



Londonderry Conservation Commission

Tuesday, May 8, 2007

Minutes

Page 1 of 2

Present: Deb Lievens; Gene Harrington; Mike Speltz; Mike Considine; Ken Henault; Paul Nickerson; George Herrmann; Stephen Fassi; Mark Oswald

Also present: Susan Hickey, Assistant Town Manager; Andre Garron, Director of Planning and Economic Development; John Vogl, GIS Manager

Call to order

Budget Committee Chair Tom Freda was joined by several other Budget Committee members who were invited by the Conservation Commission to discuss funding for the Open Space plan.

M. Speltz began the dialogue by explaining the importance of preserving open space. Aside from the more obvious reasons such as recreational purposes, scenic views and support of local agriculture, the protection of vital natural resources such as water make the Open Space Plan essential for all residents, both current and future. M. Oswald noted that roughly 85% of Londonderry residents depend on well water. The cost of implementing a municipal water system would be so cost prohibitive that land conservation, he explained, is far less by comparison. While education, incentives and regulations can be utilized to achieve these goals, purchasing land through title fee or easement is the main method of conservation.

D. Lievens next presented detailed information regarding the purchases the Town made by the Town since the late 1970's. In 2002, the original Open Space Plan was developed and implemented with what would be the first of several bonds passed by the voters at Town meeting. The plan was updated in 2006 to continue the conservation efforts. To date, taxpayers have spent a total of \$9.3 million since the initial purchase of the Musquash Conservation Area in 1979.

Grant funds were then discussed since they have contributed significantly to the Town's efforts. Budget Committee member Tom Dolan noted that the key to understanding grant funding is that in order to receive this assistance, the Town must demonstrate first that they actually have the necessary finances to make a purchase. In effect, the Town 'has to spend money to make money'. M. Speltz added that because of the competitive nature of grant funding and the relatively short window of time given to close on a property, substantiating that the Town currently has those funds is essential to being selected to receive grant funds. While it was noted that grants account for only a little more than 20% of the Town's overall purchases, M. Oswald stated that since the inception of the Open Space Plan, that ratio has increased considerably. M. Speltz stressed that from the time a willing seller approaches the CC to the closing on the property, a rather lengthy process ensues, involving an appraisal, surveys, title searches and other items of the CC's due diligence. Since a landowner often has the option of entering into a less time consuming transaction with a developer, having open space funds available is crucial to the success of the program.

A separate but equally important financial factor involves the bonds themselves. S. Hickey explained the requirements and responsibilities involved when purchasing and selling bonds, emphasizing that such funds must be used within specific time parameters so as not to incur penalties and affect the Town's bond rating. Bond funds cannot be used as a quasi savings account; it must be established that they will be put towards a particular project. This creates another element of the fiscal



Londonderry Conservation Commission

Tuesday, May 8, 2007

Minutes

Page 2 of 2

process the CC must balance with the other aspects. The advantage to bonding money for open space, however, is that as long as interest rates are favorable, longer terms of up to 20 years can be established. This is permitted because unlike bonds for such things as road improvements where the result may only last for ten years or so, conservation land will exist long after the life of the bond. M. Speltz added that in such a case, the future beneficiaries of open space will help share the financial burden along with current residents.

With regard to the kind of land the CC has purchased, it was previously asked whether taxpayer dollars spent on open space were, in effect, being used to protect wetlands. J. Vogl gave a brief presentation, first exhibiting that of the nearly 27,000 acres in Londonderry, roughly 10% are wet. Of all conservation areas in town, whether they were protected through an easement, deed restriction, common land, fee ownership by the Town or fee ownership by another conservation group, the percentage increases to approximately 25%. When viewed strictly in terms of land purchased with town funds, however, the rate drops to 16%. Furthermore, high value purchases (\$1 million +/-) made in recent years are comprised of merely 4.6% wetlands, less than half of the percentage of wetlands in the town as a whole. Therefore, the overwhelming majority of bond funds voted in by taxpayers in the last several years have not been used to purchase any significant amount of wetlands. M. Oswald noted that even if a parcel is partly wet, it can be worth spending the funds to preserve the uplands, especially considering the shrinking amount of such land left in town.

In the pursuit of approval of another \$1 million dollar open space bond at this year's Town meeting, the CC had asserted that one benefit of purchasing open space is how it will save tax dollars over time. This would be due to cost avoidance resulting from the prevention of development and the correlating impact on Town infrastructure, particularly that of the school system. T. Freda argued that if such an assertion is going to be made, the CC must detail specifically how much the taxpayers will be saving. Without an actual figure or accurate estimate, it would be a misleading claim to present to the taxpayers. A discussion then ensued regarding how to arrive at a true value. Many varying assumptions and factors were presented on both sides, most of which centered on how to calculate the amount saved when school aged children are not entered into the system. One of the main points of contention concerned how to approximate the average number of children per household and even then, how many years those children would actually be in the Londonderry school system. Many other considerations would first have to be agreed upon (such as the impact of State funding) and then specified to some mutual satisfaction.

Following several attempts to reach a consensus on what factors should be used, it was decided that further research would first need to be done by Town staff to better determine some of the variables. Once that is accomplished, the two groups will meet again to continue the discussion.

Respectfully submitted,

Jaye Trottier
Secretary