



STATE OF CONNECTICUT – COUNTY OF TOLLAND
INCORPORATED 1786

TOWN OF ELLINGTON

55 MAIN STREET – PO BOX 187
ELLINGTON, CONNECTICUT 06029-0187
www.ellington-ct.gov

TEL. (860) 870-3120 TOWN PLANNER'S OFFICE FAX (860) 870-3122

**CONSERVATION COMMISSION
REGULAR MEETING MINUTES
TUESDAY, JUNE 11, 2024, 7:00 PM
IN-PERSON ATTENDANCE: TOWN HALL ANNEX, 57 MAIN STREET, ELLINGTON, CT
REMOTE ATTENDANCE: VIA ZOOM MEETING**

PRESENT: In Person: Chairman Rebecca Quarno, Vice Chairman David Bidwell, Regular Member James Gage, George Nickerson (arrived at 7:08), and Alternate Jon Kaczmarek
Remote: Regular Member Robert Zielfelder and Laurie Burstein

ABSENT: Regular Member Sean Dwyer and Alternate Ann Harford

STAFF: Remote: Lisa Houlihan, Town Planner and In-Person: Nathaniel Trask, Recording Clerk

I. CALL TO ORDER: Chairman Rebecca Quarno called the meeting to order at 7:05 PM.

II. PUBLIC COMMENTS (On Non-Agenda Items): None

III. ACTIVE BUSINESS:

1. Review Plan of Conservation & Development, Chapter 4-Conservation Strategies, Natural Resource Preservation.

John Colonese, Assistant Town Planner, and the Conservation Commission have been working on an update to the historic inventory for Ellington. Ms. Houlihan reported that Mr. Colonese talked with the State Historic Preservation Office about grants to help with the project. They are \$20,000 non-matching grants that cover an inventory of about 100 buildings. After this is fulfilled, the town can apply for successive grants if necessary. A list of buildings based on date of construction was obtained from the assessor's office, which could help start the inventory process. This does not include the existing list and does not include independent sheds and barns. Mr. Colonese is awaiting a call back from Mary Dunne with the State Historic Preservation Office. Ms. Houlihan asked if commissioners wanted to wait to get a little more information before deciding to move forward with the historic preservation inventory and outlined some of the other strategies in this chapter of the Plan of Conservation and Development (POCD) the group could work on. One strategy is the cluster open space subdivision regulation, which the town already has and is currently referred to as a density-based subdivision. Based on the subdivisions that have come through so far under this regulation, the developer has been required to connect streets, which has not worked because the old infrastructure has conventional subdivision, and they could not cluster it to create smaller lots, shorter roads, and greater open space. The other strategy is the transfer of development rights, which Ms. Houlihan believes will need to be coordinated with the Planning and Zoning Commission (PZC). There is a state statute that requires the PZC to update their housing plan every five years. The PZC will be focusing on this plan in the upcoming months and won't have time to work on transfer of development rights.

Chairman Quarno asked if commissioners had any thoughts about how to proceed. Commissioner Zielfelder asked what the benefit of establishing a historic district would be. Commissioner Kaczmarek asked how many homes were on the list from the Assessor. Ms. Houlihan said there were 100 homes and commercial buildings, not including those that were on the 1990 list. She added that by looking at this strategy from the POCD and deciding whether to proceed or not, the commission is fulfilling the goal. Once Mr. Colonese hears back from Mary Dunne, the commission will have a better idea as to what the benefit of conducting an inventory is.

This agenda item will be tabled until next meeting.

2. Report - Farmland Preservation Program.

The last pending application has closed.

As far as other initiatives that are ongoing, Ms. Houlihan has been working with the Economic Development Commission (EDC) on implementing a potential new farming ordinance under statute 12-81M which will allow municipalities to abate up to 50% of property tax on certain farms like dairy farms, vegetable farms, orchards, and nurseries. The statute does not include chicken or beef farms. The proposed ordinance was presented to the Board of Selectmen on June 10. This is a statute that was brought to the EDC's attention by Oakridge Dairy, who built a large milking facility under a tax abatement application. That abatement expires this year, and because milk is heavily regulated, it is difficult to sustain operations. This new program would effectively replace the abatement they currently have, and the building would be abated at 50% of property taxes. There is an ongoing analysis of what the tax implications would be, with Ms. Houlihan currently estimating \$2,600 in loss. The EDC wanted the ordinance to benefit as many farms as possible, although there are currently three other exemption programs regarding farm equipment, farm buildings, and land. The only farm with significant buildings on their property is Oakridge Dairy. Currently, Oakridge Dairy will be the only one that will benefit from the ordinance but will hopefully be an incentive for other farms.

Chairman Quarno asked when it was that the commission did an outreach letter to farmers. Ms. Houlihan said she believed it was 2021. Chairman Quarno added that there is usually renewed interest whenever they do outreach, however if it's the same farms that are interested, then that would not make much sense. In the past, the town has done direct mailers to promote interest in the farmland preservation program. Ms. Houlihan suggested posting on the Town of Ellington social media accounts or run an advertisement in the local newspaper. Chairman Quarno said doing some outreach in this manner wouldn't hurt. Ms. Houlihan said she would work with Mr. Colonese on it.

3. Report - Open Space Preservation Program

- a. Notice of Special Town Meeting, June 10, 2024, 6pm, Ellington Town Hall to discuss and vote on the purchase of open space at 79 Kibbe Road.

The open space purchase of 79 Kibbe Road was unanimously approved at a special town meeting on June 10. Ms. Houlihan attended the meeting. Chairman Quarno and Vice Chairman Bidwell said it has been a long time since the last time an open space purchase was wholly approved by the town. Funding from the Kibbe Road parcel came from a special fund dedicated to purchasing open space land in the Shenipsit Forest. Vice Chairman Bidwell asked if there has been any conversation regarding the use of the land. Ms. Houlihan said the only focus has been to restore emergency service access to Sykes Road and to gain public access from Kibbe Road to Shenipsit Forest.

It will take a couple of weeks to do some administrative work. The Finance Office must cut a check and a certificate of title is needed from the Town Attorney before the town can close on the property.

Ms. Houlihan said Jeb Stevens from the Connecticut Forest & Park Association called about 178 Crystal Lake Road. The property was for sale about a month-and-a-half ago until it was purchased by a new owner. Mr. Colonese called the new owners about an open space purchase; however, they are not interested. Commissioner Zielfelder added that the new owners have already installed a gate.

The Ad Hoc Ellington Trails Committee informed Ms. Houlihan that they are talking about the Penfield property again since there are many trails that run through the parcel. This property is located where the radio station is behind the YMCA. The owners of the parcel wanted a lot of money for the property, and Ms. Houlihan verified that they are up to date on their taxes. She believes they are paying someone to manicure the property. Now that funds have been used from the open space fund to purchase 79 Kibbe Road, the balance in the fund will be about \$400,000. Ms. Houlihan asked if the commission wanted to continue pursuing Green Road or look into the Penfield property. Vice Chairman Bidwell said he believed the owners were looking to sell just a piece of the property; however, he observed that a portion of the parcel extends into Vernon. Commissioner Kaczmarek confirmed that portion is the same owner via Vernon's GIS map. Vice Chairman Bidwell expressed concern that purchasing the portion of land with the trails running through it would cut the owners off from the other piece of their land. Ms. Houlihan said the area becomes more valuable when there is parking, but Commissioner Nickerson and Vice Chairman Bidwell added there is parking at the sewage treatment plant and the YMCA that people typically go to.

Vice Chairman Bidwell said it wouldn't hurt to ask the owner if they are interested in open space preservation. Ms. Houlihan said she would relay that to Mr. Colonese. Regarding the properties along Green Road, she added that Mr. Colonese is waiting to hear back from John DeRham, but did hear back from Grant, who wanted to keep some of his land to attach to his property in Somers. Additional calls will be made.

IV. ADMINISTRATIVE BUSINESS:

1. FY 23-24 Budget & Expenditure Update.

There is \$390 left in the Dues and Subscriptions account. Ms. Houlihan suggested splitting that and contributing \$195.00 to the Connecticut Farm Bureau and \$195.00 to the Connecticut Farmland Trust. The Connecticut Farm Bureau has been helping Oakridge Dairy and put on the presentation to explain the history of the statute that would allow for the 50% abatement on property tax for certain farms. The Connecticut Farmland Trust worked with Ms. Houlihan to put on the farmer information event earlier this year.

MOVED (BIDWELL) SECONDED (GAGE) AND PASSED UNANIMOUSLY TO APPROVE THE DISBURSEMENT OF \$195.00 TO THE CONNECTICUT FARM BUREAU AND \$195.00 TO THE CONNECTICUT FARMLAND TRUST FOR MEMBERSHIP AND DONATION FROM THE CONSERVATION COMMISSION'S DUES AND SUBSCRIPTIONS ACCOUNT.

Ms. Houlihan said there is a balance in the Printing Account. The Planning Department ordered some farmland brochures and Mr. Colonese is updating the open space brochures. More of those will be ordered before the end of the fiscal year.

2. Approval of May 21, 2024, Special Meeting Minutes.

MOVED (GAGE) SECONDED (QUARNO) AND PASSED UNANIMOUSLY TO APPROVE THE SPECIAL MEETING MINUTES OF MAY 21, 2024, AS WRITTEN.

3. Correspondence/Discussion:

- a. Ad Hoc Ellington Trails Committee - Monthly Agendas/Minutes.

Commissioner Harford was not in attendance to report on the activities of the trails committee, but commissioners got a copy of the most recent meeting minutes.

- b. Beech Leaf Disease.

Vice Chairman Bidwell said he was at the Highland property and noticed the beech trees were shriveling up and looked sick. He did some research and reached out to the agricultural experiments station about the issue. The trees have been infected with Beech Leaf Disease, which started in Ohio a few years ago and has been slowly spreading, hitting Connecticut last year or the year before. Not a lot is known about the disease or how to manage it. He said the agricultural station is testing some experimental treatments on it and the person he talked to asked if Ellington wanted to help with the testing by permitting the treatment on the Highland property. This disease is impacting Connecticut forests. Smaller beech trees are dying from the disease, while larger ones can survive it. Ms. Houlihan was unaware if there was any policy or precedent for research or experimental treatments, but said that one of the open space parcels, Metcalf, was closed for a couple of years due to poor vegetation management and many widowmakers. The town spent between \$40,000-\$50,000 of grant funds on tree service in the area. Processes like these take coordination with Public Works and require approval from the Board of Selectmen but could be something that the commission could put forward. Vice Chairman Bidwell said he would reach back out to see what the researchers are looking to do and whether there would be costs involved, like clearing trees and branches. Ms. Houlihan said some information would be needed on what treatment they would be doing and what materials they would use. Vice Chairman Bidwell said he wouldn't be surprised if the disease has also affected the Batz property.

This item will stay on the agenda for the next meeting.

V. ADJOURNMENT:

MOVED (BIDWELL) SECONDED (NICKERSON) TO ADJOURN THE CONSERVATION COMMISSION MEETING AT 7:45 PM.

Respectfully submitted,

Nathaniel Trask, Recording Clerk