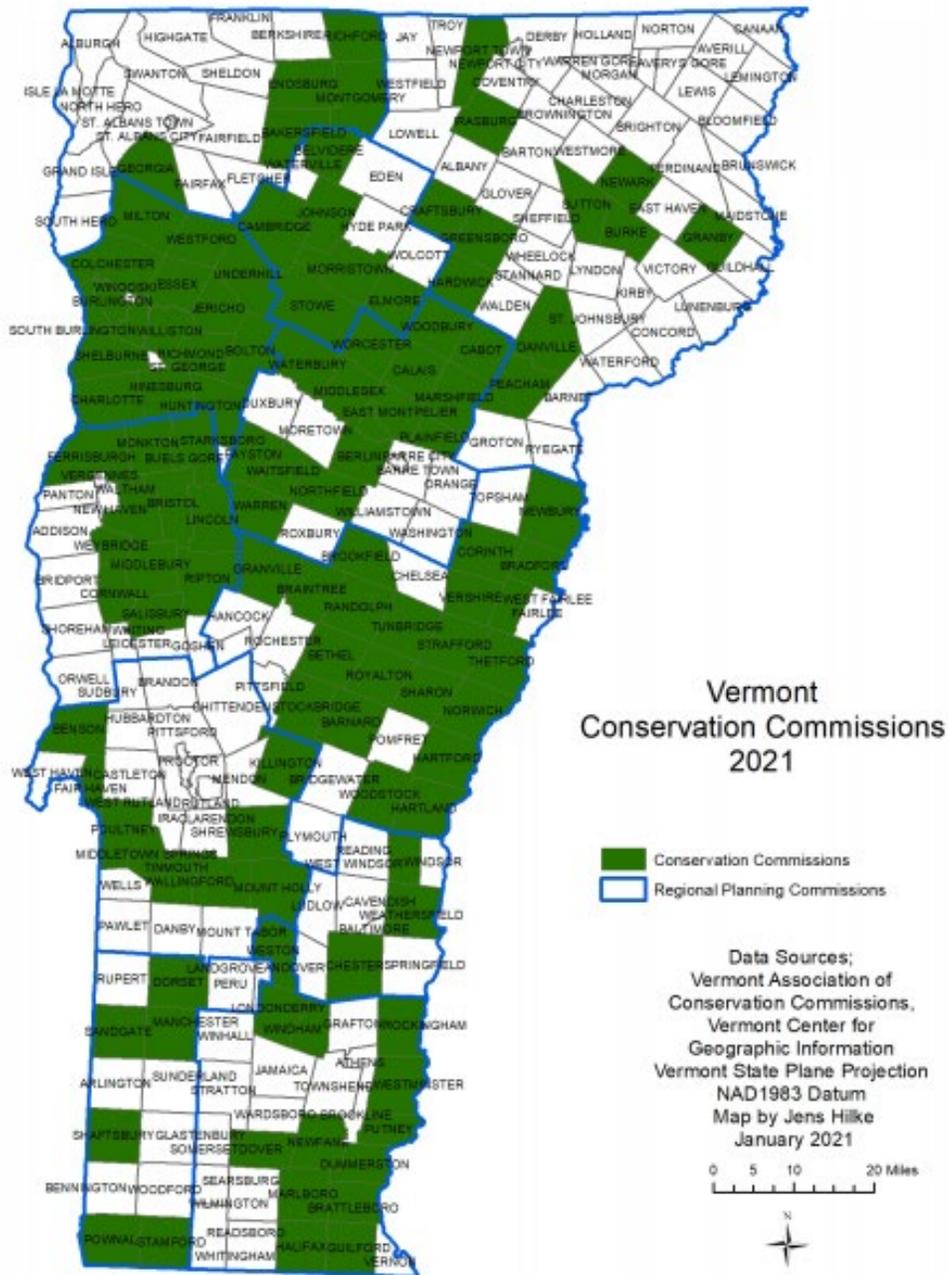
1-3 Association of Vermont Conservation Commissions

The Association of Vermont Conservation Commissions (AVCC) is a private, nonprofit organization serving the municipal conservation commissions in Vermont. <https://vtconservation.com/> Informally started in 1990, AVCC became a private, nonprofit 501(c)(3) organization registered with the Internal Revenue Service and the State of Vermont in 1996.

AVCC's mission is to support Vermont's conservation commissions and to encourage the establishment of more conservation commissions in the state. AVCC is a membership organization, with conservation commissions as well as individuals as members. It is governed by a set of bylaws and overseen by a volunteer board of directors. It has a 9-member board of directors; four Directors are elected by ballot by the membership at an annual meeting and serve three-year terms as volunteers and five Directors are appointed by Vermont Natural Resources Council involving agreements with organizations such as the Agency of Natural Resources or Vermont Land Trust who have some capacity to assist and help cover costs of staff time. These Directors serve five-year terms. Association of Vermont Conservation Commissions became an affiliate of Vermont Natural Resources Council in 2012.

AVCC is supported by membership dues, program and publication revenues, and grants and donations from public and private sources. Revenues are used to support the activities and purposes of AVCC, which include, an annual [Conservation Summit](#), [Tiny Grant Program](#), maintaining the [library of Success Stories](#), listserv, regional trainings & workshops, and serving as a resource for conservation commissions.

Map of Conservation Commission in VT



Do you know of a conservation commission that is missing from the map?

Please let us know! Email us at vtconservation@gmail.com

CHAPTER 2: STARTING AND BUILDING A CONSERVATION COMMISSION

This chapter discusses the enabling legislation for conservation commissions, describes how to start a commission, discusses why citizens volunteer for their towns, and offers suggestions for the appointment of members.

2-1 The Enabling Legislation

The enabling legislation for municipal conservation commissions is in Vermont Statutes Annotated 24 VS.A. § 4501 to 4506. See [Vermont Statutes Online](#) for a complete copy of the enabling legislation. The state enabling legislation passed in 1977. It describes the creation of conservation commissions, memberships and appointments, rules of operation, and the powers and duties of a commission. It is broad in scope and gives the commissions considerable freedom but not a lot of guidance.

The legislation describes potential roles of conservation commissions but does not contain a purpose statement or mandate. As a result, questions may arise about the extent of a conservation commission's role. Individual conservation commissions in Vermont have dealt with this issue by drafting rules and mission statements to clarify and guide their work (see [Chapter 3, Rules](#) and [Chapter 4, Mission statement](#)).

Most municipalities and conservation commissions in Vermont interpret the enabling legislation as giving conservation commissions guidelines for their duties and responsibilities but leaving open the possibility of additional roles. Functionally, and to their credit, conservation commissions undertake a variety of activities related to the stewardship of the natural and cultural resources in their communities.

The enabling legislation clearly specifies the advisory nature of conservation commissions and includes the word “may” and not the word “shall”. Commissions are expected to work closely with the legislative body and the planning and zoning bodies. In general, the legislative body in Vermont municipalities is the selectboard or the city council. For example, conservation commissions may recommend the purchase of land or rights thereto to the selectboard. The commission may provide advisory environmental evaluations to the local planning commission or zoning board of adjustment. It is also possible for the conservation commission to gain standing and give testimony at an Act 250 district environmental commission hearing.

There is also an educational role for conservation commissions, as specified in the enabling legislation. They are to encourage the public's understanding of local natural and cultural resources and conservation issues related to them. See [Chapter 5 Communication and Engagement](#)

With these advisory and educational roles, conservation commissions can influence the decisions of local government and private individuals through the use and dissemination of timely, accurate information. If questions arise concerning the powers and duties of a specific conservation commission, the commissioners should consult the state enabling legislation as well as any relevant municipal documents and should seek legal advice, if necessary.

2-2 Proposing a Conservation Commission

In Vermont municipalities, both the reasons for forming a conservation commission and the methods to do so have varied widely. Citizens in each town must decide why they want to form a conservation commission. The following are the most frequent reasons. A conservation commission empowers people to take responsibility for their town's natural and cultural resources. Commissions create and foster a sense of caring and a sense of community. A conservation commission can be a tremendous help to the planning commission, the selectboard, and other town groups.

Often, people want to form a conservation commission because they feel no group in town is stepping back to look at the "big picture" or to take the long-range view. A conservation commission works to create healthy and sustainable communities for present and future generations.

Sometimes, citizens form a conservation commission because of a specific threat to the town's natural or cultural resources. Other commissions are formed because the members want to conserve the town's working landscape or to promote stewardship of natural and cultural resources. Education of the citizenry is the reason some commissions form. By encouraging the recognition of and appreciation for natural and culture resources, conservation actions may follow.

[Creation of the Granville Conservation Commission](#)

Granville was severely affected by tropical storm Irene in 2011, which lead to FEMA purchasing two properties along the White River, totaling 5 acres. The town of Grandville acquired the land, which spurred community members to think about creating a conservation commission. In 2013 a petition was circulated to have a town meeting to vote on forming a conservation commission. The town voted in favor and four people were found to join the commission. They meet quarterly and as of.. [Read More](#)

In some cases, organizations outside the town encourage the formation of conservation commissions because these groups see the benefits of working with a locally based conservation organization that serves as the focus point for communications with the town. Often, conservation commissions become working partners with these outside organizations, which include regional and statewide land trusts and groups involved with inventorying and conserving the flora and fauna of Vermont.

The initiative and methods used to form conservation commissions have come from various sources. In some towns, one person has spearheaded the effort. In others, local planning commissions have led the way. For example, when planning commissioners are updating their town plan, the recommendation to form a conservation commission sometimes is included. In other towns, an existing local committee has evolved into a conservation commission.

There is no one preferred method for initiating a conservation commission. However, a common and successful technique is to gain support for the formation of a commission from a core group of townspeople. The following is a general approach. Note that the order of actions can be rearranged to suit each town's unique characteristics.

First, talk with other residents in town and find several who are interested in starting a conservation commission. Approach the planning commission and ask for their support. Point out specifically how planning commissioners as well as the town can benefit from having a

conservation commission. (Often, there are items in the town plan that are not being addressed and that a conservation commission could work on.)

Also, approach the selectboard. Describe the reasons for wanting a conservation commission and determine the selectboard's level of support. If there is strong support, ask the selectboard if they would add the creation of a conservation commission as a ballot item to be voted on at a town meeting. If there is not strong support, then a petition will have to be organized to get the item on the ballot.

Next, hold an informational meeting to discuss the benefits of a commission in town, including potential projects or activities. This meeting could be a small meeting among interested persons held at someone's home. Another approach is to hold a public meeting for any interested townspeople and local government officials. Conservation commissions from neighboring towns or the executive director or board members of AVCC can be invited to present background information.

Next, develop an action plan to create a commission. This plan should include a statement as to why the town should form a conservation commission and the benefits it will provide. A timeline can be included, based upon the deadline for getting a conservation commission on the ballot for a warned town meeting.

In some cases, it may take years for a town to form a conservation commission from the time one resident starts promoting the idea to the town voting to create a conservation commission. There are many reasons for this. Often, the interest and enthusiasm simmer with one person or a few people, or the supporters wait until they have a critical mass of interested people in town. Sometimes, a town does not form a conservation commission until there is a specific project or issue that serves as a catalyst. At other times, an interested and supportive selectboard or planning commission provides the needed impetus to move a conservation commission to reality. Furthermore, the timing has to be right, not only in terms of the town's capacity (e.g. if there are big projects going on that are involving many volunteer efforts) as well as the timing of the vote (See below but often the warning needs to be given to the town in January and so preliminary meetings need to happen in the fall).

2-3 Voting to Form a Conservation Commission

The state enabling legislation explains how to form a conservation commission: "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."

Most Vermont municipalities operate under the general laws of the state, and, to create a conservation commission, their charters require a vote by the whole town. In general, Vermont's cities and only a small number of its towns have governance charters that may allow the legislative body to create a conservation commission by its own action. Therefore, in most municipalities, the townspeople must vote to create a commission.

This can occur at any warned meeting but most often occurs on Town Meeting Day, held on the first Tuesday in March in most Vermont municipalities. The formation of a conservation commission must be written up as an article to be included in the warning. The warning is prepared by the Selectboard. The article should be carefully worded for accuracy and legality.

The town of Charlotte's article for the 1989 Town Meeting was worded as such: "Will the Town vote to establish a conservation commission under the authority of 24 V.S.A. § 4501 for the purposes of maintaining an inventory of the Town's natural resources, receiving gifts of land for conservation purposes, assisting the planning commission on natural resource issues, and promoting public understanding of local natural resources?"

There are two ways to get an item such as a conservation commission on the warning for Town Meeting Day. One way is to obtain approval from the selectboard. That means going to one of their meetings and simply asking them to put a conservation commission item on the warning. The other way is to present the selectboard with a petition signed by five percent of the registered voters of the municipality. It is wise to check with the town clerk for the size of the voter checklist to calculate five percent of that number, and then collect a safe margin of extra names to be sure the total is at least five percent. Names are struck from the petition if they are illegible or if the residents are not registered voters of the town.

Getting petitions signed provides a good opportunity to spread the idea and gain more support for a commission. People who sign the petition generally will vote for a commission, even though they are not obligated to. A quick way to get signatures is to attend a town event such as visiting the recycling center on a Saturday morning or a sports event at the school. A petition should begin with a statement such as "We, the undersigned voters of the town of _____, hereby petition the selectboard to add the following article to the warning for the annual meeting." The statement should appear on each page of the petition. Town clerks may reject petitions if the wording of the petition appears only on the first page, with additional pages containing only signatures and names, because there is no guarantee that the wording was seen and approved by each of the signers.

Of the two methods -getting selectboard approval or giving them a petition -the former method may be considered a gentler approach and should be tried first. If the selectboard does not give their approval, then the petition method can be used. According to the Vermont statute, one of these two methods must be completed and the selectboard must add the item to the warning at least forty days before Town Meeting Day. Check with the town clerk or city manager to find out the exact date (approximately the third week in January for the traditional March Town Meeting Day).

Once a conservation commission is legally warned, plan some publicity to educate townspeople on conservation commissions and encourage them to vote for its creation. This can include, email, Facebook, social media advertisement, Front Porch Forum or town listserv posting, holding neighborhood meetings, making presentations at other meetings in town, writing articles or letters to the editor in the local newspaper, or putting up posters in prominent places, such as local stores and schools, the town office, the post office, and other popular places. Through personal conversations, meetings, and other publicity, collect the names of individuals who potentially are interested in serving on the conservation commission.

A week or two before Town Meeting Day, call town residents to remind them to attend and to vote for the creation of a conservation commission. If the municipality holds a traditional, open town meeting, petitioners should be prepared to make a convincing statement at the meeting in favor of their proposal to create a conservation commission. This is an important opportunity to persuade voters, and perhaps it should be rehearsed. Also, make sure a few key individuals are prepared to stand up and speak to the article if questions or an active debate arises.

Only warned articles can be considered at Town Meeting. Therefore, if a conservation commission is not included as an article on the warning, it cannot be formed at the section of the meeting for "other business." According to state law (17 V.S.A. § 2660(d)), "The article entitled 'other business' shall not be used for taking binding municipal action."

Petitions may be used to direct the selectboard to call a special meeting to vote on the article. However, this should be considered carefully because calling a special meeting costs the municipality, which may turn voters against the article.

2-4 Why Do Conservation Commissioners Volunteer?

Town government in Vermont is run primarily by volunteers. To be effective, towns need enthusiastic, dedicated townspeople who are willing to give their time to get the jobs done well. Understanding why citizens volunteer to serve on their town's conservation commission will help recruit new members to serve. Although the reasons vary from person to person, there are many common threads.

Some conservation commissioners volunteer because they want to accomplish conservation projects in their town and to protect their town's natural and cultural resources. Others serve because they feel it is important to be a contributing member of their community. Many people volunteer because they feel they can make a difference. Other commissioners serve because they want to get to know more people in town or get to know the town itself better. Some people volunteer because they enjoy the sense of pride or accomplishment when they reach goals.

For some conservation commissioners, the motives for serving are to have fun or to be outdoors. Others volunteer because they want to get involved with hands-on projects, such as picking up shovels for tree plantings or putting on waders for river cleanups. Some people serve on a conservation commission to help fulfill a sense of connection to the natural world. Some citizens volunteer on a conservation commission because they gain leadership training experience. Still others view a conservation commission appointment as a steppingstone to other town offices, such as the planning commission or the selectboard (although the opposite occurs as well).

The desire to help future generations is another motivating factor for some commissioners. To be grounded at the local level is the reason some commissioners serve. It is useful to write a job description for conservation commission members because townspeople will be more willing to serve (and will serve more effectively) on a commission if they understand their role. For citizens willing to put in the time and effort, the rewards are many for serving on their town's conservation commission.

2-5 Appointing Members

This section relates to the appointment of members to a new conservation commission as well as appointments to existing conservation commissions. After a conservation commission is voted into existence, the selectboard appoints the members. Supporters of the conservation commission should attend the next meeting of the selectboard after Town Meeting to be sure that the appointments are made.

According to the enabling legislation, "All members shall be residents of the municipality." However, they do not need to be citizens of the United States. "A conservation commission shall have not less than three nor more than nine members," as stated in the enabling legislation. The selectboard is not required to appoint the full membership of nine commissioners.

Some towns also allow for youth members on their commissions and this is not only legal but to be encouraged!. This is a great way to help train the next generation of civic leaders, encourage volunteerism and offer a broader range of experience within a commission. These positions can be written into the commission's rules or bylaws (See [3-2 Rules](#)) to formalize the practice. Other town commissions such as the Development Review Board or Selectboard have specific age requirements given the property & financial matters they deal with but these rules do not apply to a conservation commissions unless specifically written into the town charter.

Some commissions have had only three members appointed and have had difficulty accomplishing their goals with so few people to do the work. Thus, townspeople should encourage the selectboard to appoint a full commission and thus promote an effective commission with many hands and diverse expertise.

The enabling legislation also describes the terms of membership. "The term of each member shall be for four years, except for those first appointed, whose terms shall be varied in length so that in the future the number whose terms expire in each successive year shall be minimized." As an example, when a commission is first formed and nine members are appointed, the initial terms can be varied as follows: three members are appointed for four years; three members are appointed for three years; and three members are appointed for two years. Thus, after two years, three members' terms expire, and all new appointments henceforth are for four- year terms.

A vacancy exists on a conservation commission when a sitting commissioner resigns or when their term expires. The selectboard shall fill any vacancies as they arise. According to the enabling legislation, "Any appointment to fill a vacancy shall be for the unexpired term." Members serve until the appointment of their successors. Thus, if a vacancy occurs because a term has expired and the selectboard has not appointed a new commissioner, the person who was holding the position may continue to hold the office legally until the selectboard acts.

The commission should encourage the selectboard to fill vacancies in a timely manner. Unfilled positions are undesirable because they increase the workload on other members and decrease available expertise.

The membership of a conservation commission is critical to its success. The selectboard should be encouraged to appoint residents who are willing to devote the necessary time to a conservation commission and who represent diverse conservation interests and different geographical sections of town. Ideally, commission members should represent different sexes, races, ethnicities, ages, skills, and viewpoints. Conservation commissions also should include members who are long-time residents of the town. Other good candidates are people who can provide links to community organizations, schools, and other government boards. See [Chapter 5-4 Engagement](#) for more ideas on involving a diversity of town residents.

The commission should include several citizens with background experience or training in natural sciences or natural resources conservation. Other talents helpful to a commission include teaching, writing, fundraising, and business and legal expertise. Farmers, residents who hunt, fish, or trap, foresters, outdoor enthusiasts, and large-lot landowners can be valuable commission members.

People knowledgeable about ecology, natural history, plants, wildlife, soils, hydrology, land use planning, and historic preservation are good conservation commission members.

In small towns, creating a widely diverse commission may be challenging. However, the importance of having a diversity of members cannot be emphasized enough. This diversity increases the expertise on the commission, and it increases the credibility of the commission as representing the town as a whole. Diversity also combats any perception of bias that others may perceive in the commission.

Although the selectboard is responsible for appointing members, they may seek or accept input from townspeople or the conservation commission. This, however, varies town to town. In some towns, the selectboard wants no input. In other towns, the selectboard welcomes suggestions of people interested in serving on the commission. In yet other towns, the commission is expected to take the lead in the process. For a new commission, the list of interested residents that was collected before Town Meeting can be given to the selectboard as potential commissioners. In some towns, interested citizens are asked to submit a letter of interest or a resume or are asked to attend an interview at a selectboard meeting.

Conservation commissions can encourage good appointments to the commission by several methods, as follows:

- Assess the skills needed on the commission and then so advise the selectboard (for example, if a clerk is needed, say so);
- Recommend public notice of vacancies that includes a description of the commissioner's duties;
- Encourage the submission of letters of interest or resumes from interested townspeople;
- Urge qualified people to apply;
- Seek the opportunity to review resumes and interview interested candidates;
- Make written recommendations to the selectboard;
- Attend meetings at which appointments are made or discussed.

In some cases, the selectboard and other town officials have been hesitant to support the creation of a conservation commission because of the waning number of residents willing to serve on existing commissions, boards, and committees. However, experience has shown that a conservation commission has the power to draw out previously inactive citizens who want to become involved in local conservation initiatives.

The enabling legislation does not limit the number of terms a conservation commissioner may serve. The municipality determines when terms begin, which is often at the same time elected officials take office. It is helpful to keep a list of conservation commission members that includes when a commissioner was appointed, when their term expires, and basic contact information such as email, postal addresses and telephone numbers.

Because the effectiveness of a conservation commission depends upon the merits of its members, the commission should develop a good working relationship with the selectboard. This will insure against key members not being reappointed or being handicapped by appointments of people who may be uninterested in conservation or, even worse, placed on the commission to limit its effectiveness.

In towns in which the selectboard routinely makes poor appointments to the commission or fails to make appointments, the commission can try to apply public pressure, or the public always has recourse at the ballot box to replace the selectboard.

2-6 Educating members

It is the responsibility of both the individual members as well as the commission as a whole to advance understanding and experience of the group. This means that the commission needs to provide opportunities to educate its members on the scientific concepts, & issues and learn to advance their skills as a commission member. This handbook should be provided to all new members and its use should be encouraged. Additionally, The Association of Vermont Conservation Commissions offers a Conservation Summit each year that offers sessions in a wide variety of concepts and skills necessary for every Conservation Commissioner. The Agency of Natural Resources' Vermont Fish & Wildlife Department offers trainings for new Commissioners that include important foundational material. Be sure to engage *Environmental Leadership Training Unit 1: From Science to Planning*, and *Environmental Leadership Training Unit 2: From Planning to Action*. Look [here](#) for current listings.

2-7 Removing Members

"Any member of a conservation commission may be removed at any time for just cause by vote of the legislative body, for reasons given to him in writing and after a public hearing thereon if he so requests," states the enabling legislation.

An example of a just cause is when a conservation commission member does not attend regular meetings but refuses to resign from the commission. Just cause is not philosophical or political differences nor is it a personality conflict. If a commissioner feels they are being removed without just cause, they may request a public hearing to air the reasons given.

2-8 Incompatible Offices

A conservation commissioner may not hold another municipal office that is incompatible with the conservation commission position. Offices are incompatible if the duties of each engender a conflict of interest; thus, the person holding both offices would be unable to perform the duties of each with undivided loyalty and objectivity.

The enabling legislation does not mention incompatible offices for conservation commissioners. In this case, only a court can rule that two offices would be incompatible. However, it is likely that a court would find the offices of conservation commissioner and selectboard member as incompatible because commissioners are appointed by the selectboard.

In some cases, a commissioner serving on multiple commissions would be a great benefit to both commissions and not deemed incompatible. For example, many towns have commissioners that serve on both the planning and conservation commissions providing important communication and coordination between these groups.

2-9 Dissolving a Conservation Commission

Once established, a conservation commission legally will continue to exist even though it may become inactive, or all its members resign or the selectboard fails to appoint members. In the latter two cases, the commission may be revived at any time by the appointment of new members.

The procedure for legally ending the existence of a conservation commission is to repeal the ordinance that established it. For example, in towns that voted to form a conservation commission, the townspeople must vote to repeal it through a warned ballot article.

In Vermont, only the town of Bennington has taken such a step. As allowed by that town's charter, the selectboard created the Bennington Conservation Commission in 1990 following an advisory vote at a town meeting. However, less than a year later, the Commission was abolished by the selectboard. The reasons for the action apparently included that there were tensions with the town planning commission and that some people felt the Commission was a duplication of effort.

2-10 Commission versus Committee

Conservation committees or similar committees are anomalies to municipal conservation commissions; that is, they are departures from the usual structure. Typically, these committees are fulfilling the same roles as municipal conservation commissions in their towns. A conservation committee usually is not voted into existence by the townspeople under the state enabling legislation for conservation commissions.

For example, the South Burlington Natural Resources Committee was formed in 1966, many years before the state enabling legislation was passed. This committee was appointed by the South Burlington Planning Commission in response to rapidly growing development pressures. Its purposes were and continue to be very similar to those of conservation commissions. The Shelburne Natural Resources and Conservation Committee has a similar history.

The Weybridge Conservation Commission started out as the Weybridge Conservation Committee. During the process of rewriting the town plan, a group of citizens wanted a strong conservation input in the plan. A conservation committee was created because it seemed easier for the planning commission and the selectboard to accept and because it could be created by the planning commission on the spot. This was in 1989. The Conservation Committee built public support by working on projects for two years, including the writing of the natural and cultural resources section of the town plan. In 1991, the townspeople officially voted to sanction the Weybridge Conservation Commission.

A committee is often viewed as a less formal structure than is a commission and a committee does not need the vote of the townspeople to be created. It is a quicker and easier method to forming a local conservation group, especially in the face of an immediate crisis or opposition to conservation ideas.

However, there are definite benefits to a full-fledged conservation commission versus a committee. Most importantly, a conservation commission has the backing of the enabling legislation for its activities. Also, a conservation commission is formed in perpetuity. Thus, the town forever benefits from having the commission, and the selectboard is obligated to keep people appointed to the commission. On the other hand, a conservation committee's existence can fall prey more easily to political and personal differences at any time.

Because municipal conservation commissions are a legal arm of town government, they can receive certain grants that can be awarded only to nonprofit entities. In addition, conservation commissions have other authorities and rights as mentioned in other state statutes and rules.

2-11 Sample Petition to Create a Conservation Commission

Petition To Create a Conservation Commission

We, the undersigned voters of the town of _____ hereby petition the selectboard to add the following article to the warning for the annual meeting.

Article No. _____. To see if the town of _____ will vote to a municipal conservation commission pursuant to 24 V.S.A. § 4501 to 4506.

<i>Name (printed)</i>	<i>Signature</i>	<i>Address</i>
1. _____	_____	_____
2. _____	_____	_____
3. _____	_____	_____
4. _____	_____	_____
5. _____	_____	_____
6. _____	_____	_____
7. _____	_____	_____
8. _____	_____	_____
9. _____	_____	_____
10. _____	_____	_____

CHAPTER 3: BASIC NUTS AND BOLTS OF COMMISSION WORK

Effective conservation commissions are well organized and approach their activities in a professional, objective manner. The purpose of this chapter is to promote this kind of effectiveness.

3-1 Organizational Meeting

According to the enabling legislation, "At its organizational meeting a conservation commission shall adopt by majority vote of those present and voting such rules as it deems necessary and appropriate for the performance of its functions." (See next section and [Appendix A](#) for sample rules/bylaws)

In many cases, once all the conservation commissioners have been appointed, the town clerk, the town manager, a selectboard member, or another municipal officer will set up the organizational meeting of the commission and will see that some member is assigned the task to bring a draft set of rules to the meeting. If such a meeting has not been arranged within a reasonable time after the members have received notice of their appointments, someone on the commission should take the initiative to get a draft set of rules and to call the organizational meeting.

At the first meeting, members should become acquainted, discuss their interests, and elect officers. A regular meeting schedule and meeting location should be established. In addition, rules for operation should be developed and voted on as soon as possible. Making these preliminary decisions as soon as possible helps a conservation commission get organized and functioning. Members should familiarize themselves with VT Open Meeting Laws to ensure the commission is in compliance. (See [3-6 Vermont's Open Meeting Law](#))

[Formation of the Montgomery Conservation Commission](#)

The Montgomery Conservation Commission was created in 2010 with the assistance of a regional conservation partnership, Cold Hollow to Canada, that works to conserve the northern forest and assist conservation commissions. The partnership provided advice and mentoring to get the Montgomery Conservation Commission started.

A group of interested town members proposed creating the commission at town meeting, framing it as 'our town is beautiful and unique and if there are things we can do.. [Read More](#)

3-2 Rules

Rules (sometimes called bylaws) are adopted by an organization for governing its meetings and affairs efficiently and fairly. Rules should be specific enough to be useful guidelines, but they also should be flexible to allow some room for the changing needs of the commission. For example, the number of conservation commissioners should be given as a range (and as allowed in the enabling legislation) rather than as a specific number.

The enabling legislation states that conservation commissions should vote on a set of rules at its organizational meeting. These rules do not need to be approved by the selectboard. Rules can be

revised periodically, if necessary, to reflect changing conditions. The rules should specify the steps officially used to revise them. Rules need not be elaborate but should include the following topics:

- Name of group;
- Purpose (including specific reference to the enabling legislation by number);
- Members and their duties;
- Officers and their duties;
- Election of officers;
- Filling of vacancies and dealing with inactive members;
- Committees and their responsibilities;
- Meetings of group (time, place, notices, quorum, etc.);
- Procedure for amendment of rules.

Sample rules from Thetford are presented in [Appendix A](#) as a guide for the formation of a commission's rules. Although it is helpful to review rules of other conservation commissions or similar organizations, a conservation commission should not simply adopt a set of rules developed by someone else.

The rules of a municipal conservation commission must be in accordance with the enabling legislation. The rules should be reviewed by an attorney to ensure that they meet legal requirements. Rules of a conservation commission can be reviewed by the town attorney or the Municipal Law Center of the Vermont League of Cities and Towns. An hourly fee is charged, based on whether the review is performed by an attorney or a paralegal assistant.

3-3 Officers and Members

Conservation commissions "shall annually elect a chairman, a treasurer, and a clerk," according to the enabling legislation. These annual elections should be held after the selectboard has made appointments to fill expired terms. Although the enabling legislation does not limit the number of terms a commissioner may serve in a particular office, some commissions have found the rotation of officers to be an advisable practice.

The chairperson presides over all commission meetings, prepares agendas for meetings, and generally directs the work of the commission. The chairperson is typically the spokesperson for the commission who deals with other organizations, town boards, the media, and the public.

The treasurer recommends action on all bills received by the commission and prepares and presents financial reports to the commission. The treasurer also prepares and submits an annual financial statement to the town.

The clerk (or secretary) keeps the minutes of all meetings of the commission and records any action taken by the commission. He or she posts public notices of commission meetings, as required.

Although the enabling legislation does not require a commission to elect a vice-chairperson, it is advantageous to do so. The vice-chairperson can perform all duties of the chairperson in case of absence or need. This position can serve as training ground for future chairpersons. If a Vice-chairperson is not elected, then the chairperson shall ask someone to preside over a meeting when in their absence.

In some municipalities, commissions have elected co-chairs to run their commission. This is a way to share the responsibility of leading the commission. However, it is not actually in keeping with the enabling legislation. A preferable model is to elect a chairperson and a vice-chairperson and to develop a working relationship between those two people such that work loads are divided to their mutual agreement.

Some commissions may write up an official job description for its commissioners, which includes responsibilities and expectations. Members are usually assigned specific tasks or projects in keeping with their interests and areas of expertise. Members may be required to participate on a committee or head at least one project of their own interest. They should report their progress on a regular basis. Members are expected to have good attendance records at commission meetings. In addition, they are encouraged to develop their personal communication and leadership skills so that they can be as effective as possible.

3-4 Committees

Conservation commissions can appoint standing or ad hoc committees, as needed. A standing committee is one that exists in perpetuity. An ad hoc committee is formed for a specific purpose and a limited time. See the Sample of Conservation Commission Rules in [Appendix A](#) for how “committees” can be empowered.

Committees may consist of conservation commissioners as well as interested townspeople. Thus, committees are effective ways to expand energy, expertise, and participation and get work done between monthly meetings. Committees also help strengthen the local conservation constituency and are a pool for future members of the commission. If the Conservation Commission forms a subcommittee for a specific task at an official meeting, that group can do work on that task between meetings as long as it is not a quorum of the full conservation commission. (See [3-8 Attendance and Quorum](#)) If that were the case, anytime the subcommittee gets together it would be considered a full meeting of the commission and need to be warned. See [3-6 Vermont’s Open Meeting Law](#).

An effective way to get volunteers for committees is to ask! Being specific about the task and the needed skills or areas of expertise is best. Former conservation commissioners may also continue to contribute to the commission in this way. Students may want to be on committees to help with special projects. Formation of a committee should happen at a regularly warned meeting. Clear parameters for the work to be accomplished should be set and a clear timeline for reporting back to the commission at a regular warned meeting should be established.

Committee members who are not appointed members of the conservation commission may not vote on commission business. They may not represent the commission publicly unless so designated by the commission on a case-by-case basis. The chairperson of a committee should be a conservation commission member.

Committees are typically established to focus attention on a particular issue at a greater level of detail than that given to other commission business. The committees often compile information and report back to the full commission to help educate all members. Or committees may function as work teams, conducting short- and long-term projects of the commission.

Committees are a good way to delegate work so that each member has some specific responsibilities. This spreads both the workload of the commission and the sense of pride in the commission's accomplishments. Committees usually hold meetings outside of the regular commission meetings to accomplish their tasks and then report back at regular conservation commission meetings.

Examples of committees that have been formed by Vermont conservation commissions include trails and greenways, agriculture, wetlands, forests, field trips, education, Green-Up Day, environmental impact assessment, and wildlife.

Sometimes, a committee is so successful that it leaves the purview of the commission and becomes its own local organization. The Quinlan School House Committee initially was formed as part of the Charlotte Conservation Commission to move and restore the historic structure. The Committee became the Friends of the Quinlan Schoolhouse, a separate, nonprofit organization. One goal of the Woodstock Conservation Commission was to create a local farmers' market. As a result of the Commission's work, the Mount Tom Farmers' Market Association was formed.

3-5 Town Staff and Paid Consultants

Because conservation commissions are an official part of town government, they may be able to arrange for staff support from one or more municipal employees. Operating within town government builds credibility for the commission as a group of municipal officers doing their job.

Some town staff support may come in the form of a municipal employee who serves as a secretary or clerk for the commission on a part-time basis in addition to their other municipal duties. Conservation commissions ordinarily have access to services of the town attorney.

A conservation commission may decide to hire paid consultants when it has a need for expertise or assistance in a particular project. For example, conservation commissions have hired consultants to conduct a natural resource inventory, to produce maps of wetlands, or to assist in GIS (Geographic Information Systems) mapping projects.

[Arrowwood Inventory of Fayston, Warren, and Waitsfield: Natural Community Mapping](#)

The Arrowwood Inventory of Fayston, Warren, and Waitsfield began when these towns were awarded a Municipal Planning Grant from the Vermont Agency of Commerce and Community Development. This grant led to the hire of Arrowwood Environmental to create inventories of the natural communities in these three towns. These inventories involved identifying, assessing, and ranking wildlife habitat, upland and wetland natural communities, vernal pools, connecting lands, and rare elements. The first step .. [Read More](#)

[Bolton Floodplain Inventory](#)

The Town of Bolton Conservation Commission engaged Arrowwood Environmental to perform a Floodplain Forest Inventory, including documenting existing flora (woody and herbaceous) and areas of existing forest within the Town, on both sides of the Winooski River. This was accomplished with both the help of those floodplain landowners who allowed access to their land and a survey conducted from the river itself, and use of aerial maps. The inventory expands upon Arrowwood's previous work.. [Read More](#)

3-6 Vermont's Open Meeting Law

(1 V.S.A. § 311 to 320) requires all meetings of public bodies to be open to the public at all times, unless a specific exception applies. 1 V.S.A. § 312(a)(1). The purpose of the law is to promote transparency, accountability, and better decision-making in government and guarantees that any member of the public may attend any meeting of every board or commission in state, regional, or local government and that no board or commission may hold a public meeting without first giving notice to the public.

Excerpt From [A Guide to Open Meetings from the Secretary of State 2019](#)

Applies to Conservation Commissions

“The open meeting law applies to “public bodies” of the state and its municipalities, including any state or municipal board, council, or commission, as well as any committee or subcommittee of these bodies. 1 V.S.A. § 310(4). It also applies to the meetings of any committee or subcommittee that is created or empowered by a public body to do its work, no matter its size. A meeting is defined as a gathering of a quorum of the members of a public body. All commission and committee meetings are included in the open meeting law.

When does the open meeting law apply?

A board or other public body must comply with the open meeting law any time a “quorum” holds a “meeting,” that is, gathers to discuss its business or to take action. 1 V.S.A. § 310(3)(A).

How does a board provide notice of its meetings?

The open meeting law recognizes three types of meetings: regular, special, and emergency. Depending on the type of meeting, a board or other public body may need to provide advance notice by “publicly announcing” the meeting, by posting public notices, or both. Public bodies also usually need to create an agenda in advance of each meeting and make it available to the public. 1 V.S.A. § 312(d)(1), (2). See below for more information on agenda requirements.

Regular meetings

A public body schedules regular meetings by adopting a resolution setting the time and place of the meetings. This information must be made available to the public on request. 1 V.S.A. § 312(c)(1). When a board meets regularly on, for example, the first Tuesday of every month, the law does not require additional public announcement or posting of these meetings so long as the time and place has been clearly designated by resolution or other determining authority (statute, charter, regulation, ordinance, or bylaw). Public bodies must, however, create and make available meeting agendas for regular meetings. 1 V.S.A. § 312(d)(1), (2).

Special meetings

A special meeting occurs when a board meets at a time or place outside of its regular meeting schedule. At least 24 hours before each special meeting, a public body must publicly announce it by giving notice of the meeting's time, place, and purpose to a newspaper or radio station serving the area, as well as to any person who has requested in writing to be notified of special meetings. 1 V.S.A. §§ 310(5), 312(c)(2), (5). Municipal public bodies must also post a notice of each 6 special meeting in or near the town office and in at least two other designated public places in the municipality. All public bodies must give oral or written notice to each member (unless a member has waived this notice). 1 V.S.A. § 312(c)(2). In addition, agendas must be created and made available for special meetings. 1 V.S.A. § 312(d)(1), (2).

Emergency meetings

An emergency meeting may be held in the event of a true emergency, that is, "only when necessary to respond to an unforeseen occurrence or condition requiring immediate attention." Emergency meetings do not require public announcement, posting of notices, or 24-hour notice to members, so long as some public notice is given as soon as possible before the meeting. 1 V.S.A. § 312(c)(3). Note that an emergency meeting should not be used if the public body is able to comply with the 24-hour notice requirements for special meetings. There is no agenda requirement for emergency meetings.

What are the requirements for meeting agendas?

At least 48 hours prior to a regular meeting, and at least 24 hours prior to a special meeting, a meeting agenda must be posted to a website that the public body maintains or designates, if one exists. In addition, and within the same timeframes, a municipal public body must post the agenda in or near the municipal office and in at least two other designated public places in the municipality. A meeting agenda must be made available to a person prior to the meeting upon specific request. 1 V.S.A. § 312(d)(1), (2). Note that there is no agenda requirement for emergency meetings.

What are the requirements for minutes?

Public bodies must take minutes of their meetings. Minutes are the permanent record of the formal actions of the public body and play an important role in recording the history of the public body's business.

The open meeting law requires that minutes "give a true indication of the business of the meeting," covering all topics that arise. At minimum, minutes must include: the names of all members of the public body who are present at the meeting; the names of all other active participants; all motions, proposals, and resolutions made, and their dispositions; and the results of all votes, with a record of individual votes if roll call is taken. 1 V.S.A. § 312(b)(1).

Minutes are public records and must be made available for public inspection and copying after five calendar days from the date of the meeting. If a public body maintains or designates a website, minutes must also be posted to that website no later than five calendar days after the meeting. Except for draft minutes replaced with updated minutes, posted minutes must not be removed from the website sooner than one year from the date of the meeting for which they were taken. 1 V.S.A. § 312(b)(2).

3-7 Regular Meeting Schedule, Place, and Time

Meetings may be conducted online using software such as Zoom, Teams, Google etc. Members do not need to be physically present in the same space, but the agenda needs to clearly show a physical location where members of the public may go and participate in the meeting and at least one member of the commission or town staff have to be at that location. This may require some expense in outfitting a municipal building with appropriate online audio / visual equipment but is also an important aspect of climate resilience and limiting fossil fuel use / unnecessary travel. For some meetings, online works well. This can also significantly increase participation from townspeople that weren't able to participate in person. See [3-10 Online Meetings](#) Also see the Vermont League of Cities & Towns [Remote Public Meeting Software Guidance for Vermont Municipalities](#)

Most conservation commissions welcome interested citizens at their meetings. These citizens can help the commission determine the needs and desires of the townspeople and increase support for commission activities. A notice on the local Front Porch Forum, town listserv, or local newspaper may increase attendance by the public. Note that according to statute, meeting minutes must include the names of "all other active participants in the meeting."

In each public meeting, the law requires a public comment period, during which the public must be given a reasonable opportunity to express opinions. This does not mean that members of the public have a right to disrupt the meeting. Visitors may not speak without permission. A commission should use its discretion and invite comments on a topic when they feel it is valuable or appropriate. Note that according to statute, meeting minutes must include the names of "all other active participants in the meeting." Maintaining good public relations is an important consideration. See [Chapter 5 Communication & Engagement](#)

Most conservation commissions in Vermont meet at least once a month. For example, a commission may hold its meeting the first Tuesday of every month. Active commissions with several projects often meet twice a month. Each commission should decide what works best for its members and its operations but meeting at least monthly leads to more productive commissions. One reason is that meetings can serve as deadlines for getting work done. Towns that meet regularly online may consider holding one in-person meeting per year to help get to know each other.

In-between meetings work can still get done. The commission could choose to form a committee to advance a specific task before the next meeting or on a different timeline and then have the committee report back to the full commission at another regularly warned meeting. The committee must not represent a quorum of the full commission (in which case it would need to be another warned meeting) but can include people that are not on the commission.

In scheduling their meetings, conservation commissions will probably want to avoid conflicting with the schedules of other key boards and community groups, such as the selectboard or the planning commission. This way, members can attend the meetings of the other groups.

Some commissioners find it difficult to attend summer meetings because of their seasonal work demands or vacations; commissions may decide to have fewer meetings in the summer. However,

if a commission does not meet during the summer, momentum for projects may suffer. In general, commissions meet during evening hours, for example, from 7 to 9 p.m. Whereas evening hours make it easier for the public to attend, the hours should be set upon the convenience of commissioners. Some commissions have found online meetings increase flexibility and allow for new times of day as options. For example, the Williston Conservation Commission meets at 7am.

Conservation commissions most frequently meet in a room in the town office or the local school. Increasingly commissions are meeting mostly online with at least one member present at the designated location. At least one commission member must be physically present at the meeting place designated in the agenda.

For in-person meetings the space should be public and meet the following criteria:

- Comfortable environment, including temperature;
- No distracting background noise;
- Adequate seating for commissioners and guests;
- Adequate lighting;
- Freedom from telephone or people distractions;
- Bathroom facilities available.
- Audiovisual equipment available. this includes web camera that picks up on everyone present in the room, a microphone, sufficient speakers, a display of any online content on projector or screen.

3-8 Attendance and Quorum

One of the most important duties of a conservation commissioner is attending meetings of the commission and actively participating. This spreads the workload among members and allows the commission to conduct its work by having a quorum at meetings.

A quorum is a majority of the conservation commissioners. Most people interpret this to mean a majority of the commissioners currently serving on the commission. For example, if six of nine positions on a commission are filled, then the quorum is four people. Others interpret a quorum as a majority of those present and voting. What constitutes a quorum should be clearly defined in the commission's rules / bylaws.

If a meeting is held but the commission lacks a quorum, members present may still conduct business but not vote or take binding actions. To encourage attendance, the clerk should send out agendas and call members to remind them of the meeting. Refreshments and guest speakers can serve as incentives for attendance.

Committees can be empowered to do work outside of regularly warned meetings as long as they are NOT a quorum of conservation commission members and have a task that was voted on at a regularly warned meeting.

3-9 Agenda

The agenda is part of the permanent record of a conservation commission, and the chairperson should prepare an agenda for every commission meeting. Moreover, meetings run more smoothly if an agenda is followed. An agenda that is agreed on at the onset can help avoid the frustration of wandering discussions and meetings that do not seem to "get anywhere."

The agenda may be posted in the town hall. The clerk should email a copy of the agenda to conservation commissioners ahead of time, for example, four to seven days before the meeting. This advanced notice is a reminder of the meeting and of the focus of discussions. Additionally, the agenda is a prompt if certain items need to be added to the agenda or if information needs to be gathered in preparation for the meeting.

In addition, it may be appropriate, at times, to supplement mailing the agenda with other background material that may be discussed at the meeting. This would allow members to be better prepared for the meeting and to make the best use of the actual meeting time. Prepare additional resources as hyperlinks that members can look at ahead of time. Use Google Drive or similar online storage to share files and create a separate *Town__CC@email.com* account that can be cc'd for all Commission business to keep a log of activity. Email agenda's and meeting minutes to this account or store in Google Drive or other cloud storage.

Items can be added to the agenda at the beginning of the meeting if new situations arise and require discussion. A sample agenda follows; all items may not be needed at each meeting. Some commissions have included approximate times when the agenda items will be discussed, which is useful for the public who may want to attend certain topic discussions.

Agenda of the (town) Conservation Commission for (month, day, year)

- Call to order.
- Finalize agenda.
- Approve minutes of prior meeting.
- Treasurer's report.
- Correspondence and announcements.
- Old business.
- New business.
- Other business.
- Public comment
- Confirmation of next meeting date, time, and place.
- Adjournment.

The clerk should review the draft minutes, which have been copied and sent to all members in advance of the meeting (for example, mailed along with the agenda). Additions and corrections are noted, and then the final minutes should be approved. The treasurer should present a budget report, if requested. The treasurer should also report any outstanding bills that the commission may owe.

Under correspondence and announcements, the chairperson should report significant email, mail and telephone calls received. Announcements of upcoming events should be shared. These and other items of interest can be circulated among members during the meeting but should not distract from the meeting. Material that requires further study should be duplicated for members to read outside of the meeting.

Standing and ad hoc committee reports should be listed separately under old business. New business should also be listed by topics. If a guest speaker is coming to a meeting, it is common to have the presentation before the business part of the meeting. If members of the public wish to add something to the agenda, it may be courteous to handle this early in the meeting.

Agendas can be sent to other town boards and officials and interested individuals. This increases understanding of commission activities and encourages attendance by non-commissioners, thus strengthening liaisons with other parts of town government. It is also a signal to other organizations that the commission is interested in being a partner with other groups.

Here is a sample agenda from Williston that clearly articulates how the meeting is being held and how to access the meeting both online and physical location. Note how important hyperlinks in the document are to ensure smooth access by the public and board members. See the section [3-14 Maintaining Records](#) for ideas on setting up shared cloud storage as a way of maintaining, sharing and editing documents

TOWN OF WILLISTON

Conservation Commission

Wednesday, May 19, 2021 at 7:00 A.M.

Zoom Meeting ID: 888 888 888 on zoom.us/join or 1-888-888-888

Add Physical Location Here

1) 7:00 CALL TO ORDER

2) 7:05 PUBLIC COMMENT

(items not on the agenda)

3) 7:10 MINUTES OF [MAY 5, 2021](#)

4) 7:20 SIGNIFICANT WILDLIFE HABITAT AREA (continued)

- [Examples of regulatory language from other municipalities](#)
- Habitat blocks and connectors (Jens Hilke)

5) 8:00 [NOISE ORDINANCE VARIANCE REQUEST](#) (WCC's input is requested)

- [Selectboard discussion](#) (starting at 52:41)
- [Observer article](#)

6) 8:30 STAFF REPORT/OTHER BUSINESS

- Catamount Community Forest updates

7) 9:00 ADJOURN

UPCOMING MEETINGS

- June 3: TBD (Mud Pond Conservation Area MP?)
- June 17: F22 workplan, nomination of Officers

For further information, email Melinda Scott at mscott@willistonvt.org or go to www.town.williston.vt.us and click "Public Records & Documents", then "Agendas & Minutes."

How to Participate: Due to COVID-19, town board and committee meetings are being held virtually using Zoom. No physical space is required for open meeting law as of Monday, March 30, 2020. Zoom is free to the public and does not require registration or log-in. Public comment at this meeting is welcomed and encouraged using the following methods:

Access Zoom for free on your computer or smartphone: <https://zoom.us/j/888888888>

Call-in to the webinar: Dial 1 888 888 8888, enter the webinar ID, and press # when prompted

Mail or email public comment prior to the meeting (mscott@willistonvt.org; letters to: Town of Williston, c/o Williston Conservation Commission, 7900 Williston Road, Williston VT 05495)

Free WiFi (no password needed) is available from the parking lot and patio of the Dorothy Alling Memorial Library, 21 Library Lane, Williston VT 05495.

Please note: It can take 5-10 minutes to download and connect to Zoom for the first time—so we suggest doing this in advance of a meeting that you wish to view or participate in. Zoom works best if you download the Web Client, but can be accessed from a web browser. If you need help connecting to Zoom, please feel free to contact Melinda Scott, Senior Planner, at mscott@willistonvt.org.

3-10 Running a Meeting

Successful meetings achieve common goals through communication and collective action. They leave participants feeling positive, motivated, and productive. Meetings should make good use of participants' time by dealing with those items that need to be handled by a group and cannot be handled reasonably by individuals or committees or by circulating written information.

Meetings are often unsuccessful because they are longer than they need to be, disorganized, or handled poorly when conflicts or disruptions arise. They leave participants feeling bored, frustrated, or unenthusiastic about the group. Part of the chairperson's role is to provide the vision and leadership needed to run successful meetings. However, all members share the responsibility of using meeting time well. The following are generally accepted guides for all participants to follow to get more out of their meetings:

- Be prepared and start on time;
- Review and finalize the agenda as a group;
- Agree on ground rules for the meetings, such as time limits, who will present what, etc., and remind people of the ground rules as necessary;
- Maintain an informal, positive atmosphere by asking pertinent questions, encouraging participation of all members, listening carefully, avoiding being critical of others' contributions, and using common sense and common courtesy;
- Politely intervene to refocus the discussion back to the topic if members begin to wander, lecture, or make lengthy or repetitive comments;
- Recognize and give members public credit and thanks for their efforts;
- Be patient and allow time for everyone to follow and participate in the discussion; avoid rushing a decision the group is not ready to make;
- When conflict arises among members, deal with it directly and as constructively as possible;
- Put closure on an agenda item before moving to the next by reviewing important decisions, agreements on actions, and assignments, for example, who is to do what and when (see below);
- Call for a formal motion and take a vote whenever appropriate for the record (see below);
- Before closing, briefly analyze the success of the meeting to reinforce actions that promote group productivity;
- Discuss preparations for the next meeting;
- Thank everyone for participating and close on time.

It is up to the commission to decide how to conduct its meetings. It is suggested that meetings are run by using at least an informal form of parliamentary procedure based on Robert's Rules of Order. This book can be purchased in most bookstores. These rules, based on common sense and common courtesy, help meetings run effectively. If the rules become overly burdensome, then they are typically being misapplied or overused.

The chairperson determines the extent of using parliamentary procedure, based on the discussion at hand. Thus, the use can vary. For example, the procedures should be followed fairly strictly when tensions are high and commission members have strongly divergent opinions. In calmer situations, the style can be more casual.

Some conservation commissions do not make formal motions to reach a decision. Instead, they conduct their business by consensus. This approach must be used carefully to assure it does not slide into decision-making by the chairperson or a small group, thus discouraging minority viewpoints.

True consensus is reached when each member feels comfortable with their contribution and the final decision. To assure that such is the case, there should be a clear, agreed upon, and formal mechanism for stating for the record what exactly is being agreed to. For example, the chairperson should clearly state what he or she understands the consensus to be, for example: "Can I say that we are all in agreement that the Conservation Commission will offer an educational program to the Fifth Grade this spring?" This statement is then modified by the group until everyone can accept it.

Successful meetings often include two additional components: refreshments and fun! The chairperson can ask for a volunteer to bring refreshments for the next meeting, or the task can be rotated among members. The chairperson can encourage attendees to arrive on time by having a short time for refreshments and mingling before the meeting.

3-11 Online Meetings

Board members do not all need to be physically present for meetings. According to the Secretary of State's office, [A Guide to Open Meetings from the Secretary of State 2019](#)

“ As long as certain requirements are met, one or more members of a public body may fully participate in discussing the body's business and may vote at a regular, special, or emergency meeting by electronic or other means without being physically present at the designated meeting location. 1 V.S.A. § 312(a)(2).

If a quorum or more of members will be participating in a meeting electronically, the **meeting agenda must designate at least one physical location where a member of the public can attend and participate in the meeting.** At least one member of the body, or at least one staff member or other designee, must be physically present at this location. 1 V.S.A. § 312(a)(2).”

It is up to the commission what culture they adopt around online versus in-person meetings. In-person meetings are best for collaborative decision making and when everyone around the table needs to be heard and valued. Online meetings work fine for presentations from experts or other sharing of content. Tools such as online whiteboards, voting platforms, cloud storage (e.g. Google Drive), and more can be very helpful.

If you do decide to do online meetings make sure you plan for it. It's a different beast than in-person as there is the potential for anyone from anywhere in the world to join your meeting. Have one member that is technologically savvy handle the online meeting host responsibilities such as allowing access to participants, screen sharing, muting etc.

As more and more of our conservation work goes online, be sure that someone is up on the details. In the online environment, differing level of information and access to an online event should be

advertised at different times. If your online event is set up without a “waiting room” don’t advertise the full URL openly because you can’t control what happens if a “zoom bomber” is intent on disrupting your event.

Use some sort of pre-registration system for larger online events (such as a likely to be well attended speaker). Zoom has this built in. Or use a registration tool like Eventbrite. This collects information on who is attending that helps hold people accountable for their actions by removing anonymity. In the Zoom registration system each participant gets a unique URL. These sorts of details are important for someone to be aware of since they greatly affect how you people access the meeting and what to do if someone is having trouble accessing your meeting.

Maintain a Waiting Room and the ability to remove people from the meeting without their being able to return is an important security feature for online meetings and events. Note that your commission should adopt a policy on how to handle public comment and disruptive behaviors in the online environment.

Maintain the ability as host to control who screen shares and the ability to mute microphones of attendees.

Make it easy to find the login information for committee members by embedding it in the agenda that warns the meeting.

The Town of Williston uses a reoccurring meeting and password (i.e. the URL does not change from one meeting to the next) to make it easier for members to find the link but this practice also increases the risk of disruptive behavior from outside individuals as the link is posted on every agenda. This makes the use of a “waiting room” all the more important. In the event of an extremely disruptive attendee, the host can remove the attendee to the waiting room.

3-12 Minutes

"A conservation commission shall keep a record of its transactions, which shall be filed with the town clerk as a public record of the municipality," states the enabling legislation. This is usually done by uploading them to the town website.

Minutes should provide a clear and concise record of a commission's business. They are an important part of the permanent records of a conservation commission. The minutes should contain sufficient detail so that those not present can determine what was done at the meeting and why. At minimum, minutes must include: the names of all members of the commission who are present at the meeting; the names of all other active participants; all motions, proposals, and resolutions made, and their dispositions; and the results of all votes, with a record of individual votes if roll call is taken. 1 V.S.A. § 312(b)(1).

Vermont’s open meeting law states that the minutes of public meetings, such as those of conservation commissions, must be available to the public within five calendar days of their meetings (1 V.S.A. § 312). If a public body maintains or designates a website, minutes must also be posted to that website no later than five calendar days after the meeting. Except for draft minutes replaced with updated minutes, posted minutes must not be removed from the website sooner than one year from the date of the meeting for which they were taken. 1 V.S.A. § 312(b)(2). The Access to Public Records Law (1 V.S.A. § 315 to 320) guarantees that all documents are open and available for review and copying unless they are defined as confidential by the law.

The clerk of the conservation commission takes the minutes. In their absence, another commissioner is asked to perform this task. A draft set of minutes is distributed to members before the next meeting, when revisions are made and final minutes are approved. At this point, they are filed / uploaded to the town website.

The following guidelines apply not only to minutes of the commission meetings but also to any committee meetings. Minutes should include:

- The name of the body and the kind of meeting (e.g., regular, special, committee);
- The date, time, and location of the meeting;
- Presiding officer and members present;
- Names of other people present (pass around a sign-in sheet or in a digital meeting ensure members of the public announce themselves if their online name is unclear);
- Approval of the minutes of the previous meeting with any additions or corrections noted;
- Summary of reports presented (long or complex reports should be provided by email ahead of time);
- Summary of discussions and disposition of agenda items;
- Record of each vote, including names of those making and seconding a motion, numbers voting in the affirmative and the negative, and names of those abstaining;
- Date of next meeting;
- Time of adjournment;
- Name of person taking the minutes.

Minutes serve several purposes. They form the record of the activities of the conservation commission, remind members of tasks they agreed to perform, and assist in writing the annual report (see [3-13 Annual Report](#)). As with the agenda, the minutes also can be sent to other town boards or officials, such as the planning commission, to keep the recipients abreast of conservation commission activities, increase interest and support, and encourage collaboration.

Conservation commissions may conduct on-site inspections, such as a visit to the site of a proposed development to offer comments and recommendations to the planning commission. Unless a site visit has been posted as a meeting, no decisions may be made there. Decisions and recommendations should be made at a future meeting of the conservation commission. In addition, a report (either oral or written) on the site visit should be made to place this information in the minutes and thus the record of the commission's activities.

3-13 Annual Report

According to the enabling legislation, a conservation commission may "make a brief annual report to the municipality of its finances and transactions for the year just passed, and its plans and prospects for the ensuing year." If the commission's report is submitted for inclusion in the town's annual report, the town clerk or selectboard can tell the commission in what form the report is most helpful and the deadline for submission (usually in January).

The conservation commission's annual report should be treated as part of the permanent records of the commission and a good public relations tool.

The annual report is usually prepared by the chairperson or the clerk, with input from the other commissioners. The year's minutes are useful for compiling this report. The report should be viewed as an opportunity to increase public support for commission activities and to educate towns- people on timely issues. It should be well written and project a positive, upbeat tone.

The following are suggestions for what to include in a conservation commission's annual report:

- List present commission members;
- Thank retiring members for their contributions;
- Welcome new commission members;
- Briefly describe the role of the conservation commission and when it was formed;
- List funding and grants received;
- Summarize projects worked on and what was accomplished;
- Highlight how the commission assisted the planning commission and other local government boards and how the commission collaborated with community groups;
- Indicate the kinds of assistance the commission can provide to residents, such as assistance with land conservation options;
- List conferences or trainings attended by members;
- Thank all volunteers and organizations for their assistance and collaboration;
- Explain and encourage support for the town's local conservation fund or other local initiatives;
- Explain how the town benefited from having a conservation commission, for example, the benefits of a new community park;
- Describe plans and goals;
- Invite the public to approach the commission with interests, concerns, and potential projects;
- Invite townspeople to volunteer for a vacancy on the commission or to help with specific projects;
- Indicate when and where the commission holds its meetings and invite the public to attend;
- Thank the townspeople, selectboard, etc. for their support.

If all the aforementioned items are included in the commission report, the report may be too long for inclusion in the town's annual report. The commission may decide to submit a condensed version for inclusion in the town report and have the longer version available upon request.

Town reports are more complete if an annual report is submitted by each organization that provides service to the town. Thus, although not required by law, conservation commissions are encouraged to submit an annual report to the town report. The law requires towns to make town reports available to every voter. See [Montpelier Conservation Commission's Annual Reports](#)

3-14 Maintaining Records

Commission records include agendas, minutes, annual reports, financial statements, committee and project records and reports, and documents such as planning documents, resource inventories, management plans for individual sites, maps, and photographs. Commissions are encouraged to maintain an orderly archive for use by the commission, other government bodies, and the public.

As required by the public access law, records of the conservation commission must be available to the public. For more information on what constitutes public records, see the Vermont statutes.

As mentioned above, conservation commissions are an official part of town government. Thus, they are entitled to a place to maintain their records and resource materials as well as a place to perform office duties. Some conservation commissions have office space for their use in the town hall or elsewhere. A commission may have its own mailbox slot. A filing cabinet or shelf space should be provided to hold any physical records. A separate online space should also be established that allows commissions to have upload and download privileges and read/write access. Many commissions have their own gmail account (ExampleTownCC@gmail.com). This gives them access to a shared Google drive and also provides a single and consistent email address that all conservation commission business can be cc'd. Conservation commissions are entitled to have access to a portion of the town website and use town letterhead or stationery (or can develop their own).

Setting up a "library" with information relevant to conservation in the town is helpful to the commission and to other town officials and residents. This can be a resource section of the town website with downloadable PDFs, or a Google drive or even a physical binder/ book shelf stored in the town hall or the local school library. This library should include a copy of this handbook and other materials relevant to the commission, such as the Commission Vision & mission, natural resource inventories, maps, reports, articles, pictures of commission events, an email directory of town positions/ boards and groups, etc.

For many conservation commission projects, having thorough and accurate information is critical to success. Thus, maintaining a library that is organized, accessible, and useful is a worthwhile investment. If there is a large turnover of commission members over the years, it is extremely valuable for the present commission to know what the past commission activities included. Thus, another important reason for having a thorough resource library is to build on and not duplicate past work.

3-15 Orientation of New Commissioners

If new conservation commissioners are given an orientation to the commission, they will become functioning and contributing members sooner. New commissioners should be familiar with the mission statement and goals of their conservation commission. Commissions should provide new members with a directory of contact information for commissioners and other local officials and community groups.

New commissioners should read minutes of past meetings, project and annual reports and this handbook to understand conservation commissions in general and their conservation commission in particular.

3-16 Conflict of Interest & Liability

A conflict of interest is a conflict between one's obligation to the public good and one's self interest. It is often the appearance of conflict that counts more than actuality. If the public may believe that a commissioner could be conflicted because of financial or familial connections to the decision, it is better to abstain.

Participation in a discussion or recommendation by a commission member with a perceived possible conflict of interest could impair the credibility of a commission. Thus, a commissioner must abstain from all activity on any issue in which possible benefit or special interest could be inferred. The minutes of the meeting should note the abstention.

Liability of conservation commissioners for actions or failure to act is a complex subject and may require advice from a municipal attorney. However, commissioners are generally immune from personal liability in performance of their official duties under state and federal law.

CHAPTER 4: SETTING PRIORITIES AND ACHIEVING GOALS

This chapter discusses mission statements, planning, the natural cycles of commissions, and partnerships with other organizations. It is designed to help commissions focus their energy and minimize the problems caused by being bogged down.

4-1 Mission Statement

Some conservation commissions are very clear on their goals and mission, whereas others have difficulty developing a focus for their efforts. A conservation commission should know why the organization exists and be able to write a clear statement of purpose. In fact, one of the first tasks of a commission is to write a mission statement.

As discussed in [Chapter 2 Starting and Building a Conservation Commission](#), the State enabling legislation for conservation commissions does not contain a purpose statement as do many other pieces of legislation.

Consequently, some conservation commissions have struggled with their role and purpose, which leads to conflict among members and ineffectiveness of the commission. Writing a mission statement will help commissions get started and keep them directed.

Generally, a mission statement should be a short, inspiring message that is easily communicated. It answers the question "Why do we exist?" It also serves as a recruitment and public relations tool. In addition, the mission statement for conservation commissions

Morristown Conservation Commission Mission:

To preserve the natural beauty and rural character of Morristown and to protect and enhance its natural environment through land acquisition and easements, advocacy and education.

Guilford Conservation Commission Mission:

To serve the Guilford community to identify, inventory, foster education about, and help protect Guilford's natural, scenic, recreational, historic, educational, cultural, architectural, agricultural, and archaeological resources for the public good. The commission shall help residents and town officials recognize the value of these resources and administer them for the benefit of future generations.

Charlotte Conservation Commission Mission:

Our mission is to support the Charlotte Town Plan by promoting land and other resource use decisions which protect and enhance Charlotte's natural and cultural resources through:

- Promotion of public understanding and appreciation of nature.
- Creation of education and planning tools for resource management.
- Participation in town planning and policy development processes.
- Engagement in the civic life of the town.

must be in accordance with the enabling legislation. The reason for the establishment of a particular commission also may influence the wording of its mission statement.

4-2 Short-Term Planning during the First Few Years

After writing a mission statement, the next task a conservation commission faces is how to turn the mission statement into concrete, measurable goals and objectives. This includes establishing priorities and writing a work plan.

In general, a conservation commission's goal is to promote stewardship of the natural and cultural resources in the community. However, because this mandate is so broad and because there are likely more conservation issues in any community than there will be time and energy to address them, conservation commissions need to establish priorities. Taking the time to plan thoughtfully will lead to more success and less frustration.

Short-term planning often involves deciding on several projects and writing a work plan for the course of a year or so. This type of ad hoc or incremental planning leads to getting involved with activities somewhat randomly, as opportunities arise. This strategy may keep a commission busy but does not direct energy toward specific goals, and the impact of the commission will be scattered or small. An example of incremental planning by a conservation commission would be the following:

- This month, hold a river cleanup;
- Next month, host a public lecture on preserving agricultural land;
- In September, sell chrysanthemums at the fall festival to raise funds for an Arbor Day activity.

An annual work plan is very useful. Answering the question "What activities should we undertake during the next year?" It can be a fun and stimulating exercise for a commission. Two effective tools for generating ideas are brainstorming and the nominal group process. Both processes benefit from a skilled leader who acts as a facilitator. The facilitator helps the group move through the process and frees all commissioners to participate.

Brainstorming is one of the most widely used strategies for drawing out creativity. The facilitator writes down the topic or question on a flip chart or a chalk board. Group members call out their ideas in short phrases that are written down by one or more recorders. No judgments or discussions are allowed during this stage; offbeat or unusual ideas are encouraged to stimulate fresh thinking. The point is to come up with many initial ideas, out of which a few of the best can be selected.

[Missisquoi River Basin Association Tree Planting Program](#)

The Missisquoi River Basin Association (MRBA), got its start in 1994 with the determination and dedication to restore the Missisquoi River watershed. The MRBA is a group comprised of teachers, farmers, business owners, environmental experts and concerned citizens. Since the formation, the non-profit has planted more than 22,000 trees to create streambank buffers and provide habitat alongside the Missisquoi River.

The MRBA has sought grant money, volunteers, and willing landowners to he.. [Read More](#)

Next, making the choices to narrow the scope can be done in a variety of ways. Everyone can vote for the three ideas they like the best. Another approach is for everyone to rate the ideas from 1 to 10, with 10 being the highest priority and 1 being the lowest. The ideas with the highest combined score will be discussed further. After narrowing the list to a few topics, group members need to clarify and examine each of them.

The nominal group process is an effective strategy for assuring input from all group members. Each group member silently writes down their ideas on a given topic or question in a few words. The facilitator then asks each person to present, but not discuss, their first idea. Then, each person gives the second idea and so on until all ideas are written down by the recorder on a flip chart or chalk board.

The facilitator then reviews each idea, asks for questions or clarifications, and numbers the ideas. Each person silently chooses priority items. The facilitator goes down the list and records the number of people who consider each item a priority. This step can serve as a winnowing process, eliminating some ideas. Finally, each member rates each item from 0 (no importance) to 10 (top priority). A cumulative rating is calculated for each item. An alternative approach to the last two steps is to give each group member a certain number of dots (colored paper with adhesive backs) to vote for their top priorities. Often, three to six dots are given to each member, who can put all the dots on one item or spread them around. The item with the most dots is the highest priority.

The advantage of the nominal group process over brainstorming is that the former assures all participants an equal opportunity to express opinions and ideas in a nonthreatening setting. Both strategies can help conservation commissions generate a set of priorities for the coming year.

A variation on the brainstorming approach is to start the list of ideas at one meeting and then continue it at the next meeting. In between meetings, members can talk with family members, neighbors, selectboard and planning commission members, civic organizations, school officials, and townspeople in general to gather ideas about what the conservation commission should be doing. This expanded process not only results in a longer list but can also generate support for the commission.

When choosing priorities, a newly formed conservation commission should consider several factors. First, pick some projects that can be accomplished fairly quickly with the energy and expertise available. This will help the commission establish a track record, build confidence, and build a base of support for conservation work in town. Projects such as trails and cleanup efforts can achieve recognition and citizen involvement. Noncontroversial projects such as education projects—helping a class of local students monitor the presence of amphibians and reptiles in a wetland—can build community support and reduce possible concerns that town residents may have about the role of a conservation commission.

Second, a conservation commission should focus its work on the most pressing conservation issues. Therefore, a new commission can assess these interests directly by community surveys, which can be a joint project with the town planning commission. An established commission should conduct community surveys periodically. Such a survey should identify the most important conservation issues in town. For more on surveys, community values mapping and more, see [Chapter 5 Communication and Engagement](#).

Third, to deal successfully with conservation of a town's resources, a community first needs to know what it has! Thus, an inventory is often the first place to start for a new conservation

commission. Priorities and a work plan will flow from an inventory. For more on inventory, see [Chapter 6 Commissions Work in a Larger Context](#).

Depending on the reason for its creation, a new commission may have a clear mandate for its course of action. Other commissions may perceive an urgent need to get involved quickly on a particular project. Most new commissions avoid controversial projects for the first few years. Each community has its unique people, resources, and priorities that translate into different projects and work plans.

After selecting priorities for the next one- to two-year period, the commission should develop a clear work plan that specifies what activities will be undertaken, who is responsible, what will be accomplished, and how the activities relate to one another and to the target audience. A good work plan leaves time and energy for dealing with new urgent matters that may come up.

4-3 Long-Range Strategic Planning

After conservation commission has been up and running for a few years, it may want to do more sophisticated strategic planning. This type of long- term planning is a process of determining both what impact or influence the organization wishes to have in the future and how it will achieve that. Typically, the scope of strategic planning varies from three to five years, although it can focus on a more manageable one to three years.

In contrast to incremental planning discussed above, strategic planning involves deciding on a goal and taking progressive steps that build on each other to reach the goal. A simplified example of strategic planning by a conservation commission would be the following:

- With a goal of preserving working farms in town, a commission first encourages the townspeople to set up and fund a local conservation fund.
- For a few years, the commission encourages the townspeople to contribute annually to the fund through a tax appropriation.
- Next, the commission holds a series of public meetings on the benefits and techniques of land conservation and specifically invites farmers in town.
- Then the commission hires a staff member of a land trust to meet one on one with willing farmers who are considering a conservation project.
- Finally, the commission and a land trust put together a land conservation deal and encourage the selectboard to appropriate money from the conservation fund to leverage other grant money to buy a conservation easement on a particular farm in town.

Strategic planning answers four questions.

1. What is our goal?
2. Where are we now in relation to our goal?
3. Where do we want to be?
4. How do we get there?

A strategic plan provides a framework for decision-making, budgeting, fundraising, and recruiting volunteers. An effective plan is feasible, measurable, flexible, inspiring, and in writing. It includes a mission statement, goals, objectives, and a timeline. Without a strategic plan, an organization continually reacts to situations or squanders its resources trying to do everything and often ends up feeling burned out.

There is not one way to do strategic planning; each conservation commission can use a process that fits its needs. The process itself requires energy, creativity, and time, but it is extremely valuable. A key element in how smoothly and quickly the planning process goes is how it is led. Commissions should consider asking an experienced person for help to facilitate their strategic planning sessions. Sometimes, a commission may try but be unable to agree on a long-term strategic plan. Rather than consider this a failure, the commission can use at least some of the ideas generated by these discussions to improve short-term plans.

Some conservation commissions have charismatic leaders who intuitively seem to know the way to proceed. These commissions often can operate without a formal strategic plan—if the gifted leader stays in the lead! However, in these situations, it can be hard for less confident commissioners to participate fully and for new leadership to develop within the commission. It can also lead to a lack of participation by some members since “clearly (the leader) has it covered.” In these cases, it is important not to let the commission become the work of only one inspired person. Be sure that work is delegated to everyone in appropriate ways and that the commission has ways of gently holding each other accountable for the work that they take on.

For lack of leadership or a mission statement or for other reasons, some conservation commissions muddle along without organized planning. This reactive approach means responding to situations as they arise and not taking much initiative. It can be a temporary survival strategy when the organization's time and energy resources are very low. But in the long run, it is frustrating for volunteers and can harm an organization. Some level of participatory group planning and targeted activities is important.

When thoughtful planning is done on a regular basis, it provides direction and periodic accomplishments; that is, the group decides where and how they want to go and they have the satisfaction of knowing when they get there! These elements are especially important to a volunteer board such as a conservation commission. Commissioners will be most willing to engage in planning sessions if the process is kept simple and relatively brief. The effort invested in planning will pay off in terms of more efficient use of time and money and a more effective use of enthusiasm and expertise on the commission and in the community.

4-4 Ebbing and Flowing of Conservation Commissions

Conservation commissions, being volunteer organizations, tend to ebb and flow in cycles of energy. Most conservation commissions will experience low energy and membership at some point. This is understandable but discouraging. Commissioners will want to take actions to promote strong organizational and leadership development and to avoid or minimize the impact of low times.

One typical situation is when a long-standing leader, for example, the founding member, leaves. If no preparations have been made for the transition to a new leader, the commission may experience a painful void that seems almost impossible to fill. The best preparation is to work regularly in teams and keep good records so that when an unexpected or planned change of membership occurs, others can pick up the responsibilities of the departing member more easily. Leadership development within the commission should be promoted constantly by the chairperson and others. A successful strategy used by one conservation commission was for the founding member to stay on the commission as a member for at least six months after she stepped down as chairperson.

Lack of a focus or goals is another problem frequently encountered by conservation commissions that can result in low enthusiasm and participation and a sense that the group is just drifting. A mission statement, rules, an annual workplan, and a strategic plan will go a long way to stimulate and focus energy. Even if the work plan must be modest due to limited human and financial resources, it can still be made meaningful and satisfying to those involved.

Successful conservation commissions carefully balance their projects and workload. Commissions can burn out from juggling too many projects at one time. On the other hand, there must be enough interesting projects going on to keep members involved. Similarly, a commission needs to complete projects to feel successful. A combination of short- and long-term projects is desirable so that there is periodic accomplishment and completion. Big, long-term projects can be divided into manageable pieces. Having an experienced outside person help with the strategic planning process can provide a voice of reason when the commission is tempted to overcommit itself.

In many different situations, an ebbing conservation commission can benefit from successfully conducting an easy, short-term project. Some easy projects can generate a great deal of success and public recognition! Including the excitement of children in a project can also help inspire others.

Having fun is a very important ingredient of successful commissions and keeps members wanting to serve. An example of a fun activity is monthly field trips to explore different areas in town, whether hiking in summer or snowshoeing and skiing in winter. Commissions can host seasonal community celebrations on the land, such as a winter solstice party with storytelling, singing, and sharing of food. Include humor, when possible.

[Volunteer Recruitment for Invasive Species Control](#)

The Charlotte Conservation Commission in partnership with Lewis Creek Association have conducted an ambitious volunteer based invasive plant control project. The project site is the Thorp/Kimball 50 acre wetland complex, adjacent to Town Farm Bay of Lake Champlain. European frogbit, a floating aquatic plant was first discovered in the wetland in 2007. At the time, it was estimated to have covered 50% of the open water. With the support of DEC and funding from Green Mountain Coffee Roaste.. [Read More](#)

Including some hands-on, outdoor projects can keep commissions energized. Projects such as stream bank restoration, trail maintenance, or pruning and releasing wild apple trees for wildlife refresh members' spirits and are fun. As Middlebury College professor John Elder said, "We need to connect with our local landscapes to gather strength."

Effective commissions make the most of the talents and interests of their members when choosing projects. This increases motivation and success. Moreover, an effective commission recognizes and accepts that the time and energy each member can give varies.

Commissions that include a mix of long-time members and new members tend to flow better because of continuity with the past plus some fresh, new ideas and perspectives. In addition, larger commissions have the advantage of being able to spread the workload out over more people, so individuals are less likely to feel overwhelmed. Commissions function well when there is a mix of "organizers" and "doers."

Low membership can dampen commission enthusiasm. Easy, short-term projects show potential members that the time commitment does not have to be a large one to accomplish worthwhile goals. One commission held a highly visible event in town, and afterwards, several new members joined. Volunteers will join if they believe they will have fun and accomplish something! Encourage new members to take on a manageable task immediately. Also, see suggestions on finding new volunteers in [Chapter 2 Starting and Building A Conservation Commission](#).

Low enthusiasm and poor attendance at commission meetings reinforce each other. To perk things up, the chair can try talking with members individually to draw out their personal concerns and motivations or organizing a short retreat with an inspirational speaker. Attendance at meetings can be encouraged by making sure they run efficiently, having an occasional guest speaker, and regularly offering refreshments. On a regular basis, a fun outdoor activity can help counterbalance some of the unavoidable strain and discouragement that commissioners experience.

Commissions are energized by working collaboratively within and outside of the town. Joint projects with the planning commission, the recreation committee, or the local historical society are rewarding and beneficial now and, in the future, (see the following sections).

Not only can less-active commissions meet with neighboring conservation commissions and "recharge" their energy that way, but active commissions also can enjoy the stimulation of reaching

[Sullivan Education Woods Monthly Walks](#)

After the Sullivan family donated the 14-acre forest to the town of Middletown Springs, the town's conservation commission were appointed stewards of the property and created a loop trail and signage. One of the largest projects pursued by the group was a series of walks that took place each month for about six years. Open to all, this family-friendly series offered citizens the opportunity to engage in monthly-guided walks of the forest... [Read More](#)

[Sue Morse presents "Animals of the North: What Will Global Climate Change Mean for Them?"](#)

The Bolton Conservation Commission (BCC), the Association of Vermont Conservation Commissions and the High Meadows Fund presented: 'Animals of the North: What will Global Climate Change Mean for Them?' by Susan Morse, forester, wildlife ecologist and founder of Keeping Track, at Smilie Memorial School on October 4, 2017. Sue's powerpoint presentation about northern animals and the effect that our warming climate is having upon them was illustrated with her stunning, award-winning photography .. [Read More](#)

out to new commissions nearby and offering help or planning joint activities. Regional meetings of conservation commissions are great places to increase motivation and hear new ideas.

Successful commissions seek outside expertise and help when needed. They gather information carefully from a variety of sources before making important decisions. They talk with successful fund-raisers about how to find grants and other support

for projects. Contact [AVCC](#) for assistance or a fresh perspective on how to move forward.

Conservation commissions can ebb and flow depending on what is going on in their towns. It follows that most conservation commissions have their strongest activity while the climate is most supportive. The opposite is also true. For example, if the town will be voting on a large school bond, it might not be a good time for the conservation commission to ask for money to buy land for a new town park.

Controversies or issues that seem ripe for public support often motivate people to get involved and the commission to act as opportunists. However, a conservation commission should discuss the various aspects of controversial issues before choosing its role. What do they want to achieve and how can they be successful? Sometimes a commission will decide to approach an issue from the side rather than head-on, such as by collecting and distributing objective information for townspeople and decision-makers. For example, the Woodbury Conservation Commission chose to stay out of the motorboat controversy in town. Instead, members put their efforts into studying the twenty-three lakes and ponds, setting up a lake lay monitoring program, and writing a report.

Success breeds success. A commission can minimize failures by planning carefully and carrying out its projects conscientiously and professionally.

Many conservation commissions are discouraged by the slow rate of progress on the things they want to see changed. But they must recognize that it takes time to affect changes that are important and that they must keep moving forward steadily with their conservation work.

Under a sense of urgency to "do something" about conservation issues in town, conservation commissions often overlook or do not leave time to take care of themselves as an organization. It is extremely important for volunteers on any board to feel respected, valued, and satisfied that their participation is making a difference to something they care about.

Conservation commissions are no different. The officers often provide key leadership, but it is the responsibility of all commissioners to monitor and promote the health of the organization.

The following list suggests additional ways to keep conservation commissions motivated, energized, and successful. Many of these topics are discussed in other sections of this handbook:

- Require each member to be responsible for at least one project;

- Acknowledge the efforts of individual members;
- Write a job description for members;
- Recruit and encourage effective leaders;
- Participate in training sessions for commissioners and town officials;
- Rotate members who serve as officers;
- Have chairperson and vice-chairperson share leadership;
- Make meetings a productive and efficient use of time;
- Set reasonable deadlines and keep to them;
- Encourage members to subscribe to the AVCC email listserv;
- Recruit new members on a regular basis so that vacancies can be filled without delay;
- Seek and foster the support of other town boards;
- Work at developing credibility, trust, and community support;
- Promote partnerships with other town boards and community organizations;
- Use volunteers wisely;
- Maintain an effective outreach and education program;
- Maintain a user-friendly library of resources;
- Review projects periodically to assess strengths and weaknesses, to acknowledge success, and to adjust as needed;
- Remember that process is as important as outcome;
- Talk about burn out and ebbing cycles and discuss solutions;
- Learn from mistakes;
- Be flexible.

Sometimes, a conservation commission does not feel that it is successful. But when it makes a list of accomplishments, the commission may realize it is more successful than it gives itself credit for. Just having a conservation commission is a success, with many spin-off effects.

4-5 Conservation Commissions as Part of Town Government

Vermont's tradition of strong local government results from an interplay of history and geography common to New England. Early European settlers to the region congregated in isolated small communities, separated by a rugged landscape. This isolation along with strong participatory democracy led to a decentralized form of government, including the tradition of annual town meetings.

This tradition of strong local government led to the formation of the first conservation commission in Ipswich, Massachusetts, in 1956, to save a local wetland from development. The idea spread to all of the New England states, and, as a result, conservation commissions have been called a distinctly Yankee phenomenon. New York and New Jersey also have picked up the concept.

A municipal conservation commission is the only local board specifically charged with protecting the natural resources of the town. Without a conservation commission, the planning for these resources must be done by other boards, which have other responsibilities and priorities. Thus, a conservation commission is a crucial part of town government.

Some conservation commissions are perceived, and in fact perceive themselves, as "second-class" town officials, partly because they are "only advisory" to the longer-standing selectboard and planning commission.

Other boards may treat conservation commissions as somehow less "official" than they are. This attitude can be overcome by the conservation commissioners acting like the legitimate town officials that they are. A little effort put into positive public relations will help the commission clarify its role. See [Chapter 5](#)

4-6 Relationships with Other Municipal Officials

Because conservation commissions are primarily advisory bodies, they must have good working relationships with other municipal officers to be successful. By providing accurate and reliable information, the commission will gain credibility. By offering assistance and alternative solutions, the commission will gain influence.

Gaining the respect of local officials and citizens and building strong working relationships can take time and patience. Eventually, the conservation commission will establish a reputation as being a credible and reliable source of information. Other town officials will realize that conservation commissions can assist them in carrying out their jobs.

Support from the selectboard and the planning commission can be critical at budget time because conservation commission budgets are often part of the budgets of these two groups (see [7-1 Creating A Budget](#)). Another reason for good working relationships among all town officials is to avoid unnecessary duplication of effort.

There are several goals for a conservation commission in regards to relationships with town officials and the public in general:

- To establish credibility and trust;
- To be a reliable and unbiased source of information;
- To demonstrate the ability to work cooperatively as a partner;
- To be seen as a positive entity;
- To offer people-power and enthusiasm as cosponsors of events or partners in projects;
- To be seen as a safe place to come and raise issues;
- To help sustain the valuable webs of relationships in a community;
- To be recognized as the town's commission, not as a separate group.

Most conservation commissions in Vermont do work collaboratively in their towns, especially with the planning commission, selectboard, and local school officials. Many of these relationships are successful and supportive. For example, a Ferrisburgh conservation commissioner reported, "We have a good working relationship with other [town] groups. You know that when you are asked for your technical advice by others."

A few commissions have experiences marked by miscommunication, confrontation, and disrespect. In one town, the planning commission asked the conservation commission to conduct a certain project. But after months of hard work, the planning commission rejected the work. To avoid this problem, a conservation commission can check in with the other town board shortly after starting

the project, for example, when it is 10% done. Then, periodically continue to get approval for the work and do not wait until the project is completed to present the work.

Communication is often the key to successful town board relationships. Let town officials know before, during, and after a project what the conservation commission is pursuing. Additionally, a commission can discuss the risks of tackling controversial issues with other boards ahead of time.

If there are problems working with one town board, the commission may gain success by accessing the decision-makers another way. For example, one conservation commission had trouble working with the selectboard but was able to work well with the town manager instead. If there is one person on a board who is not supportive of conservation commission activities, try to find out why and, if possible, respond to their concerns. And, in the meantime, seek other allies on the board.

A conservation commission should avoid the language or sentiment of "Us vs. Them" in its relationship with other town boards or factions within the town. Its really not helpful to talk that way within commission meetings since it only furthers any perceived divides. The more a commission can do to speak about other boards and citizens and their actions with respect, the more it will be respected. Remember the difficult balancing act the planning commission and selectboard have to engage in. By comparison, the work of a conservation commission is more straightforward in having a more singular mission. Be gentle with each other and recognize the tremendous dedication of volunteers around town, some of whom might disagree with the commission's work. Instead of "us vs them", its really only "Us", the town, and the town needs to figure out how to get along. For better and worse, we're stuck with each other and need to find ways to productively engage in the town's business.

Managing conflict is an important aspect of a conservation commission's work. Conflict is unavoidable and isn't something bad or to be feared and doesn't necessarily mean anyone did anything wrong. It is a natural byproduct of people living in community with different visions for what they want their present and future to look like. A conservation commission can help train and empower its members to handle conflict in an appropriate way. This involves skills in managing inter-personal conflict as well as conflict between boards or with various factions within the town. Understanding the bigger picture of who is doing what (See [Chapter 6 Conservation Commissions Work in a Larger Context](#)) can be helpful in minimizing some conflict between boards as commissioners learn more about each other's roles. (See [4-7 Working Collaboratively with Other Organizations](#))

One role that a conservation commission can serve is education of its citizens outside of the schools. This is an area in which conservation commissions can take the lead and build strong alliances with other groups supportive of this educational role.

Not always, but in some instances, the conservation commission must seek approval for its projects from other town boards, especially the selectboard. Whether approval is needed or not, it is always wise to keep other boards informed of commission projects from the beginning. To encourage approval, the commission should be well prepared and have "all its ducks lined up." One commission had to go back to the drawing board because it could not answer all the questions of the selectboard, including how much the project would cost.

To have successful relationships with town officers, conservation commissions must be aware of the political and organizational framework in which they operate. Every commissioner should be

familiar with how municipal government works, the roles of each entity, and the regulations and Town Plan currently in force.

The following are short descriptions of some of the major players in town government, along with suggested actions for conservation commissions to build bridges to these players. Consult the Vermont Statutes and publications by the Vermont League of Cities and Towns, and the Office of the Secretary of State for more detailed descriptions of town officials.

Selectboard / City Council

The selectboard is the three- or five-member legislative body of the town. Its members are elected at town meeting and are responsible for the basic administration of the town. Their major role is to manage the town budget and the infrastructure, such as roads, water, and sewer. They also make appointments to other boards and commissions, such as the planning and conservation commissions and the zoning board.

Conservation commissions work closely with selectboards. Sometimes the selectboard asks the conservation commission to write a report or management plan, research a position, or monitor an activity in town with environmental impacts.

The following are suggested actions to foster good relationships between the conservation commission and the selectboard:

- Make agendas and minutes of conservation commission meetings available to the selectboard and email them directly;
- Designate one commission member as the liaison who attends selectboard meetings;
- Alternatively, rotate who serves as the liaison;
- Have the selectboard designate one member who will serve as the liaison with the conservation commission and attend commission meetings;
- Request that the agendas and minutes of the selectboard meetings be emailed to the conservation commission;
- seek support for conservation commission projects early on;
- Ask the selectboard for suggested future projects for the commission;
- If the selectboard asks the commission to conduct a project, be sure all the details are clear and agreed upon.

Planning Commission

The planning commission's overall role is to lead the community on planning matters. The three to nine members are either appointed by the selectboard or elected by the townspeople. The planning commission writes zoning bylaws and the town plan, which by state law must be revised every eight years. If a town has zoning bylaws that include a site plan review provision and subdivision bylaws, the planning commission is responsible for the review of proposed developments and may conduct site inspections, unless there is a Development Review Board, which would take on that responsibility.

Conservation commissions work closely with planning commissions in several important areas, including updating the town plan, reviewing development proposals, drafting new zoning bylaws, and preparing open space plans. (See [Chapter 6](#) for more on municipal projects) Many planning commissions ask conservation commissions to work jointly or independently on specific projects

such as making maps, conducting inventories, writing grants, conducting community surveys, holding public meetings, or forming study groups around an issue.

The following are suggested actions to foster good relationships between the conservation commission and the planning commission:

- A conservation commission member also may serve on the planning commission;
- Send the planning commission agendas and minutes of conservation commission meetings;
- Designate one conservation commission member as the liaison who attends planning commission meetings;
- Alternatively, rotate who serves as the liaison;
- Have the planning commission designate one member who will serve as the liaison with the conservation commission and attend conservation commission meetings;
- Request that the agendas and minutes of the planning commission meetings be mailed to the conservation commission;
- Seek support for conservation commission projects early on;
- Ask the planning commission for suggested future projects for the conservation commission;
- If the planning commission asks the commission to conduct a project, be sure all the details are clear and agreed upon.

Zoning Administrator and Zoning Board Of Adjustment

The zoning administrator issues zoning or building permits and makes initial decisions on zoning matters (Administrative Review). The administrator is appointed by the planning commission with the approval of the selectboard. The zoning board hears appeals of permit denials from, the zoning administrator and grants variances and conditional use permits. The zoning board is appointed by the selectboard.

Generally, the conservation commission has limited interaction with these town officials but may want to meet with them periodically to reinforce the importance of supporting conservation issues in town.

Development Review Board

In municipalities that create a development review board, this board takes over the regulatory functions of the planning commission as well as the responsibilities of the zoning board, which ceases to exist. This frees the planning commission from the burden of conducting site plan and subdivision reviews and allows them to concentrate completely on planning. To date, about 50% of Vermont towns have established a development review board. The selectboard creates a development review board simply by voting to create one. The board consists of three to nine members, appointed by the selectboard.

Town Clerk And Treasurer

The town clerk is elected to keep the records of birth, marriage, and death and the land records and to run elections. The treasurer is elected to keep the financial records of the town and to collect current property taxes. Often both positions are held by the same person. A town clerk can be the glue that holds a town together, and they often are a pivotal point for communication among townspeople and town officials. Conservation commissions can benefit from having a good working relationship with the town clerk.

Town Tree Warden

Every town in Vermont is required to appoint a town tree warden, who is responsible for the planning, planting, and maintenance of trees within the public domain. The interests of conservation commissions and town tree wardens overlap, and these two groups should work closely together.

[Ash Tree Awareness Week 2014](#)

In 2014, the Vermont Urban and Community Forestry held Ash Tree Awareness Week to provide education and outreach to the public about the Emerald Ash Borer. During the designated week, events were held throughout the state of Vermont to raise awareness of the damaging effects of the Emerald Ash Borer. Events included tree walks in every county that were open to the public, hanging posters on 1500 Ash trees with information about EAB, and teaching citizens of Vermont how to identify EAB. In add.. [Read More](#)

Road Commissioner / Town Road Crew

The road commissioner is either elected by the voters or appointed by the selectboard. This individual is charged by the selectboard to maintain the town's highways and to keep the bridges, culverts, and roads in good repair. A conservation commission may work with the road commissioner on a variety of issues. This might include: Aquatic Organism Passage; invasives species management along town roads, wildlife road crossings, erosion control, curb cuts, & maintenance practices that impact water quality and roadside vegetation. Emerald Ash Borer is another growing problem that merits close collaboration with the road crew as dead ash trees along the roadside are dangerous to motorists.

Cemetery Commission

The cemetery commission is elected to supervise the care and use of public cemeteries. Each town has its own rules for cemetery use. A conservation commission may work with the cemetery commission in regard to conservation of cultural resources present in the cemeteries, open space for public use, and trees in the public domain.

Town Manger and Town Planner

Larger municipalities in Vermont have paid staff, such as a town manager or a town planner. The town manager (or town administrator) works for the selectboard as the chief administrator of the town. The town planner works for the planning commission and the Zoning board. These town officials can be valuable allies and resources for conservation commissions.

School Board

Three or five members of the school board serve as a legislative body for the school district. They write the school budget, negotiate teachers' contracts, and set school policies. Conservation commissions may collaborate on projects with the school board or other school officials, such as offering educational programs or establishing a nature trail on school property.

Town Health Officer

The selectboard members (who serve as the town's board of health) recommend a person to serve as the town health officer, and then the Vermont Commissioner of Health makes the appointment. The health officer's job is to abate any potential or existing health hazards in town. Topics of concern include sewage disposal, drinking water supplies, solid wastes, hazardous materials, and rabies. This town official can be a valuable partner and resource for conservation commissions.

Town Energy Coordinator or Energy Committee

Appointed by the selectboard, the town energy coordinator is an ex officio member of the planning commission. The energy coordinator's role is to coordinate existing energy resources in the town and to evaluate alternatives that lead to more efficient and economical use of energy resources. A conservation commission can work with an energy coordinator on mutual interests, for example, drafting an energy conservation element for the town plan, putting together a tour of energy-efficient or energy-independent homes, and working on projects that decrease energy use in transportation such as ride sharing and bicycle and pedestrian paths.

Recreation Committee

Although a recreation committee technically may or may not be a part of town government, these committees provide valuable services to the town by planning for public recreational land, facilities, and programs. The activities of a conservation commission dovetail with a recreation committee because both are concerned about offering recreational opportunities. Often, the recreation committee spends most of its time planning for activities such as baseball, soccer, swimming, tennis, urban parks, and playgrounds. Conservation commissions tend to focus on trail systems and lake and river accesses. These two groups should establish good working relationships for mutual benefits. The groups also need to discuss and determine the balance between access and resource protection. Not all wild places are suitable for recreation and the two commissions need to be on the same page about what those places are.

[Lamoille River Paddlers' Trail](#)

A community effort is underway led by the Vermont River Conservancy, to create new opportunities for paddling and fishing along the Lamoille River. Called the Lamoille River Paddlers' Trail, the project's goal is to establish a network of well-maintained river access points, primitive campsites, and portage trails from the river's headwaters west to Lake Champlain, as well as to develop recreational guides for visitors. A steering committee of local community members has been assembled to coo.. [Read More](#)

Town Historical Society

A town historical society is not part of town government but consists of townspeople who care about a town's history. The primary goals of historical societies are to preserve and interpret town histories and to participate in historic preservation projects. These groups can be valuable allies for conservation commissions to accomplish historic preservation projects and land conservation projects. For example, a historic building is more valuable if its historic landscape context is also maintained. Thus, these two types of projects can go hand in hand.

Generally, conservation commissions have less interaction with the following categories of town officials: listers, board of civil authority, justices of the peace, library trustees, auditors, collector of delinquent taxes, town agent, and town grand juror. Town government is much more complex and interesting than this short synopsis suggests. It is relevant to conservation commissions, for example, that a town must have an approved capital plan and budget before it can levy impact fees on new development. Impact fees can be designated for use in conservation projects. An important job for all town officials is to help the citizenry understand the maze of town government and know how to register their views on issues early in the process.

A few parting suggestions:

- Be aware of town politics, both in the past and present;
- Remember that democracy depends on compromise;
- Give praise and thanks when due!

4-7 Working Collaboratively with Other Organizations

By collaborating with other organizations, conservation commissions can address a wider range of issues with greater effectiveness and efficiency. Other organizations can provide new perspectives, increased access to information and expertise, people power, financial assistance, and a greater foundation for support. Because the environment does not respect political boundaries, conservation commissions often need to work with other groups in neighboring towns or in their region. This is especially true for projects such as shoreline issues, recreation trails, wildlife habitat and corridors, and watershed management.

Another valid reason for working collaboratively is that some funders prefer to fund proposals that involve numerous partners, thus representing a broader base of resources and support. Moreover, partnerships that form around a particular project or issue can have positive effects well past the time and scope of the original project.

To increase the effectiveness of collaborations, one conservation commission member can serve as a liaison with another group by serving as a joint member of both groups. For example, some conservation commission members are also members of a local land trust or a local river group.

Some organizations join up with several other groups because the union is more powerful. For example, a coalition is an organization of organizations working together for a common goal. A coalition amasses the power necessary to do something that cannot be done by one organization. An example of a number of conservation commissions and other groups joining together is the newly formed Champlain Valley Conservation Partnership. One of its goals is the compiling of a regional conservation priorities from existing and new information to guide local and multi-town conservation projects.

Some commissions feel that they have a wealth of resources and contacts from outside organizations, whereas others feel removed from these sources. The number and types of organizations with which conservation commissions can work are large and diverse. A few organizations that have worked with conservation commissions are scouts, students from elementary schools through colleges and universities, private environmental organizations, and state and federal government employees. If your Conservation Commission is having trouble connecting to outside groups, AVCC may be able to facilitate an introduction to possible partners.

4-8 Recruiting & Retaining Volunteers

Many conservation commission projects require large numbers of people, such as walking town roads for Green-Up Day or clearing vegetation for a new hiking trail. Volunteers can be regular contributors to a commission or can be recruited for a one-time project. Volunteers can serve informally or can be part of one of the commission's committees (see [Chapter 3-4, Committees](#)). Using volunteers increases people power and community support.

In addition, volunteers are a pool for future members of the commission. The most common reasons that people volunteer include:

- Attracted by the cause;
- Enjoy being with other people;
- Are personally satisfied from doing the work;
- Appeals to their self-interest;
- Enjoy helping others;
- Gives them something to do.

How do you entice volunteers? A big part of the answer lies in good public relations and in publicity (see [Chapter 5](#)). Effective ways to get volunteers are newspaper articles and letters to the editor about the commission's activities. People particularly respond well to encouragement from their friends and family to get involved; accordingly, commission members should activate personal networks of friends, neighbors, and acquaintances. Other local groups in town are good sources of volunteers.

To increase volunteerism, commissions should stay abreast of trends in volunteers. For example, adults with children may be hesitant to give up a Saturday with the family. However, if the volunteer work can involve the whole family, they may be more likely to show up. If childcare is made available for young children, more volunteers may step forward.

Community service components of school programs may be tapped for student volunteers. Many businesses are encouraging their workers to volunteer in their communities and may even have formal corporate volunteerism programs where employees are permitted to spend a certain number of days volunteering.

Volunteers are more likely to step forward if they understand what they are being asked to do and if they understand how it fits into a goal or objective of the conservation commission. This can be accomplished by writing a job description that includes what they will be doing and how long it will take. Being clear and realistic on the time required is helpful as many volunteers are leery of open-ended commitments.

While on the job, volunteers may need training, advice, or supervision so that the job is done the way the commission wants it done. Be sure to account for this ahead of time in the division of labor such that project leaders have time to orient and supervise volunteers.

Serving refreshments, such as coffee, cider, bagels, or ice cream, will be much appreciated; these can be donated by state or locally based businesses. Recognition and appreciation are obviously important components of volunteer management. Commissions can do this in many ways:

- Give words of thanks and praise;
- Give warm smiles and handshakes;
- Write thank-you notes;
- Give a "Volunteer-of-the Year" award at town meeting.

The recruitment and organizing of volunteers require care and attention to avoid confusion, misunderstanding, and disappointment and to maintain good will and support in the community. Common sense is the best guide as well as remembering to treat volunteers as commissioners would like to be treated themselves.

Conservation commissions should keep track of volunteer hours. This can be accomplished with a sign-in sheet on a clipboard. Knowing the number of hours of volunteer support is often important for the matching, in-kind services that are necessary components of many grants and can be used in annual reports or project report-outs to the community as evidence of community support.

CHAPTER 5: COMMUNICATION AND ENGAGEMENT

How your conservation commission communicates and engages with your community matters a great deal. Your image and standing within the community require regular attention and care.

5-1 Establishing and Keeping a Positive Image

First, focus on ensuring that the conservation commission is perceived as a good partner for others to work with. If your group is new and still getting going, make the time to discuss how every commission member should contribute to maintaining that positive image. As noted in other chapters, clear communication with partners, such as the planning commission and Selectboard, will go a long way towards reinforcing your image as a thoughtful and reliable partner in town affairs.

Second, evaluate whether your image is in touch with the full range of community values. A common critique of conservations commissions is that they can be a disconnected from the broader needs and realities of the community, only focusing on environmental values. A common friction point is where commission members' opinions are at odds with beliefs held by others in your community. As a starting place, every commission member should read the town plan; because the town planning process must go through a process for incorporating public input, the town plan is likely to represent a wider range of perspectives that exist in the community.

A common friction point is where commission members' opinions are at odds with beliefs held by others in your community. Conservation commissions should, to the best of their abilities, try

[Bat Houses Building Project](#)

Starting in June 2017, a community volunteer, Phillip Wilson provided background information and building plans for a Conservation Commission sponsored bat house project. Phil built two prototypes and prepared literature for a public presentation which he gave in July at a well attended community program. On October 7, 2017 volunteers and Conservation Commissioners joined Phil to build and paint 12 bat houses. Several smaller bat houses were donated to the project. In March, siting location.. [Read More](#)

to connect with those people and understand how they feel. The more in-touch and aware your conservation commission is with these different perspectives, the more you can find overlap between your conservation goals and the needs of all community members.

5-2 Crafting your Message

In [Chapter 4](#), you learned about how to develop a guiding purpose for the conservation commission. This was the process where you figured out why your commission exists. As part of that process, all members of the conservation commission need to develop a strong understanding of what the mission and work of the conservation commission is. That understanding of shared purpose is at the core of your basic message. You should be able to articulate in a sentence of two why your conservation commission exists and the kinds of work you engage in. Make sure the language is accessible and not overly complex. You want folks to easily understand what you do and be interested in learning more. This is the message you send out into the world. For example, the Middletown Springs Conservation Commission describes itself this way:

Since 2000, the Middletown Springs Conservation Commission has worked with our community to learn about and sustain the natural resources of our town. Conservation commission initiatives include stewardship of the town forest, Sullivan Educational Woods; educational programs and nature walks for the community; monitoring and controlling invasive species; contributing to town planning efforts; coordinating Green Up Day, and monitoring and assessing the town's rivers, wildlife, wetlands, and upland natural communities.

The Bolton Conservation Commission articulates its mission in fewer words:

The Bolton Conservation Commission's role is to promote stewardship of natural and cultural resources in our town and to advise the Select Board, Planning Commission, and Development Review Board on matters relating to the environment.

Beyond its core message, the conservation commission will periodically need to develop more targeted messaging around specific projects. If, for example, you are kicking off a new project to address the threat of invasive plants, you will need to understand how to communicate with different groups why this project is relevant and worthwhile. For example, think about how a business might engage with invasive species and think about the message you would use in conversation with this business. Perhaps you might focus on how invasives can quickly dominate the vegetation around a home or business and become hard to manage. By removing invasives and replacing with native vegetation, the business could also share that with customers as an example for why they are a good community partner.

To promote the health of the Winooski River, the Montpelier Conservation Commission (MCC) capitalized on an opportunity to work with a local business to reduce stormwater from its parking lot. In 2019, the MCC partnered with Vermont State Employees Credit Union (VSECU) to install a rain garden at VSECU's Montpelier headquarters. The new rain garden helps the business reduce its parking lot's stormwater contribution to the Winooski River, helps demonstrate the businesses' environmental values to town residents, visitors, and customers.

Finally, as you design messaging to reach different groups, focus on creating fun and engaging experiences for people to interact with your topic. If you are trying to get parents and families involved in improving water quality in your community, consider partnering with the recreation department to provide free swimming lessons at the town beach to underscore the importance of clean water. Try bringing your aspirations of protecting farmland to the town fair, or the farmers market, where you can interact with more people working and living in the agricultural community.

5-3 Creating a Communications Plan

Sharing the work of your conservation commission is an important part of building support and credibility. As you plan, implement, and complete projects, make sure that you are sharing stories about that process with the community. We often hear about the beginning or end of the project, with far too few updates on the progress and the interesting twists and turns along the way. As you plan a project, be sure to brainstorm the messaging that will go along with different phases of the project. All of these exercises can be wrapped into the conservation commission's Communications Plan. The Communications Plan identifies:

- Who you want to reach; (list each audience)
- How you will reach them;
- How often you will reach out;
- Guidelines for the "voice" and "tone" of your communications material.

Knowing how to reach people in your unique community is essential, because every community connects in slightly different ways. For some towns, residents gather at central places like the general store, local café, farmers market, or transfer station. In others, community discussions transpire online on various platforms. Your messaging should be designed to match with those different venues and each of the various audiences listed in your communications plan. Long-term residents of town can help identify where the old-timers gather, while younger community members might provide insights to how young people or families are communicating with each other. Ideally, you are distributing your messages in multiple venues to reach as diverse a group of constituents as possible.

As you broadcast your message, don't forget to take advantage of traditional media, such as radio, TV, bulletin boards, and word of mouth. If your town has a newspaper, get to know the editors and the ground rules for submitting articles, opinion pieces, or press releases. If you plan a public event, make sure that your local reporter or editor knows about it, as they may be interested in covering the event. Oftentimes, local reporters are keen to cover interesting goings-on in town.

[The Creation of the Lowell Community Nature Trail](#)

In Lowell, VT, a student at the Lowell Graded School named AJ Sicotte had a growing interest in building a walking trail through the woods behind his school that would be open to the entire town. After beginning clearing the trail himself, AJ gained help from the community when Bob Hawk, the linkage coordinator for the Staying Connected Initiative (SCI) met with the Lowell School principal, Scott Boskind, and two teachers from the school's science department, Judy Ide and Michael Brooks.

.. [Read More](#)

Recognize that in the digital age, many people are likely to hear about your projects online. If your town maintains a website, find out who maintains the website and request a dedicated page or section of the town website for the conservation commission. Items you may want to add to your website include:

- Names and terms of commission members;
- Regular meeting times and locations;
- Purpose or mission statement;
- A brief paragraph about your commission history;
- Archived agendas and minutes (unless your town uses a separate portal to store these documents);
- Digital copies of reports, inventories, and other related documents;
- Maps or links to online map portals;
- Good quality pictures of projects and events you have completed.

Keeping your web presence up to date, organized, and well-curated help create a positive impression of the conservation commission. To keep web materials current, designate a conservation commission member as the point person for making or requesting updates and changes to the website. For a good example of a conservation commission that is using its website to engage community members with its Trail Camera Project, visit Cornwall's Conservation Commission [website](#).

In addition to the website, your conservation commission can benefit from engaging in digital communication. Many Vermonters stay abreast of community events through social media on platforms such as Facebook, Instagram and others. Many communities have spirited local discussion on Front Porch Forum. These are useful places to announce events, distribute information, post requests for volunteers, and more. When used well, social media sites are productive avenues for staying engaged with your community; however, take care with social media, as the dialogue and exchange of comments can easily become politicized or impolite.

Set ground rules for how your conservation commission engages with social media, which roll up under the broader communications plan. The communications plan should include guidelines on your intended "voice" and "tone." For example, one group's communications plan encourages a voice that is "earthy, energetic, friendly, fun, and trustworthy." When members are writing articles or preparing presentations, another conservation commission member should provide edits and suggestions to ensure the tone and content reinforce that positive image.

Return email and voicemails in a timely manner. If you cannot respond to an inquiry within a reasonable amount of time, send that person a brief note acknowledging that you received their message, are considering it, and then share a realistic timeframe for getting back to them. This will help people feel heard without placing an unreasonable expectation on conservation commission members for returning correspondence.

Finally, designate one or more conservation commission members to take charge of maintaining regular communication with the public. One of these people can be responsible for responding to general inquiries, while passing on specific inquiries to the appropriate conservation commission member. As your group and your work evolves, update the Communications Plan as needed. Rotate members in and out of this role, just as you would for other commission roles.

5-4 Visioning & Community Engagement

Once a conservation commission has crafted a core message and created a communications plan, the Commission is better suited to design community engagement activities. Some of these activities should address visioning—the process of helping a community articulate a future worth seeking; Other activities should address participation—reaching numerous people from diverse backgrounds and perspectives. The two are intertwined: the more diverse group engaged, the more likely the visioning will suit the full range of community needs.

Visioning

One type of visioning exercise conservation commissions can engage in is helping their community better understand its values, and where those different values occur on the landscape.

Community Values Mapping is an exercise designed to gather a group of community members to map out different places that they love, using different categories, such as Recreation, History, Scenery, Ecology, Hunting, Fishing, and more. Once the initial maps have been drawn, the mapped results can be aggregated to show where different values overlap, and where different user groups share common ground. For example, a forest block delineated as having both a recreation value and a hunting/fishing value indicates broader support for keeping that forest intact. It may also help communities anticipate potential conflicts, such as disagreements among different recreational user groups.

Monkton conducted its Community Values Session online during the COVID-19 pandemic using a combination of software to enable video-chat (Zoom) and online collaborative mapping ([Miro](#)). In

[Community Value Mapping in the Northern Green Mountains](#)

In 2009, Cold Hollow to Canada Forest Link Project, the Staying Connected Initiative, and the Vermont Fish and Wildlife Department hosted a gathering which brought together community members from the towns of Enosburgh, Montgomery, and Bakersfield. The goal of this meeting was to compile a multitude of community-value maps created at the event into a single map which depicted areas of high community value overlap. In total there were over 90 community members who attended the event, and each.. [Read More](#)

[St. Albans Main Street Revitalization](#)

In 2009 the city of St. Albans started developing a master plan for the redesign and revitalization of Main Street which included Green Stormwater Infrastructure (GSI). This redesign included new sidewalks, street lamps, roadways, and tree planting alongside Main Street. The city broke ground in October 2012 after many years of developing a vision and creating a master plan. The master plan was a collaboration of public and private sector individuals with various experiences addressing the.. [Read More](#)

addition to the online mapping exercise, the conservation commission posted maps in a central town location and encouraged people to map their values individually, but in an outside, safe manner consistent with public health guidance. Other conservation commissions may find it advantageous to conduct a community values mapping session in a “hybrid” mode – combining an in-person event with supplemental online opportunities to engage more people.

A similar process called **Community Heart & Soul**, is a process that engages the entire

population of a town in identifying what they love most about their community, what future they want for it, and how to achieve it. Funded by the Orton Family Foundation, this process has been used by the towns of Canaan and Essex.

Engagement

Crown Jewel Walks

For the past few years, the Thetford Conservation Commission (TCC) has asked select landowners if TCC members might walk their properties. The purpose of these "Crown Jewel Walks" is both to offer information to Thetford residents, but also to help the Conservation Commission know what properties in town are truly special. The walks usually include several TCC members who are particularly knowledgeable about flora and fauna and can point out interesting features of someone's land. After each walk,.. [Read More](#)

- In many towns, only a relatively small group of residents participate in town events. It can become predictable who is going to show up for public meetings as it's often the same cast of characters. This presents a real problem as those that attend don't necessarily represent the full diversity of opinions across the town. Many towns have experienced this phenomenon: they take public input from a small group in the early stages of a proposed rule change and then are later blindsided by adverse public opinion when the rule is about to be finalized. One might ask, "Where were you when we were developing this proposed change? Why did we have to go through all those steps before more residents got involved?" Engagement beyond this cast of likely characters is key to broadening representation of the town as a whole and not getting blindsided with end-of-the-process feedback that scuttles forward movement. Engagement is also key to gaining access to potential volunteers that aren't already maxed out. Commissions should take a fresh look at how events

are advertised and that the events that are planned are interesting and exciting.) It's important to ask the questions, who are we reaching and who is showing up? Who is left out of that? How can we make input more accessible to them? Barriers like language, time, child care, accessibility of information (is it easily understandable by someone who is not deep in the environmental world; is it easy to find online)? Online input as well as in person feedback are both critical aspects.

One of the main barriers to participation is that many people cannot attend town events due to scheduling conflicts and family obligations. Consider holding "open office hours," at a variety of different times. These sessions provide a time and place for community members to drop by and engage with commission members, explore ongoing or proposed projects, and voice concerns or questions. For example, the Town of Jericho held office hours during its process creating the Jericho Natural Resources Overlay Zoning District. The town of Waitsfield tabled at the local farmers market, a convenient weekend gathering place, to encourage people to engage with their ongoing projects.

Providing food makes meetings and forums more fun, especially at night meetings that interrupt normal dinner hours. The Putney Conservation Commission made its regular meetings into potlucks. Sharon Conservation Commission hosted "Dump and Donuts," where conservation commission members brought donuts to the transfer station to engage with residents taking care of business on a weekend morning. The Town of Panton held a Pizza for Planning party as part of an effort to solicit more participation in its town plan update. In all these cases, the food facilitates a feeling of community togetherness.

Engaging youth brings vibrancy and energy to your commission. It is their future you are working to conserve! Consider adding a youth seat to your commission. Youth members, often high-school aged, can serve on a conservation commission. For several years, Shelburne has included youth members on boards, commissions, and committees, where they hold non-voting seats. Manchester, Montpelier and other towns also allow youth members.

Increasingly, Vermonters are working to make their communities more welcoming to more people. While towns have developed a certain way of doing things, the expectation that, “it’s the way we’ve always done it,” isn’t necessarily the most inclusive path of moving forward. Conservation commissions should take a fresh look at their own operations and other aspects of town governance and ask who in the community benefits and who is being left out. Decisions about what time of day the commission meets or the format of the meeting can make involvement difficult for some town residents and easier for others. Conservation commissions need to have a true understanding of who makes up their community and ensure the CC’s work reflects the community’s racial and socio-economic diversity. More than that, marginalized voices need to be better heard in municipal government. So, conservation commissions are tasked with the job of balancing the needs and desires of many different community members to meet the goals of the town and the commission.

One exciting initiative designed to address inequities in conservation is a “tree equity” partnership between municipalities, the Vermont Urban & Community Forestry Program, and the Arbor Day Foundation. The program provides free trees to people whose urban location, health, or income puts them at risk of heat-related illness—ensuring that historically marginalized community members can enjoy the many benefits of urban trees, such as home-cooling, stormwater retention, air quality improvement, property value increase, and more.

One good tool in thinking about more inclusive and democratic governance can be found in the [Jemez Principles for Democratic Organizing](#). Furthermore, working with Black, Indigenous, and

Nulheganaki Tribal Forest

The Nulhegan Abenaki was a partnership by Vermont Land Trust with funding from VHCB and permanently conserved and facilitated the transfer of 65 acres of forest land to the non-profit Abenaki Helping Abenaki (AHA). The establishment of the Nulheganaki Tribal Forest permanently prevents the 65 acres from being developed and allows for sustainable forest management, maple syrup production, wildlife habitat improvement, pedestrian recreation and educational and cultural activities. The forest is currently a working sugarbush with a fully equipped sugarhouse and a well-developed system of forest roads. It is estimated that the property can support at least 3,000 taps. The tribe intends to continue this activity as a cooperative-tribal effort. The tribe also intends to pursue small scale, organic, forest cover gardening for limited cash crops. They will use this forest sustainably to provide elders and low income families with supplemental home heating firewood. Tribal members will use this land to sustainably hunt game as allowed for by the Vermont Department of Fish and Wildlife. They also plan to use small scale traditional Abenaki agricultural methods in existing clearings in order to provide vegetables and fruits for the community, and to sustainably gather traditional Abenaki medicines. Finally, the tribe, through the Nulheganaki Youth Program, hopes to use this land as a location for their tribal youth to be educated in the ways of nature, the outdoors, and traditional practices.

persons of color (BIPOC) community members is necessary to further conservation work in Vermont that serves the full range of values and needs in this state. See [Vermont Releaf Collective](#) as one example.

Above all, engagement should have an element of fun. Of course, some conservation topics are serious business, but there are many opportunities to focus on fun, enjoyable opportunities for people to connect around a conservation topic. For example, the Montpelier BioBlitz, conducted every 10 years, combines a city-wide citizen science effort with fun events such as tree climbing and a slip n' slide station. Billed as a "once in a decade jamboree for Nature," this event hits the sweet spot for combining science, conservation, and fun. See all the [case studies](#) in this book for more ideas on successful engagement and other stories in [AVCC's Success Stories Library](#). [Community Workshop](#) offers a variety of engagement ideas and additional services. The Agency of Natural Resources *Environmental Leadership Training Unit 2: From Planning to Action* also focuses on engagement ideas. Look [here](#) for current listings.

CHAPTER 6: COMMISSIONS WORK IN A LARGER CONTEXT

As long as conservation commission projects fall reasonably within the powers and duties outlined in Vermont Statute, commissions have a wide latitude to take on a variety of meaningful projects in town life. Naturally, certain topics will appeal to the people who make up the commission based on their interests and priorities. It is also normal that certain topics will be more relevant to some towns than others.

Once the conservation commission has developed a strong sense of purpose and understands how to work collaboratively, it can tackle a variety of different projects. However, some commissions have trouble figuring out where to start. The following sections suggest a rough sequence of how the conservation commission can plug into different aspects of conservation. This order might not always be the most appropriate sequence but grounding the conservation commission in several of these first elements will improve their ability to tackle later ones. Also see [4-1 Mission Statement](#), [4-2 Short Term Planning](#) & [4-3 Long-Range Planning](#)

6-1: Understanding the Municipal Scene

As mentioned in earlier chapters, the conservation commission's first task is to understand how the municipality works. There are several established activities that towns regularly engage in. As such, the conservation commission does not necessarily need to brainstorm new project ideas—it can plug into existing, meaningful municipal projects. The first, and one of the most impactful, municipal project is the town plan.

The Town Plan

The town plan (for those communities that choose to plan) is the visioning document for the town. It speaks to the “balancing act” the town seeks in the various competing values the town is

[Plainfield Town Plan Update](#)

Plainfield updated their town plan in February, 2014. The updated plan added a significant amount of conservation language throughout the document. Plainfield's vision statement directs the town to foster appreciation for Plainfield's natural resources. To ensure this goal, in addition to enhancing and strengthening the conservation language in the chapter on natural resources, critical conservation-oriented strategies and objectives were added to other c.. [Read More](#)

planning for. The plan is a document, generally written by the planning commission with input from townspeople and a variety of other municipal boards. It must be in conformance with the Regional Plan and that is voted on by the full Regional Planning Commission responsible for that town and approved by the Department of Housing and Community and Community Development (DHCD) at the Agency of Commerce & Community Development (ACCD) every eight years. It presents conservation commissions with an established avenue to ensure that their interests are represented in each edition of the town plan. Although town plan rewrites are generally coordinated by the planning commission, conservation commissions often write or contribute to various chapters.

Because the town plan is focused on planning for the future, it is therefore the most appropriate avenue for

describing resources of interest in town and strategizing ways to protect those resources into the future. This generally takes shape as a written narrative and related maps in the town plan. Many conservation commissions help write the “Natural Resources” chapter; however, because conservation issues cross into many other topics, conservation commissions can provide input to other sections of the town plan, such as the Transportation, Land Use and Flood Resilience chapters. A good town plan approaches resources from a systems perspective, thinking about how each issue intersects with other related topics. Conservation commissions should learn when the next town plan update will occur, understand the scope of the rewrite (sometimes towns will tackle only a few sections), and make a concerted effort to be included. This must be a high priority because it may be the only opportunity for eight years!

Note that there is an increasing trend toward brevity in town plans across the state to make them more readable and accessible. This means that the full spectrum of resource values may not be adequately captured in the narrative. With this trend it is even more important that goals, policies, and objectives in the plan clearly represent next steps for the commission and the most important policies to protect natural resources.

See Section on [JAM Golf Supreme Court decision](#) to emphasize need for clarity and mapped data clearly indicating what natural resources are important for the town’s planning and regulation.

Local Hazard Mitigation Plans

Another type of planning that towns engage in is Local Hazard Mitigation. Common hazards facing Vermont communities include floods, winter storms, tropical storms, high winds, and structural fires. Landslides, wildfires, hazardous material spills, and water supply contamination events are among the many other potential hazards that communities may encounter. The process of creating a Local Hazard Mitigation Plan helps communities identifies the most likely hazards for the

community, focuses resources on mitigating the greatest risks, and educates people about hazards in town. Importantly, local governments with a Local Hazard Mitigation Plan approved by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) are eligible for a variety of federal funds. Having an approved hazard mitigation plan is one of the requirements to qualify for post-disaster funding through FEMA’s Emergency Relief and Assistance Fund (ERAF). Conservation commissions can play an important role in this process, as it intersects with many other traditional conservation topics. For example, the commission could create a mapped overlay of riparian buffer protections that mitigate flood risk. See the website for [Vermont Emergency Management – Local Hazard Mitigation Plan & Planning Resources](#) page

Renewable Energy Siting

In 2016, Act 174 was passed, establishing a new set of municipal and energy planning standards. Towns with an “Enhanced Energy Plan” (generally as a chapter or appendix to the town plan) that meet the new Act 174 standards are granted greater consideration in the siting process for renewable energy generation. The Public Utility Commission (formerly known as the Public Service Board), which regulates energy projects, will grant towns “substantial deference” in the renewable energy siting process, but only for towns that undertake this extra planning step. In other words, by creating an Enhanced Energy Plan, towns can have a greater say in where energy projects, like wind and solar, should and should not be sited. This is a complicated topic with many important details, and it exceeds the scope of this Handbook. However, Regional Planning Commissions are available to provide technical assistance to towns on this topic. While this topic may fall primarily under the purview of a different town organization (such as an Energy Committee), conservation commissions may wish to engage in this process to advocate for natural resources protections within the energy siting process.

Whole Communities and Livable Cities

Although conservation commission members may think of themselves at home in the woods or wetlands, there are important conservation opportunities in downtowns, neighborhoods, and commercial districts. One important strategy for protecting natural resources is to engage in making your town center green, livable, sustainable, and a vibrant place to live. This will encourage people to live closer to public services in denser developments that are less land-intensive and are common drivers of development of natural resources.

[Buildout Analysis in Calais by CVRPC](#)
Central Vermont RPC helped Calais do a GIS Buildout analysis to determine the maximum number of new building units that could hypothetically be placed in Calais given current regulations as well as under another scenario. This project helped the town look at its zoning standards and get a sense of where new development was being guided, enabling them to better understand current regulations and changes that might be made to better protect natural resources. Within the context of this hypothe.. [Read More](#)

One framework for a making your town greener is to replace “gray” infrastructure—concrete, stone, brick, pavement—with “green infrastructure,” such as trees, shrubs, pollinator gardens, and rain gardens. Green infrastructure provides a host of benefits for people and nature, including:

- Air quality improvements;
- Increased shade, reducing urban heat effect;
- Reduced stormwater runoff into waterways;
- Filtration of pollutants before they reach waterways;

- Erosion control;
- Increases in property values;
- Habitat for wildlife such as birds and pollinating insects.

Another strategy is to focus efforts on making your town more bicycle- and pedestrian-friendly. Towns with bike lanes, bike racks, and safe avenues for cyclists and pedestrians will encourage people to conduct more of their transit by bike or foot, which reduces pollution and road congestion. Additionally, “pocket parks” or allowing for businesses to use sidewalk space or remove a parking space for additional outdoor seating can be worthwhile in making downtowns more livable and pedestrian friendly.

Cultural opportunities also play a major role in making a community vibrant and livable. As such, the conservation commission might choose to engage in cultural history and preserving historic sites and buildings. For some residents, conserved historical and cultural features help foster a deep sense of connection to a community and its history.

[A Place in Between - Collaboration for a Healthy Landscape between the Adirondacks and Green Mountains](#)

A Place in Between is a collaborative effort through the Staying Connected Initiative and the Wildlife Conservation Society. The goal was to create a platform from which all the environmentally-focused organizations within a particular geographic boundary (the region between the Green Mountains and Adirondacks) could visualize the work of all others, determine whether there was overlap of goals and strategies between groups, look for gaps in geography and focus, and begin a conversation about.. [Read More](#)

Assistance for the Municipal Scene

- Vermont’s eleven Regional Planning Commissions each work with a geographically bound service region, and can provide assistance on a variety of topics, ranging from GIS mapping to transportation planning to assistance with a variety of other aspects of fulfilling state and local planning goals. See the [Vermont Association of Planning & Development Agencies](#)
- Vermont League of Cities & Towns can provide additional resources. Founded in 1967, this nonprofit, nonpartisan organization exists to serve and strengthen Vermont local government.

6-2: Plugging into the Larger Conservation Scene

Beyond engaging in existing, ongoing municipal projects, conservation commissions can become part of a larger conservation scene in Vermont. Below are two suggestions for how to begin that process.

Joining the Association of Vermont Conservation Commissions (AVCC)

The Association of Vermont Conservation Commissions serves as a gateway to a broad community of Vermonters, volunteers, and professionals working across the state and region. Although [membership in AVCC](#) is not required of conservation commissions, it is encouraged and provides several benefits to member towns, including:

- Access to an active 600-member listserv, where announcements, resources, and opportunities are regularly shared; vtconservation@googlegroups.com

- Eligibility for the [AVCC Tiny Grant Program](#);
- Discounted access to the AVCC annual [Conservation Summit](#);
- An online library of “[Success Stories](#)” from other conservation commissions highlighting projects and the elements that made those projects successful.

Beyond these direct member benefits, the AVCC exists to help conservation commissions develop capacity and access the resources and knowledge it needs to succeed and help form additional commissions across the state.

Land Conservation

Conservation commissions have the authority to engage in land conservation on behalf of the municipality under its powers and duties listed in Vermont statute. This can be conducted through outright purchase of the property and its various interests (also known as “fee simple acquisition”); alternatively, the town can accept donation of or purchase a particular interest in the property, such as the development rights. This legal arrangement is called a conservation easement, where the municipality holds legal rights to a particular interest (such as development rights) in the property without owning the property itself.

Some towns have even created their own land trusts, including Duxbury, Charlotte, Greensboro, Mount Holly, and South Hero, among others. Starting a local land trust should be done carefully as the organization has a responsibility to steward the easements it holds *in perpetuity*. That’s a high bar for a local organization and should only be tried if existing regional or statewide land trusts are inadequate for the local need.

Many conservation commissions are very interested in land conservation because it is a proven, permanent way to protect valuable natural resources; however, land conservation is made much easier for municipalities through partnerships with other conservation organizations in the State. While land conservation can be undertaken by the town with the conservation commission as a major player, there are professional organizations such as land trusts of government agencies that specialize in these kinds of land deals and transactions. Many land trusts specialize in a particular geographic region (such as the Upper Valley Land Trust) or specialize in a particular kind of conservation project (such as town forest acquisition or farmland protection). The AVCC can help match towns to an appropriate conservation partner with experience in the type of project the town is interested in conserving. For more information on land conservation, see [Chapter 7 How to pay for Conservation](#).

Brushwood Community Forest

The Brushwood Community Forest is a 1,059-acre municipal woodland owned by the town of West Fairlee, Vermont.

Brushwood strategically adjoins the 1,400-acre Fairlee Municipal Forest. (A few hundred acres of Brushwood actually lie within the town of Fairlee.) Together, these two town forests are part of one of the last significant blocks of forestland in the ecologically significant Upper Connecticut River Valley... [Read More](#)

6-3: Understanding the Science & Taking Inventory

Over time, as your conservation commission builds credibility within municipal government, the commission may be called upon to weigh in on science and land management topics. As such, commissioners should do their best to stay abreast of current scientific topics. Attending conferences, webinars, and field walks are great ways for commissioners to increase their

knowledge. Some commissions include members with professional experience in science or land management and can lean on these members to help educate the remaining commissioners; however, there are times when bringing in an outside expert, such as a consultant or agency professional, has its benefits. One of these times is during a Natural Resources Inventory.

Natural Resources Inventory & Mapping

As the enabling statute indicates, conservation commission may undertake inventory and assessment of the town's natural resources. A natural resources inventory, simply put, is a study of any noteworthy natural resources over a given area. Field-based inventory data, particularly natural community data, is the most appropriate scale of data to use in town planning. Resources commonly inventoried include:

- Wetlands and vernal pools;
- Streams, rivers, and ponds;
- Natural communities;
- Rare, threatened, endangered, and uncommon species;
- Special wildlife habitats (mast stands, deer wintering areas, grassland bird habitat, etc.);
- Habitat blocks;
- Wildlife corridors;
- Wells, groundwater, and springs.

Dummerston Biodiversity Inventory Report

The Dummerston Biodiversity Inventory Report was fueled by a partnership between the Dummerston Conservation Commission and the Bonnyvale Environmental Education Center. This report was inspired by the Vermont Biodiversity Project, which suggests that inventories be carried out on a community/town scale. Using the Vermont Department of Fish & Wildlife's document "Conserving Vermont's Natural Heritage" as a guideline, these two organizations came together to develop a conservation plan that wo.. [Read More](#)

Conservation commissions may undertake the inventory independently if they have sufficient in-house expertise. Be sure to think about town politics and how final results may be received and used when the inventory is completed. For some towns, local experts can serve as a trusted voice. While in other towns it can be easier for an outside voice. It is more common to hire a consultant who can provide expertise on a variety of natural resources and complete the inventory work more rapidly. If the inventory is designed to cover most or all the town, a consultant might charge between \$15,000 and \$20,000. A smaller project, such as inventory of a town forest or another piece of town-owned land might cost around \$5,000. These costs can vary, depending on the acreage, complexity of the project, and consultant rates. See [Chapter 7 How to pay for Conservation](#) for ideas on funding inventories and the need for local match.

Most modern natural resources inventories include maps made using Geographic Information Systems (GIS) software, although conservation commissions can also make maps using various online mapping platforms, such as [BioFinder](#) and the [Agency of Natural Resource's Atlas](#). A paid consultant will usually gather existing GIS data and add any new data collected from the inventory's field work. If your town decides to hire a consultant for an inventory, the conservation commission should still play an important role in connecting the consultant to landowners. In the town of Richmond, the conservation commission sent out postcards to landowners requesting that they permit the consultant to visit their property for the natural resources inventory. With an actively involved conservation commission, natural resources inventories are more likely to be used rather than forgotten on a bookshelf.

Planning for the intended uses of inventory before it begins can be an important first step. In Hinesburg, a Natural Resource Inventory Committee was formed to brainstorm possible uses first and then they drafted the Request for Proposals. This committee was chaired by a conservation commission member but included representation of the Selectboard, trails committee and local land trust. It is also important to plan the public outreach after the inventory is complete to be sure everyone in town is aware of the results and that those results are translated into maps and language that residents can understand. Often the consultant will do one or two presentations as part of the inventory contract, but the commission could also set up additional events where the public has other opportunities to engage in the material and perhaps engage other speakers that can distill the information into more easily understood language.

Apart from natural resources, conservation commissions may also undertake inventory of other resources, such as cultural or historic resources.

Mapping for Regulatory Review

Once a town has natural resources inventory data in hand, it can use the data to inform its land-use planning. For example, the Town of Jericho used its natural resources inventory data as the basis for a [Natural Resources Overlay District](#). In their Overlay District, “Primary Conservation Areas” were established around areas including rare, threatened, & endangered species, vernal pools, forested riparian areas, and upland natural communities. “Secondary Conservation Areas” were established for slightly less sensitive or less precisely-mapped (but nevertheless important) resources, including ledge/cliff/talus habitats, wildlife road crossings, and high elevation forest blocks. Importantly, Jericho exempted wildlife road crossings falling within the Commercial District, with an eye towards enhancing protections in the rural, outlying parts of town, while encouraging growth within commercial areas. Another example is [Charlotte’s Significant Wildlife Habitat map](#) that the commission uses for development review.

This system of interpreting inventory data helped create a valuable land-use planning tool that protects natural resources through local regulation, but one with consideration for which resources merit the highest level of protection and which other resources still warrant protection, but with more flexibility.

[Charlotte Significant Wildlife Map and Database](#)

In 2008, the Charlotte Conservation Commission in partnership with Vermont Fish and Wildlife Department and the University of Vermont put together a map and database that provides information about local natural resources for the town. This included significant wildlife habitat, exemplary natural communities, rare species and characteristic landscape features of the area. The purpose of the map is to provide an advisory reference for town planning as well as to put scientific information in t.. [Read More](#)

Assistance for Understanding Science

- The [Community Wildlife Program at Vermont Fish and Wildlife Department](#) provides assistance to all Vermont towns. Program staff keep tabs on the latest in conservation science and help integrate that information into municipal efforts to protect wildlife, habitat, and the most important lands and waters in Vermont. Whether you are drafting a new town plan, seeking a project partner, or looking to level up your conservation planning, the Community Wildlife Program is available to help.

- [County Foresters](#), who are employed by the Vermont Department of Forests, Parks and Recreation, provide services and guidance to communities on a variety of forestry-related topics. Most assist municipalities with town forest management. County Foresters are often engaged in forest health issues outreach and may work with schools, planning commissions, conservation commissions and watershed organizations on training, demonstrations, community service events, or natural resource projects.

[Tiered Ecological Communities Map - From Science to Planning](#)

The Forests, Wildlife, and Communities Project is a collaboration among the Mad River Valley Planning District, local and state conservation organizations, state and federal agencies, and representatives in the towns in the Mad River Valley. The Forests, Wildlife, and Communities Project is involved in various efforts throughout the Mad River Valley which seek to implement a regional and landscape level approach to wildlife and forestland conservation through public and community involvement. On.. [Read More](#)

- The [Rivers Program](#) at Vermont Department of Environmental Conservation assists towns with understanding river science and planning, making their communities more flood resilient, and navigating permit processes.
- The [Wetlands Program](#) at Vermont Department of Environmental Conservation is available to assist towns with understanding wetland science, identifying strategies for wetland protection, and navigating permit processes.
- [Basin Planners](#) at the Vermont Department of Environmental Conservation draft “Basin Plans” that identify waterways in need of restoration and help connect communities with other partners to improve water quality within their watershed.
- The [Urban and Community Forestry Program at the Vermont Department of Forests, Parks and Recreation](#) assists communities with creating and stewarding healthy urban forests and street trees.

6-4: Engaging in Land-Use Planning

With an understanding of municipal planning, the conservation community, and the underlying science, conservation commissions are well-positioned to engage in land use planning thoughtfully and productively. What is land-use planning? Land use is how we manage and use our ecosystems and lands for different benefits. Planning for land use is how we take those different uses into consideration and choose appropriate actions for land in the future. We may be tasked with deciding how to manage a particular property, such as a town forest. Yet land use planning goes beyond an individual parcel – it asks us to look at broader geographies and decide how to balance different uses across many different places, through time.

Land-Use Planning

Inventory and town planning segue into deeper topics of how land should be used within town. The art of land-use planning is steering a community into the future while balancing the differing, and

potentially competing, ideas about what types of land use are appropriate in the different parts of town. Many conservation commission members have ideas about what types of land use should be encouraged or discouraged and becoming a part of municipal government is a great opportunity to become involved in a variety of land use planning topics. Conservation commissions can engage in land use planning through several important processes. See the [Municipal Planning Manual](#) by the Agency of Commerce and Community Development. See [Mapping Vermont's Natural Heritage](#), the Vermont

[Burke Natural Resources Overlay District](#)

The creation of the Burke Natural Resources Overlay District stemmed from the purchase of a ski area in Burke, VT. This purchase caused great concern for the scenic beauty of Burke's mountains due to the lack of zoning regulations to protect these mountain tops from heavy development. In order to protect the scenic beauty of Burke and to conserve its mountain tops, the Scenic and Conservation Overlay district was created.

The overlay district was created through many hearings with .. [Read More](#)

Fish & Wildlife Department's guide to using BioFinder for land use planning.

Forest Integrity Planning under Act 171

Act 171 was passed by the Vermont legislature in 2016, requiring town plans to identify forest blocks and habitat connectors and to plan for development to minimize the effects of forest fragmentation. Any town plan adopted after January 1, 2018, is required to identify, map, and plan for these features on the landscape. Many conservation commissions take a leading or supporting role (to the planning Commission) in adding these provisions to the town plan (either as an amendment, or as part of periodic update required every eight years). In addition to new narratives defining and describing the importance of forest blocks, habitat connectors and the threats of fragmentation, Act 171-compliant plans should also include implementation steps to protect those resources from fragmentation, as well as map(s) indicating where the most important forest blocks and habitat connectors are in town. See [Agency of Natural Resources' Act 171 Guidance document](#).

Implementing the Town Plan

Once your commission has laid out the vision for your town in the plan, you will need to think about how to implement the vision that has been crafted. There are many "tools," or approaches, available to help towns achieve their visions as laid out in the plan. Many of these are what are known as "non-regulatory" tools, in other words, voluntary programs that individuals such as landowners or renters or businesses can undertake. Examples of nonregulatory tools include incentive programs, like the Use Value Appraisal Program; educating landowners about Best Management Practices on forestry or agricultural lands; encouraging willing landowners to conserve their land with a land trust or other qualified entity. These are often useful steps for any town – every community can benefit from an elevated awareness about natural and cultural resources, and the voluntary steps people can take to protect them.

On the opposite end of the spectrum are what are known as "regulatory tools," things like zoning and subdivision bylaws, wetland regulations, and municipal ordinances. These tools are effective ways to plan for development and steer projects away from sensitive parts of the landscape. They can be especially effective in communities that experience high development pressures. In the end,

many towns craft a unique “toolkit,” comprised of a range of both regulatory and nonregulatory tools, to achieve their visions. Figuring out which tools are viable and effective in your community is part of the work of the conservation commission. See the [Municipal Planning Manual](#) by the Agency of Commerce and Community Development.

Land Management and Stewardship

Many conservation commissions are responsible for stewardship and management of town-owned land, including but not limited to parks, trails, and town forests. These properties, particularly town forests, are usually managed to accommodate multiple uses, including forestry, recreation, wildlife

[Developing a Wilderness Trail in our Town Forest](#)

A 1.6 mile Wilderness Trail was completed in a remote corner of Bradford's conserved Wrights MT/Devil's Den Town Forest that is managed by the Bradford Conservation Commission. Using funds from AVCC's Tiny Grant Program that was matched with money from the Friends of Wrights MT Fund, Upper Valley Trails Alliance was contracted to complete the work. Under the direction of UVTA staff, four trail crews in UVTA's High School Summer Odyssey Program, two crews from Dartmouth College's Tuck Progr.. [Read More](#)

habitat, water quality, education, and cultural use. Managers and stewards of municipal lands must balance these multiple uses, some of which may be at odds with each other. A good rule of thumb is to identify sensitive natural resources and steer more active town forest uses away from those sensitive areas. For example, some towns restrict trail development or restrict seasonal use in sensitive wildlife habitat, such as deer wintering areas. For more information on managing multiple

uses in a town forest, reference [The Vermont Town Forest Stewardship Guide: A Community Users' Manual for Town Forests](#), a publication of the Northern Forest Alliance.

Managing access to town owned lands is another responsibility conservation commissions may take on, spanning from town forests to parks and waterway accesses. Establishing a formal parking area with a kiosk for displaying maps and important information can help transform municipal land into an inviting place for residents and visitors. These facilities require maintenance, but having clean, well-maintained access areas will do wonders for your image and reputation among users of municipal lands.

[Montpelier Invasive Species Control and Education Project](#)

Park lands in North Branch River Park were acquired with significant invasive species that needed control. It was proposed to create an interpretive trail on invasive species management, including signage with explanations of the invasive species and how they are being controlled.

Many conservation commissions find it helpful—or essential—to create management plans for municipal lands. These documents codify the intended goals and purposes for the land, highlight important natural and cultural resources, and lay out a structured plan for how the town will steward the land and its resources into the future. Management plans should address the land's current and potential status, identify the community's purposes and goals, and schedule any approved management activities—spelling out what needs to be done, who will do it, and when it will happen. The process of creating a management plan should include a diverse group of stakeholders. For example, the Andrews Community Forest in Richmond, Vermont, has a management plan that focuses on forestry and ecological management to facilitate holistic management of the parcel. Management plans are critically important!

Managing land now requires addressing invasive species. Invasive species are non-native organisms that outcompete and displace native plants and animals. Considered by ecologists one of the greatest threats to biodiversity, some invasive species are widespread across Vermont while others are just beginning to gain a foothold in the state. The conservation commission is a logical group to spearhead efforts to prevent the establishment and spread of invasive species. Worthwhile efforts to respond to invasive species include educating people about prohibitions on transporting firewood, (which can carry invasive pests), removing invasive species on town lands, and encouraging landowners to replace invasive ornamental plantings with native species.

For example, the Guilford Conservation Commission focused its efforts on responding to the Emerald Ash Borer, an invasive insect pest whose damage to ash trees makes them unhealthy and a hazard to public safety. Commission members mapped more than 2,700 ash trees on 67 miles of town roads to report the status and condition of each ash tree for Vermont’s Roadside Ash Inventory. Next, the conservation commission worked with an arborist to apply approved insecticides to save important ash trees on town properties.

Waterways, River Corridors, Floodplains, & Buffers

Apart from lands, conservation commissions may also engage in stewarding and managing aquatic resources in town—such as rivers, streams, lakes, and ponds. Town waterways are dynamic places that require special attention and planning. During high water events, many waterbodies exceed their normal capacity and spill water into the floodplain. These are areas that may be well-mapped, or less-well-mapped by the FEMA; in either way, town activities should be steered away from known or suspected floodplains. In a related phenomenon, rivers are constantly moving laterally to adjust their sinuosity because of their physical properties; like floodplains, communities should steer growth and development away river corridors. The Agency of Natural Resources coordinates mapping of river corridors. In many cases, towns have existing regulations (either set up by the municipality or in some cases by the state) to discourage development within the floodplain and river corridor. See the [Rivers Program](#) at Vermont Department of Environmental Conservation.

[Charlotte Watershed](#)

Founded by the town librarian, editor of the town newspaper, and two members of the Charlotte Conservation Commission, the Charlotte Watershed project hopes to educate the local community about the area's water resources. Through a series of events including speakers and workshops, this group has made a substantial effort working towards this goal in their town. Charlotte Watershed's mission not only includes the education of citizens, but also includes a call-to-action to protect water resou.. [Read More](#)

Regardless of whether regulations exist for these areas, conservation commissions can work to ensure that native vegetation is present along the banks of streams, rivers, lakes, and ponds. These setback areas from the water’s edge, known as “buffers,” provide numerous functions, including bank stability, water quality protection, and wildlife habitat.

Conservation commissions should advocate for ecological management of waters and their buffers, for example by:

- Restoring buffers along waterbodies that lack native vegetation;

- Reducing the quantity of shorelines “armored” with riprap, concrete, and other impermeable surfaces;
- Steering public uses away from the water’s edge to protect bank condition, water quality, and wildlife habitat.

For example, the Marshfield Conservation Commission partnered with the Friends of the Winooski and the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service to restore riparian lands along the Winooski on a town-owned property. Together, the partners developed a planting plan for a 50-foot wide, 9-acre riparian buffer (5.5 acres of new plantings to supplement 3.5 acres of existing vegetation). Planting was completed in stages starting in the Fall of 2007 and completed in 2014. Following tree loss from drought and herbivory, some areas were replanted in 2018 and 2020. As part of the project, the town of Marshfield also restored an historic covered bridge spanning the Winooski River, bringing together natural and cultural history into one meaningful project.

Assistance with Land Use Planning

- Vermont’s eleven [Regional Planning Commissions](#) each work with a geographically defined service region, and provide assistance on a variety of topics, including GIS mapping, transportation planning, solid waste management, emergency management, and other planning activities
- The [Agency of Commerce & Community Development \(ACCD\)](#) helps Vermonters improve their quality of life and build strong communities. ACCD publishes the [Municipal Planning Manual](#), oversees State Designation Programs, and provides funding opportunities and other incentives for municipalities. It administers the [Municipal Planning Grant](#), which can be used for a variety of conservation-related land use planning activities.
- The [Community Wildlife Program at Vermont Fish & Wildlife Department](#) is available to assist communities with a land-use planning, such as Forest Integrity Planning for Act 171 compliance.
- The [Vermont Natural Resources Council \(VNRC\)](#) is a conservation NGO that advocates for clean energy, clean water, toxic-free environment, smart growth, and healthy forests and wildlife. VNRC staff provide expertise and perspective on various land-use planning topics.

JAM Golf Course decision

In 2009 the Vermont Supreme Court ruled against the City of South Burlington in a case that sets legal precedent for VT Municipalities. It suggests that towns need to be specific about what natural resources they are planning for (in the town plan) and what regulatory standards are applicable (in unified bylaws or zoning/ subdivision). Mapped data is an important part of the clarity towns can bring on where they are protecting and then offering clear definitions of any natural resources discussed.

6-5: Working with People & Landowners

Outreach & Education: Many conservation commissions conduct outreach and education to raise awareness about natural resources within town. In addition to educating community members, outreach initiatives foster positive community relationships and enrich town life.

One common type of outreach activity is a “Walks and Talks” series. In New Haven, the conservation commission hosts the “Armchair Naturalist Series,” inviting speakers to present on various natural history topics. Richmond engaged with the Vermont Master Naturalist Program to provide training to town members in natural history topics; graduates of the program conduct conservation service projects within the town. Other conservation commissions gear their walks and talks towards reaching private landowners in town. Thetford hosted “Crown Jewels” walks on private lands to highlight ecologically interesting lands and demonstrate what various landowners are doing to steward natural resources on their lands.

In a similar vein, some conservation commissions take it upon themselves to connect landowners with conservation program, such as the Use Value Appraisal Program (also known as “Current Use”). Interested landowners who enroll agricultural land, working forest, and some ecological lands in Current Use are taxed at the land’s “use” value (i.e. use as working forest or farmland) instead of its higher development value. The Battenkill Watershed Association maintains a “Menu” of landowner tools, describing different methods and opportunities for landowners to become better land stewards.

See [Chapter 5](#) for more on engaging with people.

Assistance with Landowner Outreach

- The Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), part of the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), is a major player in cost-sharing conservation programs. Although these programs change throughout time, the general process starts with NRCS and partner organizations providing a free consultation to eligible landowners. Once a project is competitively selected for funding, NRCS provides funding to landowner to implement recommended habitat improvement projects.
- Vermont’s fourteen [Natural Resource Conservation Districts](#) provide assistance on conservation, maintenance, improvement and development and use of land, soil, water, trees, vegetation, fish and wildlife and other natural resources in Vermont. Each of the 14 Conservation Districts serves a specific region of the state.
- Land Trusts are non-profit entities that conserve land through a variety of techniques and commonly work with private landowners to protect the conservation values of their properties. Some Land Trusts work statewide, such as the [Vermont Land Trust](#). Others

[Woodbury's Natural History Publication, Our Town: Introduction to Natural History](#)

Susan Sawyer has been with the Woodbury Conservation Commission for about twenty years and she is a naturalist. The Conservation Commission's role is to advise the select board and to educate the public on the issues that happen within Woodbury. Her main focus is on education and she is the one who wrote the natural history publication and created maps. It was published in 2006 but she started writing in 2005. Other members of the WCC edited and town residents contributed photos for the pu.. [Read More](#)

focus on specific region or town, such as the [Upper Valley Land Trust](#) or the South Hero Land Trust.

- [Vermont Coverts](#) is a non-profit organization that facilitates peer-to-peer learning among landowners about wildlife habitat and forest management. Vermont Coverts offers three-day trainings for landowners, teaching them about different habitat types and techniques, while connecting landowners to organizations and professionals operating in the field of conservation.

A Word About Climate Change

Each year, we learn more about how a changing climate will affect our communities and state. The scope of these changes can feel overwhelming! Because the work of a conservation commission is local by nature, it can feel challenging to address a complex global phenomenon working only at a local scale. Keep in mind, however, that many of the actions described in this chapter are examples of climate solutions. Protecting river buffers will help make communities more resilient to increased flooding; forest integrity planning will help keep our forests healthy and resilient to new invasives species and pathogens; making towns more sustainable and livable will reduce our dependence on fossil fuels. The conservation commission can become a source of inspiration and education for its community, articulating the connections between exciting community projects and their positive climate impacts.

[Burlington Climate Action Plan](#)

The Climate Action Plan was initiated and developed by then Mayor Peter Clavelle and the Burlington City Council in 1998. The plan was then adopted by the City Council in May of 2000. The objectives of the Climate Action Plan are to reduce the impacts on human health, forests and agricultural land, winter recreation, along with the infrastructure/land and the correlation to water quality. Ultimately, the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions within Burlington and the potentially the greater.. [Read More](#)

CHAPTER 7: HOW TO PAY FOR CONSERVATION

The two most limiting resources for conservation commissions are usually time and money. This chapter covers aspects of a conservation commission's finances, including sections on budgeting, fundraising, and starting a local conservation fund. By investing time in understanding how to pay for conservation work, you can help advance your conservation commission's goals, and become a higher functioning part of municipal government, as well as a valuable conservation partner.

7-1 Creating a Budget

Creating a budget for your conservation commission is an important step to ensure that you have the necessary resources to complete your workplan. The size and complexity of the budget will vary by town, but at minimum should lay out any expected sources of revenue and any operating expenses.

Conservation commissions typically have four sources of revenues:

- Municipal funding;
- Funds or grants from public sources such as state or federal programs;

- Funds or grants from private sources such as foundations or businesses;
- Revenues from various fundraising events.

Operating expenses for conservation commissions can include costs such as;

- Membership dues to the Association of Vermont Conservation Commissions;
- Technology and hardware (computers, external hard drives, game cameras);
- Software (GIS, Microsoft Office);
- Travel reimbursement;
- Training, meeting, and conference costs;
- Stewardship (e.g., lumber, tools, contractor labor);
- Water sampling equipment;
- Printing, photocopying, and postage costs (maps, flyers, newsletters, etc.);
- Educational program costs (Walks and Talks series, etc.).

Commissions should draft annual budgets for those expenses. It also is good practice because commissions will need to become proficient at drafting budgets for larger projects requiring grant applications. For any budget request, a commission should state why the funds are needed and what they will be used for. Descriptions of past successes, future partnerships, and benefits to the community all increase the likelihood of acquiring funds.

7-2 Funds from the Municipal Budget

For conservation commissions, most operating funds, that is, the money needed to run day-to-day operations, are obtained through the municipal budget. The enabling legislation states that a conservation commission may "receive appropriations for operating expenses including clerical help by appropriation through the budget of the legislative body."

Most conservation commissions do receive annual operating funds from their municipal budgets. Some conservation commissions work for years (especially the first year or two) with no operating funds from the municipality. But typically, these commissions are given access to parts of other budgets within town government, such as the planning commission's or selectboard's funds. The key to any type of fundraising is to ask for the money that is needed! Some commissions receive no town funds because they have not asked for it.

Conservation commissions need to learn the budget cycle in their municipalities as well as the process for requesting funds. They need to find out who is responsible for preparing the municipal budget, when budget requests should be submitted, and what information or supporting data should be included in the request.

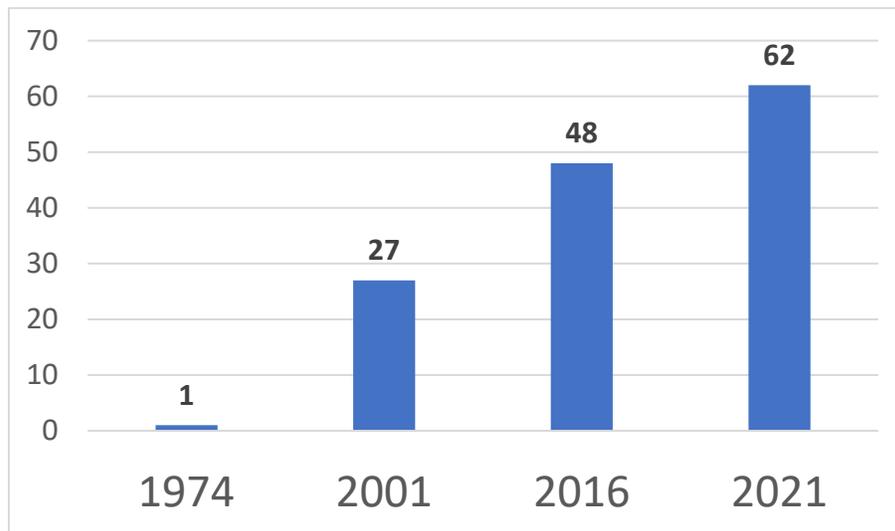
Generally, the conservation commission submits an itemized estimate of budget needs for the coming year to the selectboard or a municipal employee. The selectboard reviews all funding requests and compiles a draft town budget, which is presented at a public hearing. After the hearing, the final budget is prepared and is included in the Town Report for voting at Town Meeting. After a budget for the conservation commission is approved, the treasurer of the commission must keep accurate records of expenses (e.g., bill and/or receipts) that are submitted to the municipality for payment or reimbursement.

A conservation commission can also submit a request for a town appropriation for a specific project, such as a specific capital expenditure to purchase a parcel of land. This could appear as a separate article on the town warning or could be a line item in the municipal budget. However, a better approach may be to establish a local conservation fund, as described in the next section.

7-3 Town Conservation Funds

A conservation fund is a dedicated fund set up by a municipality for conserving lands and waters for agriculture, forestry, wildlife habitat, scenic attributes, recreational use, or natural areas. The real estate can be bought outright via a fee acquisition or protected by the purchase of development rights. Since the establishment of the first local conservation fund in 1974 by the Town of Norwich, at least 62 towns have established a conservation fund, representing approximately a quarter of all Vermont towns.

Local conservation funds have been highly successful throughout Vermont. Towns with such funds have preserved many important parcels of important conservation lands. For example, East Montpelier has used its local fund to protect over 3,000 acres in town, representing 72% of the conserved acreage within town. In Williston, the town's Environmental Reserve Fund has helped conserve 2,252 acres, resulting in a \$2.4 million investment for a total value of \$5.2 million over the life of the fund. A local conservation fund shows a town's collective commitment to protect what the citizens value about their town. This funding program takes a strong community belief and puts a financial commitment behind the words of responsibility and stewardship. Such a fund is a long-term public investment in land conservation.



Benefits of a local conservation Fund

There are many advantages to having a local Conservation Fund, including:

- “Leveraging” or tapping into matching funds;
- Advancing town goals;
- Enables town to engage and focus on its local conservation priorities, versus those of other conservation organizations;
- Speeding action and providing flexibility to act on fast-moving projects;

The following sections will explore these benefits in greater detail.

“Leveraging” Or Tapping Into Matching Funds

Most land conservation projects involve multiple funding partners, and a local conservation fund is often a critical piece in this equation. Beyond its direct dollar value, the fund will often attract to the project additional financial partners who view the fund as proof of the townspeople’s commitment to conservation. Thus, every dollar invested in the fund can leverage additional dollars from other funding sources. Leveraged funds are a financial commitment towards the cost of a project from a source beyond the granting organization. Most grant programs require a certain percentage of matching funds from applicants. There is strong competition for land conservation funds from state, federal, or private sources. Projects that include local public dollars, such as from a local conservation fund, are often viewed more favorably because these local dollars show the townspeople’s commitment to being a paying partner in the project. From the funder’s perspective, this also signals that you have done the organizing work ahead of time for the project to succeed.

[Richmond Conservation Reserve Fund](#)

After an earlier attempt narrowly failed to win voter approval, in late 2004 the Richmond Conservation Commission tried again. In a single day at a holiday fair, volunteers gathered enough signatures on a petition that compelled the Selectboard to put an article before voters on Town Meeting Day 2005 calling for the establishment of a Conservation Reserve Fund. The commission then worked with the Selectboard to write the article, setting a funding level of one cent on the tax rate for five ye.. [Read More](#)

Often, a modest sum from a local Conservation Fund can access many times that amount through various grants and programs. For example, from 2000 to 2018, the Huntington Conservation Fund spent \$96,000 of town dollars, leveraging another \$576,750 of funds from other sources. Put another way, each dollar Huntington contributed through its fund generated \$6 from other sources. Moreover, this local match is usually much smaller than the amount received from other sources. For the purchase of its town forest in 2021, Montpelier received \$258,000 from the USFS Community Forest Program to expand Hubbard Park. The Town Conservation Fund contributed \$20,000 and an additional \$35,000 came from private fundraising. Partners included the Montpelier Conservation Commission, Montpelier Parks Commission, & the Trust for Public Land.

As in the case with Montpelier, leveraging is also about working together with partners. Towns with a particular conservation project idea can often find partners, such as land trusts, state agencies, or other organizations that can provide expertise and assistance. Many of these groups have specialized niches. The Upper Valley Land Trust works within a specific region; The Vermont River Conservancy, on the other hand, focuses on conserving Vermont’s river corridors and public swimming holes.

Where does the conservation commission fit into all this? If Conservation Fund dollars are on the table in a multi-partner conservation project, the conservation commission should play a leading role in rallying local support for the project. While outside partners may be able to provide

[Orange County Headwaters Project \(OCHP\)](#)

The Orange County Headwaters project began to emerge in 2002 in the towns of Corinth and Washington, VT. The project stemmed from a community interest in maintaining the character of the area in the face of increasing development of these largely forested and agricultural towns due to the short commuting distance to Barre/Montpelier and the Upper Valley area of VT and NH. As towns surrounding the area became increasingly more fragmented by development, the landowners of Corinth and Washington.. [Read More](#)

expertise on land conservation, they cannot compete with locals when it comes to spreading the word and building relationships in town. For example, if the town is hosting a joint event with a partner organization, the conservation commission can spearhead efforts to spread the word and boost attendance at the event.

Advancing Town Goals

Another benefit of a local conservation fund is that the funded projects may help the town achieve local community goals described in its town plan or other town reports. For example, many local funds state that one of the fund's goals is to preserve the town's rural character and its working agricultural and forested landscape—very similar language to what is found in most town plans. For example, the first of several goals in the East Montpelier Conservation Fund is to “Maintain the rural, working, land-based character of East Montpelier...” Other town plan goals that can benefit from a local conservation fund program include protection of wildlife habitat, water resources, and recreational opportunities. In

addition, a local conservation fund represents a nonregulatory approach to land use planning; it is a local mechanism that includes the participation of willing landowners.

Conserving Local Priorities

Local sources of funds are also critical to land conservation efforts because regional and statewide organizations cannot undertake all of the potential projects. These groups have limited funds and resources and thus must prioritize their work, often across large geographic regions. As such, a particular parcel of land may be very important for the town's conservation goals, but a statewide organization may not be interested in the project because it is not of regional or statewide significance, or their funding priorities might not match a town's priorities for a particular project. In such cases, a local conservation fund may be the difference between a successful land conservation project versus the land being developed. Moreover, regional and statewide groups are not as familiar with individual towns and their needs.

Speeding Action

Another benefit of having a local conservation fund is the ability to move quickly on a potential project. The chance to conserve an important parcel of land can arise suddenly. With a local fund in place, town officials can move the proposal through the application and review process quickly, potentially before the opportunity is lost or before costs rise. This is particularly true in towns with policies that do not require a town-wide vote to expend the conservation funds. For example, the Brattleboro Agricultural Land Protection Revolving Loan Fund may be used to provide short-term financing when conventional financing cannot be arranged quickly enough. Moreover, with such a local program in place, a town can seize the opportunity to move from a reactive mode to a proactive mode in land conservation. Instead of waiting for certain landowners to come forward or for a certain parcel to be put up for sale, a town can inventory its natural resources and prioritize key areas or parcels for conservation projects. Then, landowners can be approached to see if they are interested in participating in this program.

Legal Mechanisms for Establishing Conservation Funds

The authority to establish a town Conservation Fund appears in multiple sections of Vermont Statute. Most Conservation Funds are types of reserve funds that are under related statute (24 VSA §2804) are established by a vote of the municipality and placed under the control of the legislative body (i.e., Selectboard, City Council). This statute allows for towns to set up reserve funds for whatever funds they deem necessary. The municipality votes to create the fund at its annual meeting or at a special meeting duly warned. Williston, for example, is one town that established its fund this way.

Conservation Funds, however, can also be established under the powers and duties of conservation commission (under 24 VSA Chapter 118 §4505(5)), through their ability to “receive money, grants or private gifts from any source” for conservation purposes. Moreover, the ability to raise funds is a logical extension of the authority of conservation commissions to recommend that the municipality purchase key properties (24 VSA 2405[3]). Thus, the enabling legislation for a conservation commission allows it to set up a conservation fund without a vote of the citizens. Thetford is one town that set up a conservation fund this way. In Sharon, the conservation commission asked the town selectboard to sanction the establishment of a fund. Another Vermont Statute addresses local land conservation: 10 V.S.A. Chapter 155 Acquisition of Land by Public Agencies. This chapter encourages the maintenance of Vermont’s agricultural, forest, scenic, and recreational lands and discusses the power of municipalities to acquire real property or rights or interests therein by purchase, donation, transfer, or other methods.

A municipality can use the authority under Section 2804 to create a reserve fund even if it does not have a conservation commission. For example, the Town of Warren created a Reserve Fund before it had a conservation commission. In general, though, town Conservation Funds are better positioned with oversight by an organized body, such as a conservation commission, or even a special entity whose purpose is to oversee and administer the Conservation Fund.

Laying the Groundwork & Building Support

The initiative to form a local conservation fund can come from any citizen of the town. Most often, conservation commissions have been the leaders on this issue. Others who can promote the formation are the selectboard, the planning commission, or the local land trust. The Charlotte Land Trust initiated the formation of the conservation fund in its town. In Bolton, one citizen stood up at March Town Meeting and successfully proposed the establishment of that town's fund during discussion of the municipal budget. However, in many towns, successfully forming a Conservation Fund will require careful planning and strategizing.

Laying the groundwork for a Conservation Fund is an important strategy for success. First, focus on building local support. One potential place to begin is in the town plan. If your town is undergoing a revision of the town plan, as it is required to do every 8 years, a Conservation Fund may be recommended as an implementation strategy for protecting natural resources. If you sense that community members may be hesitant or have questions, structure that recommendation around "Exploring the formation of a Conservation Fund" instead of automatically jumping to the formation stage.

Distributing a survey to community members is another way to gather thoughts on the topic, gauge willingness to pay, and help identify priorities for what the fund should be used for. You may need to take on a campaign of persuasion to convince people why this is a good use of their tax dollars. Write letters to the editor of your local newspaper; post on Front Porch Forum; Host a series of educational walks and talks on conserved lands. Other options include holding a public meeting before the voting day, and garnering support from other town officers or community groups. Town residents speaking in favor of the article at town meeting is an effective way to educate voters. One town handed out an information sheet at town meeting. Networking throughout town and sharing ideas with nearby towns that have conservation funds are also beneficial strategies. For example, the Town of Charlotte undertook a series of efforts to promote formation of its fund: It commissioned an in-depth study that helped with educational and outreach efforts; results from the study were widely disseminated, through letters sent to all households, and at a public hearing to present the findings of the study. Letters and articles debating the pros and cons of the local fund were published in The Charlotte News.

[Cornwall Conservation Fund Appropriation Approved by 86% of Voters](#)

Cornwall has had a Conservation Fund since 2016, proposed and defined by the Conservation Commission and Cornwall Planning Commission and approved by the Select Board. However, up until March 2021, there had been no approved appropriation of money into it. At the March 2020 Cornwall Town Meeting, voters approved the creation of a Conservation Fund Planning Group to study how towns in Vermont fund their conservation activities. This group collected data and communicated via email, telephone .. [Read More](#)

Another way to build support for a local conservation fund is to develop an inventory of a town's natural resources or an open space map that includes the location of important conservation lands. Thus, the voters can envision why the fund is needed and how it might be spent. Finally, a compelling project or threatened piece of land can often kickstart the momentum to organize and establish a conservation fund.

Promoters of a conservation fund should consider the timing of their proposal. For example, is their community facing a large tax increase this year? If you are getting the signal that there is not enough support for a Conservation Fund at the moment, use that awareness to refocus your efforts on

building the necessary support before you bring it up for a vote at Town Meeting Day.

Starting a Conservation Fund may not happen overnight, and it's very normal to encounter setbacks. The Town of Huntington, for example, began laying the groundwork for a Conservation fund in the 1990s, only to have their proposal narrowly voted down at the 1999 town meeting. But advocates persevered in Huntington, and voters approved an article approving a Reserve Fund the next year, which has been used to fund projects ranging from renovation of a historic town hall to purchase of conservation easements, to trail restoration work. Twenty years later, as of 2018, the Conservation Fund has used \$96,000 to secure an additional \$576,000 of additional funding for local conservation projects, six times the amount the town paid out itself.

Warning Language

If a conservation fund will be voted on by the citizens, the warning language for the article should be simple and clear. Excess language may unnecessarily limit use of the fund. Several examples include:

- To see if the Town will vote to establish a Conservation Fund to conserve Weybridge land and waters for agricultural, forest, wildlife, recreational, or natural use;
- To see if the town (of Calais) will establish a reserve fund under 24 VSA 2804 for the purpose of acquiring real property or any rights or interests in real property, pursuant to 10 VSA Chapter 155;
- A reserved fund for conservation and related purposes such as land acquisition, open land preservation and other conservation activities that area consistent with the objectives of the conservation commission as outline by the State of Vermont and Hartford Town Plan.

Most towns give their funds names such as the East Montpelier Conservation Fund, the Williston Environmental Reserve Fund, and the Norwich Conservation Trust Fund (which was established in

[Weeks Forest Carriage Trail](#)

For many years the Guilford Conservation Commission has envisioned a network of public trails in our town with the goal of building appreciation for our natural resources. Much of our work in recent years laid the groundwork for this vision. We have organized monthly walks to explore our natural resource and historic landmarks. We created a guide and map of Guilford's recreational resources for our town's 250th anniversary. We researched and documented several Guilford "ancient" and Class IV .. [Read More](#)

1974 and is the oldest local conservation fund in the state). Choose a name that will have a broad appeal in your community and will not be perceived as too narrow or bent on a particular cause.

Use of Conservation Funds

Monies from a conservation fund can be used for various purposes, depending on the statute and the language used to establish the fund. If the fund is created under the statute chapter for conservation commissions, then the fund must be used “only for purposes of this chapter.”

Most often, local conservation funds are used for the permanent protection of land, that is, to purchase land in fee simple ownership or acquisition of rights to land, such as conservation easements. A conservation fund can be used to purchase rights of first refusal, options to purchase, long-term leases, and land through a bargain sale.

Funds are also used for technical assistance in land conservation projects, including legal work, surveying or mapping, appraisal or closing costs, easement stewardship costs. The East Montpelier Conservation Fund can be used for activities such as appraisals and surveys “with the understanding that such funds will be reimbursable [by the landowner] to the Fund if conservation is not achieved.” The local fund in Brattleboro was set up as a revolving loan fund to help protect agricultural lands in town. The Brattleboro Agricultural Land Protection Revolving Loan Fund can be used to purchase or assist in the purchase of interests in farmland that is threatened with development. The Williston Environmental Reserve Fund has one of the broadest purposes of any local conservation fund. One of its funding requests stated that the fund can be used “for the purpose of preserving open space, park lands, and natural resources lands by performing inventories, investigations, and surveys; negotiating options, purchase agreements, and other legal documents; and purchasing or otherwise acquiring lands or interest therein with any unexpended portions of such funds to be placed in a reserve fund to be used solely for the purposes in future years.” The Williston Reserve Fund has been used for land conservation projects several times since its formation in 1989. In a more atypical use, the fund was used to help a farmer build a manure pit to keep agricultural run-off from flowing into a nearby river. (The farmer had already donated an easement for a canoe access to the river.) As long as the farmer kept the land in agricultural production, the money was considered a grant; if he stopped farming, then the money would be considered a loan.

[Journey's End in Johnson](#)

Journey's End is a well-used swimming hole and spectacular waterfall carved in the bedrock of Foote Brook, a cold water stream which flows into the Lamoille River. The property contains 25 forested acres along Foote Brook. The brook contains high quality trout habitat and the property hosts deer yards, songbird habitat, and a forested buffer along Foote Brook. Access is a corridor from Plot Road. In January 2011, when the land adjoining the waterfalls was on the market as a house lot,.. [Read More](#)

Funding of a Local Conservation Fund

Once you have support for the idea of a Conservation Fund, there are a variety of ways you can put money into it. In most Vermont municipalities with such funds, the monies are raised from town appropriations, most often requested annually. These town appropriations can be either a lump sum or a certain portion of the tax rate. For example, Hinesburg has raised its land conservation funds by requesting a lump sum of \$5,000. The voters of Charlotte agreed to levy a tax via the following article: “Will the Town vote to authorize the selectboard to increase the tax rate by no more than two cents for a ten-year period to establish a conservation fund.” This raised

approximately \$70,000 per year for land conservation projects. This strategy is sometimes referred to as the “penny for conservation” tactic.

These requests for town appropriations are included in the town warning of the meeting at which the citizens will vote. In Shelburne, the town’s Natural Resources and Conservation Committee encouraged the town to increase its town appropriations by changing from an annual lump sum of \$15,000 to one cent on the tax rate. The first year the one-cent rate generated approximately \$58,000.

In many towns, the lump sum allocation to the local Conservation Fund is a line item in the town budget or is a budget item under the conservation commission. In addition to the town

appropriations, other town revenues have been put into local conservation funds. For example, the Calais Conservation Commission arranged for a timber sale on one of the town forests. The timber harvest generated \$16,500, which was put into the local Conservation Fund.

Monies can also be raised by fundraising activities. The

Norwich Conservation Commission sold ice cream and tee shirts and put the profit into its local fund. Several towns fund their local Conservation Funds through voluntary donations. It is important to note that donations to a town conservation fund are tax deductible under the Internal Revenue Service Code. For example, in 1999 the Hartland Conservation Commission sent an appeal letter to all town residents with the town tax bills; it received donations totaling \$3,400 for the local Conservation Fund.

If your town has a conservation commission, it can, under its powers and duties, accept direct donations from individuals, as well as bequests and gifts of land. If your town has a municipal forest, revenue from any potential timber harvest can be set aside for Conservation Fund uses. In rarer cases, towns can receive unexpected one-time windfalls or settlements: this unexpected money has not been allocated for in the budget, usually, and may be good candidates for setting aside in the Conservation Fund. Funds held in a conservation fund can also accrue interest, depending on the type of bank account they are held in. Other strategies to raise funds include fundraisers (more on that in [7-4 Grant Programs](#) and [7-5 Other Funding Sources](#)).

Of course, local conservation funds can be funded through a combination of the methods discussed above. In Norwich, both fundraising activities and donations are used. Moreover, the neighborhoods in which the projects are taking place are encouraged to raise some of the money needed for the project.

The cost of conserving land varies by the land prices and development pressures in any given Vermont municipality. Some towns need to raise much larger funds than do others. Many towns with local Conservation Funds have realized that these funds can be designed to accumulate to significant amounts through relatively modest town budget contributions made year after year.

[Warren's Conservation Reserve Fund](#)

Warren's Conservation Reserve Fund was created to conserve forest lands through purchasing land and conservation easements. The Warren Conservation Commission is responsible for the fund and how money is spent. Each year a separate article is voted upon at Town Meeting to maintain the fund. Currently, the fund contains between 10 to 20 thousand dollars. Like all commissions in Vermont, Warren's Conservation Commission is staffed by volunteers who administer the fund and work on .. [Read More](#)

Administration of a Local Conservation Fund

The administration of local Conservation Funds also varies throughout Vermont. If the fund was created under the Reserve Fund statute, then the statute specifically states that the fund is under control and direction of the legislative branch of the municipality (24 VSA 2804). In many towns, the municipal conservation commission administers the local Conservation Fund with the approval of the selectboard. However, in East Montpelier, the East Montpelier Fund Advisory Committee was created. In Charlotte, an advisory committee is comprised of three people: the chair of the local land trust, the chair of the conservation commission, and the chair of the town recreation committee. Tasks for administering the fund include keeping financial records, developing policies and criteria to evaluate projects, creating an application process, and making recommendations on the use of the funds.

[Conservation of Zack Woods](#)

Zack Woods is a unique 393 acre area containing 9 undeveloped shoreline ponds, including Zack Woods Pond, Perch Pond, and a third of the shoreline of Mud Pond. Zack Woods Pond is one of the top 9 lakes in Vermont, ranked the highest for wilderness-like character. Zack Woods Pond has been a nesting location for the Common Loon since 1996, due to its unique natural island. The land is a popular destination for hiking, running, skiing, and snowshoeing. The ponds are a destination for swimming.. [Read More](#)

Maintaining Financial Records:

Bookkeeping and financial records are usually handled by the town clerk or the town treasurer. Funds are deposited in low-risk, liquid financial accounts, such as special savings accounts, certificate of deposit accounts, or money market accounts. For funds created under the conservation commission enabling legislation, the town's trustee of public funds maintains the monies (24 V.S.A. 4505 [5]).

Developing Policies and Evaluation Criteria:

The municipal body that administers a local Conservation Fund must develop goals for use of the fund and criteria for reviewing any proposed expenditure from the Conservation Fund. The conservation commission often adopts such policies in consultation with the Selectboard. The following are often used to review projects for expenditure of local Conservation Fund funds:

- Projects that conform to the town plan or other town reports or land management plans;
- Projects that are adjacent to or near existing town land, other public land, or other conserved land;
- Projects that conserve agricultural lands;
- Projects that conserve productive forest lands;
- Projects that protect important water resources;
- Projects that protect or conserve lands that support significant ecological resources such as rare, threatened, or endangered plants or animals; exemplary natural communities; or important wildlife habitats;
- Projects with existing or potential educational use;
- Projects with historic or scenic value (or in or adjacent to an historic district or other area of importance to the town);
- Projects that provide recreational use or access.

A landowner's willingness to place conservation restrictions on the land also may be taken into account when evaluating proposals. A primary requirement for use of the fund in East Montpelier is that the expenditure of funds must yield clear benefits to the town and must result from a voluntary agreement between the town and the landowners.

Other criteria can include financial considerations, such as projects that include a financially sound long-term management plan or include significant leverage of other funds. For example, Williston gives higher priority to proposals that maximize the reserve fund goals in a cost-effective manner. Preferred projects often are those that include partial funding from other sources, bargain sales, or donated easements, thus augmenting the Conservation Fund by leveraging other monies.

In evaluating projects, towns may also question the likely impact to the property and the town if the proposal is declined. Is the land at risk for development? Can the proposal be funded at a later date?

It can be very helpful to develop a map of conservation opportunities to aid in the evaluation of projects. Such a map can depict each of the values in the Conservation Fund's purpose statement and show where those values overlap, hence offering more value to the town. Since an ecological conservation opportunity map would necessarily rank all parcels in town, but would only be used when a willing landowner comes forward with a proposal, careful messaging is needed to insure that residents don't misunderstand its intention. South Burlington developed such a parcel prioritization in 2019 and 2020 to assist the South Burlington Land Trust and others in ranking conservation possibilities.

Several towns have included in their policies a statement that each use of the fund is unique and thus the guidelines and list of evaluation criteria are general and are not exclusive. As the Barnard Conservation Commission wrote: "Experience with conservation projects teaches us that there are many creative and flexible ways to protect resources lands, and the Selectboard and conservation commission intend to take advantage of new opportunities as they arise."

To assure that the town has the best choice of possible projects, the fund administrators should widely advertise the availability of the Conservation Fund. These funds are often described in a town's annual report and on the town website.

Creating an Application Process:

Generally, the application process starts with interested landowners or potential project partners approaching the conservation commission or the Selectboard with their conservation plans. Sometimes the conservation commission will take the initiative and establish contact with a landowner. In Calais, a landowner contacts the conservation commission and requests to be placed on the agenda of the next regular commission meeting. At this meeting the conservation commission conducts a preliminary interview with the landowner to learn about the proposal and to explain the criteria that will be used for the evaluation. If the landowner chooses to proceed, a written application is submitted to the conservation commission.

Applications forms are generally short and simple to make the process easy for anyone to participate. Application forms are often available at the town clerk's office or from the conservation commission or Selectboard. Application forms should be made accessible online as well. The information requested on the application form often includes the following:

- A description of the property;

- Identification of the significant resources to be conserved;
- Explanation of how the proposal is consistent with the criteria for use of the fund;
- Description of the public benefit to be derived from the project;
- Amount of money requested from the local Conservation Fund;
- Financial plan for the long-term management of the property.

Supplemental information that may be requested includes a project location map, photographs, deed restrictions, planning or zoning approvals, an appraisal, a project budget, draft easements, and a signed purchase and sale agreement.

In several towns, a short, preliminary application form is used to screen proposals. If the proposal is eligible for funding, the landowner fills out a longer application form. Technical assistance with project planning and application forms is available from many sources, including town officials, land trusts, local and regional planning commissions, and state agencies. As a demonstration of sincerity and personal commitment to the process, a landowner may be asked to share the cost of land appraisal with the town.

Recommending Use of the Conservation Fund:

The conservation commission or advisory committee must then review each application in accordance with the established criteria. This often happens at a regular interval or a specially warned public meeting. Additional information is requested as needed. A site visit may be an important part of the review process. In most towns, the fund advisory committee or the conservation commission then makes a written recommendation on the funding application to the Selectboard, who makes the final decision on any expenditure of the local Conservation Fund. In Hartford, the Selectboard holds a public hearing before making their decision. In Shelburne, the Selectboard can approve projects up to \$15,000; projects costing more are voted on by citizens at a duly warned public meeting.

The administration of a Conservation Fund is stronger with a system of checks and balances such that the body that reviews projects does not have the power to decide how to spend the funds. In Barnard, if the conservation commission declines a project, the landowner can appeal to the Selectboard who can override the commission's recommendation. Fund guidelines should state that no person having a direct interest in a project under review may participate in the decision. After a project is funded, a local group such as the conservation commission can assist with monitoring the property to ensure that any conservation easements or agreements are maintained.

In summary, a local Conservation Fund is an excellent way for a town to work in partnership with interested landowners, land trusts, and other organizations to undertake land conservation projects. It is a practical, cost-effective way to protect important conservation lands for present and future generations.

7-4 Grant Programs

As opposed to operating funds, most funding for conservation commissions projects comes from grants. The enabling legislation states that conservation commissions may "receive money, grants or private gifts from any source, for the purposes of this chapter."

Commissions should not be intimidated if they have no or little grant writing experience, as they can tap into outside expertise and resources. There are many books and resources on grant writing. Libraries often have a separate section on grant writing sources and resources. Non-commissioners in town with grant writing experience may be able to assist. Workshops and courses are taught on fundraising and grant writing. Even professional grant writers and fundraisers can be hired for specific projects.

Grant writing takes practice and then improvements follow. Fortunately, many funders realize that volunteers are filling out many of the grant applications and thus make the applications as simple and straightforward as possible. If time permits, several commissioners should read the grant proposal and suggest improvements. Because most grants have specified open periods where they are receiving applications, keep a file with promising grant sources and their deadlines, and be sure to refer to it early as a project is conceived.

Conservation work can be paid for a variety of grant programs administered by an assortment of public agencies, non-profits, and private foundations. The world of grants is constantly evolving, with grant programs waxing and waning over time as funding priorities, politics, and financial streams evolve. However, some grants are relatively reliable sources of funding for conservation projects in Vermont, at least as of this manual's update in 2021. See the [VT Funding Directory](#). Below are several of the more promising grant opportunities for municipal conservation.

Forest Legacy Program (FLP)

Administered By: Vermont Department of Forests, Parks & Recreation

Description: The FLP provides funding to conserve important forestland properties to protect them from conversion to non-forest uses. Landowners may sell property as fee simple title, or only a part of the property rights, while retaining ownership of the land.

Grant Details & Match Requirement: Provides for up to 75 percent of the costs of a conservation easement or fee-simple acquisition, including the costs of appraisals, surveys, closing costs, title work and insurance, and other associated costs. The remaining 25 percent must be matched by either the landowner or an assisting entity, such as a non-profit organization or non-federal governmental entity.

Example Projects:

- Lemington, Monadnock Mountain: Forest Legacy grant helped Town acquire the fee interest in a 1400-acre parcel, on which FPR holds an easement.
- West Fairlee, . Brushwood Community Forest: Forest Legacy Grant helped Town of West Fairlee acquire approximately 1,000 acres, on which FPR holds an easement.

Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF)

Administered By: Vermont Department of Forests, Parks & Recreation

Description: Used to create parks and open spaces, protect wilderness, and forest, and provide outdoor recreation opportunities. Project must meet an identified need from the Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan (SCORP).

Grant Details/Match Requirement: Up to 50% matching assistance to state and local governments.

Example Projects:

- Bolton, 2003. Preston Pond Acquisition. LWCF Contribution of \$31,457.00 towards acquisition costs.
- Williston, 2019. Catamount Community Forest.

US Forest Service Community Forest Program

Administered By: Vermont Department of Forest, Parks & Recreation

Description: The Community Forest Program provides financial assistance to tribal entities, local governments, and conservation non-profit organizations to acquire and establish community forests that provide community benefits such as: economic benefits through active forest management, clean water, wildlife habitat, educational opportunities, and public access for recreation.

Grant Details/Match Requirement:

Example Projects:

- Huntington, 2020. Huntington Town Forest: Received \$385,000 towards acquisition costs for new town forest adjacent to elementary school.
- Montpelier, 2021. Hubbard Park Expansion: Received \$258,000 towards acquisition costs for expansion of existing park.

Vermont Housing & Conservation Board (VHCB)

Administered By: Vermont Housing and Conservation Board (VHCB)

Description: Working with a statewide network of partners, VHCB funds the conservation of agricultural land, natural areas, forestland, recreational land, and the preservation and restoration of historic properties.

Grant Details & Match Requirement: VHCB requires a local match of 33% (using cash, in-kind services, or donated easement or land value) for funding local land conservation projects.

Applicants are required to demonstrate municipal support from the town.

Example Projects:

- Middlesex, 2009: \$271,000 VHCB Award towards acquisition costs for the Middlesex Town Forest, approximately 83% of acquisition cost.
- Huntington, 2020: \$125,000 VHCB Award towards acquisition costs for the Huntington Town Forest, approximately 12.5% of acquisition cost.

Watershed Grants

Administered By: Vermont Fish & Wildlife Department; Vermont Department of Environmental Conservation

Description: for water-related projects that protect or restore fish and wildlife habitats; protect or restore water quality, and shorelines; Reduce phosphorus loading and/or sedimentation; enhance recreational use and enjoyment; identify and protect historic and cultural resources; educate people about watershed resources; monitor fish and wildlife populations and/or water quality.

Grant Details & Match Requirement: \$3,500-\$10,000, depending on project type.

Example Projects:

- Charleston, 2018: \$2,000 for Echo Lake Ecosystem School Education and Milfoil Prevention Project;
- Charlotte, 2004: \$3,200 for Natural Community Mapping & Assessment of Thorp and Kimball Brooks.

AVCC Tiny Grant

Administered By: Association of Vermont Conservation Commissions

Description: Seed money or matching funds to conservation commissions for specific land conservation, education and outreach, stewardship and management, and planning activities.

Grant Details & Match Requirement: \$250-\$600

Example Projects:

- Fayston, 2020: \$300 for an ecological assessment of the Boyce Hill Town Forest.
- Brattleboro, 2020: \$480 for installation of 20 interpretive signs along a trail loop.
- Enosburg, 2020: \$350 to document wildlife activity with trail cameras on its conserved lands.
- Hartford, 2020: \$250 to eradicate invasives species and promote growth of rare plant species on town-owned conserved lands.
- Putney, 2020: \$600 to map occurrences of the invasive Emerald Ash Borer along town roads.

Recreational Trails Program (RTP)

Administered By: Vermont Department of Forest, Parks & Recreation

Description: The RTP is a program of the US Department of Transportation's Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) that provides funds to states to develop and maintain recreational trails and trail-related facilities for motorized and non-motorized trail users.

Grant Details & Match Requirement: Provides up to \$50,000 cap in grant funds with a 20% required match

Example Projects:

- Newport Center, 2017: \$50,000 for Town Forest Trail Project, which included development of ATV and multiple use trail (4,500 feet long) within town forest.
- Chittenden, 2017: \$15,718 for Downtown to School Trail Linkage, including new trail, trail improvements, and an 80-foot universally accessible trail.
- Northfield, 2016: \$11,000 for Paine Mountain Town Forest Trail Restoration, including new puncheon bridging, a wooden footbridge, and other improvements.

Vermont Urban & Community Forestry Program

Administered By: Vermont Urban and Community Forestry Program, Department of Forests, Parks & Recreation.

Description: Annual financial assistance opportunities vary in size and scope. Most years, tree planting and community tree stewardship efforts are funded through the Caring for Canopy grant program. See the program's website for current funding opportunities:

vtcommunityforestry.org/programs/financial-assistance

Grant Details & Match Requirement: Specific funding opportunities vary from year to year.

Small Grants for Smart Growth

Administered By: Vermont Natural Resources Council

Description: Provides seed money for community-based initiatives related to smart growth.

Grant Details & Match Requirement: Up to \$3,000

Example Projects:

- Canaan, 2020: \$1,200 to Canaan Naturally Connected to collect public input about usage of the Canaan Community Forest. Included determining how to enhance connectivity between the forest and nearby towns.
- Hyde Park, 2018: \$1,500 to complete a guide that helps property owners navigate the local permit process when seeking the permits required to develop their land.

Municipal Planning Grant (MPG)

Administered By: VT Agency of Commerce and Community Development (ACCD)'s Department of Housing & Community Development (DHCD)

Description: The MPG encourages and supports planning and revitalization for Vermont municipalities to carry out statewide planning goals.

Grant Details & Match Requirement: Maximum of \$22,000 for individual municipality; \$35,000 maximum for a group of applications. Minimum cash match of 10%. Eligible communities compete with other applications from towns within their Regional Planning Commission service area.

Example Projects:

- Johnson, 2016: \$14,000 for a town-wide Natural Resources Inventory;
- Fairlee, 2021: \$8,190 for work on Conservation Subdivisions and Forest Block Bylaw Provisions.

7-5 Other Funding Sources

Beyond grants, conservation commissions can seek out support from other sources. Many people, organizations, and businesses are willing to support good causes by donating money, materials, time, or other talents. These types of donations are referred to as "in-kind services," and can range from volunteer labor to donated materials to donated professional services (such as legal advice). Keep track of the value of in-kind services that are offered to your conservation commission, as you may be able to use the value of those goods and services to count towards other opportunities, such as for a match requirement for a grant.

For every project, Commissions should make a list of required goods or services and then discuss whether those items could be acquired through donations. Again, the mantra is "if you don't ask, you won't get it." So don't be hesitant to ask for donations. Examples of donated goods are food for Green Up Day volunteers or trees from a local plant nursery. Donated services can be printing services to produce an educational brochure for town residents or photography services to document a town event.

Conservation commissions often undertake a fundraising drive or event to raise funds for specific projects. Commissions must realize that sometimes fundraising events take more time and effort than they are worth. Also, a fundraiser should be in alignment with the conservation values of the commission or the project. For example, if a commission is raising money for a pedestrian path, then a car wash is not in keeping with the idea of decreasing vehicular traffic. A good example of alignment is the commission that sells trees and shrubs to town residents and uses the profit to pay for the town's street tree program.

Listed below are several examples of fundraising events:

- The Joes Pond Association in West Danville has an annual contest and fundraiser to predict the date and time of spring ice-out on the pond. Tickets are sold for \$1, and the winner splits the pot with the Pond Association which uses its share of the proceeds for water quality work and a fireworks display.
- Tree and shrub sale.
- Walkathon or Birdathon.

Don't be afraid to get creative and have fun with the process! Because your cause is worthwhile take comfort in knowing that it is okay to ask for financial support.

APPENDIX A: SAMPLE RULES FOR MUNICIPAL CONSERVATION COMMISSIONS IN VERMONT

RULES

THETFORD CONSERVATION COMMISSION

I. AUTHORIZATION

The Thetford Conservation Commission (the Commission) shall be governed by all applicable state statutes, local laws and these rules. Conservation commissions are authorized in 24 V.S.A., Chapter 118, and Sections 4501 to 4506.

II. PURPOSES

The purposes of the Commission are:

- a) to develop and maintain an inventory and conduct studies of the Municipality's natural, scenic and recreational resources and other lands which have historic, educational, scientific, architectural, or archeological values in which the public has an interest (subsequently referred to as social resources) and to assist in planning for their conservation for the continuing benefit of the townspeople;
- b) to recommend to the legislative body the acquisition of property interests to protect and conserve the Municipality's natural and social resources and with the consent of the legislative body to accept gifts of land for conservation purposes;
- c) to protect all water and wetland resources;
- d) to foster the protection of sensitive natural areas and species;
- e) to increase awareness of conservation and recreational goals in overall land use planning and zoning;
- f) to allow for recreational uses on acquired lands which are consistent with conservation goals and have a minimum impact on the land;
- g) to conduct a broad education program on issues which have an impact on local natural and social resources;
- h) to make recommendations to and cooperate and communicate with municipal officials, commissions, groups, and organizations having similar concerns and with appropriate agencies of the regional, state, and Federal governments.

III. MEMBERSHIP

- a) The Commission shall consist of a minimum of 7 and maximum of 9 members, appointed by the legislative body. Each member shall be a resident of the Municipality. The term of each member shall be for four years, except for those first appointed, whose terms shall be varied in

length so that in the future the number whose terms expire in each successive year shall be minimized.

- b) An appointment shall be for a four-year term, except for an appointment filling a vacancy shall be for the remainder of the term.
- c) The legislative body may remove any member if just cause is stated to the member in writing and after a public hearing on the matter, if that member requests one. Just cause shall include unexcused absences from 25% the Commission meetings during the preceding twelve-month period.
- d) All vacancies shall be filled by the legislative body forthwith.
- e) All members shall serve without compensation, but may be reimbursed by the Municipality for necessary and reasonable expenses incurred in the course of their duties.

IV. PROCEDURES

The Conservation Commission generally functions as an advisory body to various municipal bodies, reporting ultimately to the legislative body. The conservation commission Chair shall develop an agenda for each meeting. Clear lines of communication are important to the proper function of the Commission, its committees, and other municipal bodies. In general, projects and decision-making are to proceed along the following guidelines:

- a) The Conservation Commission will develop its work program and assign specific tasks to its committees. The committees may present suggestions for projects.
- b) The committees will develop recommendations for Conservation Commission approval and/or amendment.
- c) The Conservation Commission will present approved recommendations and/or plans to the legislative body.
- d) Final decisions and actions are the responsibility of the legislative body.
- e) The Commission and all of its committees shall operate in accordance with the Vermont Open Meeting Law.

V. OFFICERS

- 1) The Commission shall elect the following officers at the annual meeting (see section VI) of the group:
 - a. A Chair, who shall preside at all meetings of the Commission at which (s)he is present, and shall direct the work of the Commission. (S)he shall submit a brief annual report to the legislative body and, upon their adoption to the annual Town Meeting, which report shall review the Commission activities for the year past and present the Commission plans and prospects for the coming year.

b. A Clerk, who shall keep minutes of all meetings and proceedings of the Commission and record any action taken by the Commission. (S)he shall post public notices of Commission meetings and give notice to individual Commission members when necessary.

c. A Treasurer, who shall recommend action on all bills received by the Commissions. Payment for all invoices greater than \$200 must be authorized by a majority vote of the Commission. The Treasurer shall prepare and present a financial report at each meeting of the

Commission, and shall submit an annual financial statement, approved by the Commission, to the Municipality.

2) The Commission may also elect other officers it deems appropriate including Vice-Chair, who shall assume all duties and powers of the Chair in his/her absence or when the Chair so requests.

3) All officers shall be elected for a one-year term and may be reelected for successive terms in the same office.

VI. MEETINGS

a) Commission meetings shall be open to the public, and be held at 7:15pm on the 2nd and 4th Wednesdays of each month unless otherwise advised. Special and emergency meetings may be held at other times in accordance with the Vermont Open Meeting Law. The Annual meeting will be the first meeting in May.

b) All records and minutes of any Commission meeting or action shall be filed with the Town Clerk and be available to the public.

c) A quorum shall consist of the presence of a majority of the members. No action shall be taken without the affirmative vote of a majority of those voting. Any member unable to attend shall notify the Commission in advance of the meeting date.

d) In order to secure and preserve the highest level of public trust in the deliberations and decisions of the Commission, it is incumbent upon each member not only to scrupulously avoid any act which constitutes a conflict of interest established in law but also to avoid any act that gives the appearance of an undue special privilege or a conflict of interest. A member shall withdraw from all participation, in any matter including all formal and informal discussion and voting, in which the member concludes that (s)he may have a conflict of interest or upon the assertion that there is a reasonable public perception that a conflict or a special privilege may exist.

VII. PRINCIPLE FUNCTIONS

Within approved budget guidelines, or as otherwise authorized by the legislative body, the Commission may engage or retain the services of any person, partnership, company or corporation necessary to provide specialized assistance required to support the functions of the Commission. The principle functions of the Commission shall be:

a) Inventories – The Commission may prepare and maintain an inventory of the natural resources of the Municipality. This natural resources inventory may include but not be limited to

the following: prime agricultural and forest lands; soil capabilities; water resources; floodplains; known mineral resources; unique or fragile biological resources; scenic and recreational resources; and other open lands. The Commission shall also be responsible for the preparation and maintenance of an inventory of the land-related social resources of the Municipality. This inventory shall include but not be limited to those resources which possess natural, historic, educational, scenic, cultural, scientific, architectural, or archeological values to the public. These inventories shall

be available for use by the Municipal government and the public for continuing reference in all matters which may pertain to the conservation of the natural and social resources of the Municipality, including amendments or revisions to the Town Plan, zoning ordinances, subdivision regulations, highway plan, and to any applications made there under.

b) Land Acquisition – The Commission may, on the basis of the inventories or other appropriate study, recommend to the legislative body the purchase of, or the receipt of as a gift, specific land and/or property rights (including easements) or other property for the purposes set forth in Article II. The Commission may solicit or suggest sales or donations of specific interests from landowners. Subject properties and/or rights may be acquired by the Municipality, or may be acquired by other suitable organizations, for example, land trusts. Properties and/or rights acquired by the Municipality shall be by consent of the legislative body or affirmative majority vote of the Municipality. Each recommendation by the Commission may include an estimate of the acquisition-related costs to the Municipality. Each recommendation by the Commission may include an estimate of the acquisition-related costs to the Municipality, including but not limited to legal counseling, surveying, appraisal, effect on the tax base and the tax rate, and the proposed source of funds to be used for acquisition and related costs.

c) Land Management – The Commission shall exercise stewardship responsibility for properties and/or rights acquired by the Municipality for conservation purposes. The Commission will propose plans and regulations for the development and use of acquired property interests which are consistent with the protection and preservation purposes for which they were acquired.

d) Public Representation – To the extent permitted by law, the Commission may represent the public interest in any matter which it determines may have a significant impact on the natural or social resources of the Municipality. The Commission may initiate recommendations to amend or revise Town Plans, ordinances, subdivision regulations, road plans, etc. for consideration by the appropriate authority. The Commission shall make recommendations to any municipal, regional, state or federal body which it feels are needed to implement the purposes of the Commission.

e) Education and Information – The Commission shall be responsible for the conduct of educational activities pertaining to local natural and social resources. It shall make information available to the public regarding these resources, especially those relating to public lands.

VIII. COMMITTEES

a) The Commission may function with both standing and ad hoc committees. Standing committees shall be established by a majority vote of the Commission; ad hoc committees may be

established by decision of the Commission Chair. The Commission Chair shall appoint Chairs for all committees.

b) All committees shall function in an advisory capacity to the Commission. No action shall be taken by any committee without the prior consent of the Commission.

c) Committee membership shall be open to the public. Committee meetings shall be open to the public. The time and place of each meeting shall be posted. Minutes of committee meetings will be submitted to the Commission as soon as possible and incorporated with the records of the Commission.

IX. ADMINISTRATION

The Commission shall have the authority to request appropriations from the Municipality for its land acquisition, land management, inventory, education, information, and operating expenses.

Any other funds appropriated or donated to the Commission shall be carried in a public trust fund. This fund shall be under the trust and management of the Treasurer of the Municipality. This fund shall accrue from year to year for the use of the Commission solely for the purposes set out in Article II of these Rules. The Commission shall have the authority to receive gifts, grants or money from any sources for these purposes. Any funds from private, state, or federal sources which impose any obligation on the Municipality shall be accepted only by consent of the legislative body.

X. AMENDMENTS

These Rules may be amended at any regular or special meeting of the Commission by a two-thirds vote of the Commission. Written notice of intent to amend must be publicly posted, sent to each member of the Commission and the Chair of the legislative body at least seven days prior to the meeting at which the proposed action is to be taken.

XI. DISSOLUTION

The duration of the Thetford Conservation Commission is intended to be perpetual. In the event that dissolution is necessary, all existing public trust funds of the Commission remaining after payment of appropriate expenses shall be distributed to tax-exempt organizations emphasizing the same purposes as the Commission. Remaining funds originating from Municipality appropriations revert back to the Municipality's general fund.

Adopted: September 12, 2007.