

Town of Stonington Conservation Commission  
Minutes of a Regular Meeting held on September 23, 2013  
Police Station Community Meeting Room, 173 South Broad Street, Pawcatuck, CT

**1. Call to order:** Called to order by Chairman Stanton Simm at 7:05 p.m. Commission members also in attendance were Walter Grant, Stuart Cole, Tim Bell, Sheila Lyons and Ben Baldwin. Members Jim Friedlander and Bob Dewire were absent. Town Planner Keith Brynes and members of the public were present.

**2. Review of Town Developments and Proposals**

**2a. Discussion of proposal to develop Town owned 14 acre "Moss Park" open space property off Field St. and adjacent Town owned 10 acre property off S. Broad St. as elderly housing. Assessor's Map 14, Block 2, Lot 1 & 9A, S. Broad St., Pawcatuck.** Chairman Simm said that Moss Park was a gift to the Town and that the Town hadn't been required to build the roads surrounding it. Town Planner Brynes displayed an undated "Concept Layout" provided by Bill Bellock of Bellsite, the proposed developer, which showed 100 units of housing in about 30 buildings on both lots with access from Lathrop Avenue at Field Street and emergency access to Parkwood Drive. The donor, Downes Patterson Corp., reportedly has no objection to releasing the Town or the restrictions. John Kiss, an abutter, said that, as proposed so far, the Town appears to be receiving little in return for the gift of land. MOTION: We are adamantly opposed to the loss of open space. The Conservation Commission would be willing to meet with the developer, the Affordable Housing Advisory Committee and First Selectman Haberek, to discuss possible locations for the project, which are not open space parcels. (Walter Grant, Tim Bell). Passed unanimously. A meeting with the First Selectman was requested through Town Planner Keith Brynes.

**2b. Any pending applications and new preliminary proposals.** None.

**3. Old Business**

**3a. Mystic River Dam Committee** – Tim Bell said nothing to report at this time.

**3b. Discussion of Stonington's 200 Greatest Roadside Trees** – The Tree Warden has blocked CL&P's request to trim and remove donated trees under power lines on Moss Street. Fourteen Conservation Commission trees were planted on the east side of Moss Street, including Maples and Plane Trees. MOTION: The Conservation Commission is concerned about the trees and Stuart Cole will write a letter for to the Board of Selectman (Stuart Cole, Tim Bell).

**3c. Discussion of Open Space and Conservation Easement Transfers for Ongoing and Past Subdivisions.** Not discussed

**3d. Discussion of 2014 Plan of Conservation and Development** – Chairman Simm suggested a separate meeting for review, in consideration of the time.

**3e. Discussion of Updates to 2007 Open Space Plan** – To be part of the special meeting proposed for item 3d.

**3f. Discussion of public access restrictions at Town-owned open space located at 23 Bittersweet Way, Assessor's Map 124, Block 2, Lot 15E.** Ben Baldwin showed the "Stonington Conservation Area" marker. He will give one to the First Selectman for the Highway Department to post at the property.

**3g. Discussion of transfer of town owned "open space" properties to private preservation organizations.** It was noted that if the Moss Park proposal doesn't materialize, the land, and other open space like it, should be transferred to a land trust.

**3h. Installing signs on Town open space properties.** Ben Baldwin has posted Vargas Pond on Flanders road, but will also post it at the right-of-way access point, and post other Town-owned parcels except for Moss Park.

**3j. Request to consider \$10,000 donation to Coogan Farm preservation campaign.** Ben Baldwin recused himself and joined the audience. Sheila Lyons took notes. Harry White, Coogan Campaign co-chair, read the following statement and asked that it be included in the record.

Nearly 1000 supporters have together made 630 Coogan Campaign gifts and pledges. Tonight it is my privilege to speak on behalf of these citizen conservationists.

The Coogan Campaign will continue through December to raise endowment and other funds for our vision of a Nature and History Park open to all. We would welcome and appreciate your help. Because "fee in lieu of open space" funds are "your dollars" rather than taxes, we would be especially proud of our Town Conservation Commission helping lead the Coogan Farm success.

Since your last ranking of open spaces, we have two new measures of Coogan Farm's environmental value:

1. CT Department of Energy and Environmental Protection \$500,000 grant for Coogan Farm was at the highest level in its recent round of grants. We thank the Conservation Commission for cooperating with a letter of support for that grant.

2. The US Fish and Wildlife Service has just endorsed Coogan Farm's habitat conservation value with a \$600,000 grant- one of only 21 awards nationwide.

For Coogan Farm relations with the Conservation Commission we look to the future. We want our supporters to feel good about their Town, Conservation Commission and all future Stonington open space efforts. Commission members hold office with the Stonington Land Trust and we all know about its very important Davis Farm project. Therefore, we wish you well and ask you to encourage a spirit of open, mutual support among all of us.

Thank you for your consideration and for entering into your record this statement, its addendum regarding Coogan Farm's price and our September 17 letter to you.

Harry White's Addendum:

To encourage accurate, two-way dialogue, we are pleased to share a few facts about the Coogan Farm purchase price:

1. Legally as nonprofits, neither the Nature Center nor Trust for Public Land may pay more than fair market value. Therefore, allegations otherwise are of serious concern to both TPL and DPNC.

2. Two independent, experienced appraisers set the market value of Coogan Farm, at \$3.4 million or \$600,000 above our \$2.8 million purchase price.

3. It's been said that the Farm's purchase price is way above the Town's assessment. That is true-fully 14 times higher. Happily, such assessments avoid taxes forcing open space into development. A multiplier of 14 also tells us the assessment has little bearing on market value for Coogan Farm.

Harry White's letter of September 17, 2013, also signed by Steven Dodd, Coogan Farm Steering Committee Chair, was also attached. It had previously been distributed by email. Mr. White said that the property closed last week using a \$850,000 bridge loan from The Conservation Fund, that the property could be paid for in full now, but that some donors wish to fund the endowment and other special purposes. Sheila Lyons read the following statement:

Last month, I made a motion that the Conservation Commission endorse the contribution of \$10,000 from the FILOOS, which have accumulated over the years to more than \$300,000, to the purchase of the Coogan Farm property on Route 27 in the Mystic portion of the town. (FILOOS is fees in lieu of open space)

This proposal may appear to be contradictory to our first decision of a few months back which was to recommend no town financial contribution to the purchase of this property as we felt the per acre price very high, and it might not be the wisest use of town funds.

Stonington, unlike neighboring towns, has not had money in the budget or in a bond issue for open space, in recent years. Our abutting neighboring towns, North Stonington and Groton, have. We do have a large state-owned parcel at Barn Island, and because of its size there is a feeling that the town has a lot of the desired open space. State and federal grants have been given out over the years but Stonington has seldom been in the waiting line. There is no one at Town Hall to fill in the forms for the request. Groton, on the other hand, even has a grant writer and open space planner on its staff.

The one notable piece purchased outright was the Anguilla Brook Preserve, near the Elmridge golf course. In those days, there was a line item of \$50,000 in the town budget for the purchase of land. That line has been gone for a long time - twenty years, I would guess. The Preserve has been turned over to the Stonington Land Trust, which is better able to watch over it.

In the past, the town turned down a proposal to buy the airport property on Wequetequock Cove for a reasonable price and the proposal to buy the Elmridge golf course for a very large sum.

Residents of the town assume that any land not built on will always be that way, open space. They do not fully realize that one parcel, or another, may not always be open. An owner or developer may build on it, following the zoning regulations. There is a huge difference between perceived and dedicated open space.

In all honesty, there is waterfront land with oyster beds that is historically significant, which the Commission hopes can be preserved land. Its price is reasonable but also large.

It should be noted, here, that the town did make a contribution of \$10,000 toward the purchase of Paffard Woods and the town contributed to the package of funds when the Crowley farm was purchased.

The residents in the group working to preserve the Coogan Farm and the land along Route 27 and up to McQuade's supermarket behind shops on Coogan Boulevard have dedicated themselves to achieving this goal and their work is coming to a conclusion.

Our Commission's priority is open space, preserving the quality of life, the trails, the views, and the vistas in town and cooperating with a group which has similar goals should be one of our prime priorities.

The amount I am proposing is not taxpayer collected funds, though it certainly comes from town funds. It is one thirtieth (rounded off) of the FILOOS funds set aside for conservation purposes, paid by developers, who, with the Conservation Commission's approval, opted to donate funds rather than the required 15% of the land to open space. The money is intended for purchase of land in all areas of town and keeping Route 27 open will benefit all residents.

My original proposition included the suggestion of a personal contribution to emphasize our open space support. I may have been carried away with a felling of "team spirit" so I do not include that stipulation at this time and each person should decide what he wishes to do.

So, I re-propose asking town officials for approval of \$10,000 from their fee-in-lieu-of-open-space funds be given to the sponsoring agency, the Denison Pequotsepos Nature Center.

Discussion was held on the two statements. Linda Thacher Visscher, a member of the Campaign, said that her father, former Conservation Commission Chairman Peter S. Thacher, would have wanted the preservation of the farm. Mary Thacher, her mother, also spoke in favor of the Town contribution. Stuart Cole said he found the lack of protection of adjacent open space surprising. **MOTION:** To recommend the Town contribute \$10,000 toward the Coogan Campaign from its open space fund (Walter Grant, Sheila Lyons). Did not carry. Walter Grant and Sheila Lyons in favor, Tim Bell, Stanton Simm, Stuart Cole against. Ben Baldwin returned from the audience. Town Planner Brynes departed. **3k. Any Other Old Business.** Noise Abatement – It is currently being handled by other commissions.

#### **4. Open Space Parcels**

**4a. Discussion of parcels for preservation** – Ben Baldwin mentioned the Abed property at Exit 91 that extends along the north side of Pequot Trail to the overpass near Wheeler Road and includes marshland adjacent to Avalonia Land Conservancy's Fenner Preserve. Baldwin noted that the Cherenzia open space at Mary Hall & Greenhaven Roads is made up of 3 parcels (18.05, 1.13 and 2.23 acres). The 18.05-acre parcel and the 1.13-acre parcel were transferred to Stonington Land Trust. The 2.23-acre parcel was transferred to the Town. A drainage/conservation easement and separate 9.62 acres were given to the Town in 2010.

#### **5. New Business**

**5a. Schedule for 2014.** To be the same as 2013, with December's meeting on 12/17/2014.

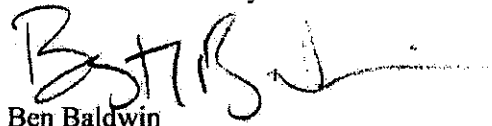
**5b. Correspondence.** CACIWCC's *The Habitat* was distributed.

#### **6. Review of minutes**

The minutes of 8/26/2013 were reviewed and approved as submitted (Tim Bell, Stuart Cole). Passed unanimously.

**7. Adjournment** – Motion to adjourn (Bell). Approved at 10:00 p.m.

Minutes submitted by



Ben Baldwin

Secretary, Town of Stonington Conservation Commission