

Conservation Commission Assistance with Comprehensive Plan Updates

Litchfield, Manchester, and Skowhegan, Maine

Conservation Commissions (CC) can significantly protect their natural resources and quality of place by assisting with local Comprehensive Plan (CP) updates. Skowhegan, Manchester, and Litchfield have helped or are helping update their community's CP.

A CP can be considered a “business plan” for the municipality. It is a document adopted by a municipal legislative body (municipal council or Town Meeting) and intended to guide the growth and development of a community for set period of time (usually 10 years) and typically includes the following elements: inventory and analysis, goals, policies and implementation strategies. A CP is divided into topical chapters with the following 3 chapters often applying to the mission of CCs: Agriculture and Forestry, Critical Natural Resources, and Water Resources. CCs can make a difference assisting with these three chapters.

CPs need to be updated every 12 years if they are to remain consistent with Maine's Growth Management Act. Though state consistency is not mandated local zoning ordinances are more open to legal challenges if the CP is not consistent. Also CDBG and other State grant funding is preferentially scored for those communities with consistent CPs.

A CP update involves evaluating existing CP strategies, responding to a checklist of minimum State inventory, policy and strategies requirements (see <http://www.maine.gov/doc/commissioner/landuse/docs/checklist.xls>) and proposing/developing inventory information, and policies and strategies for the updated CP. Typically a Comprehensive Plan Committee (CPC) is appointed by a Select Board or Council. Ideally existing boards and committees have representatives on the CPC and serve as subcommittees to the CPC. Draft inventory, policies and strategies from subcommittees would be subject to approval by CPC. It's often useful for a municipality to hire a consultant to help with a CP update .

There are several benefits to a municipality and to existing boards and committees including CCs from getting involved assisting in the update of a CP. Better strategies and implementation of those strategies result and the likelihood that community (and CC) goals such as protection of quality of place are achieved increases. This approach educates committee members about issues related to their mission and how they can positively impact those issues. Working on a CP update builds capacity of boards and committees including CCs saving some consultant costs in CP update preparation and some Town staff costs in implementation.

To get involved in a CP update process a CC should check with the Town office to find out when the local CP was adopted and when a 12-year deadline would apply. If the deadline is within 2 – 3 years then the CC could meet with Select Board and Planning

Board and advocate that the update be started and that existing municipal boards and committees be used as subcommittees of a CPC to share the workload. Incidentally if there isn't a CC in your community seeking appointment on a CPC is a good means to advocate for a CP strategy that establishes a CC.

The Skowhegan Planning Board, which was also appointed as the CPC, decided to include existing boards and committees as subcommittees to work on applicable chapters in the CP update process. Skowhegan's CC served as a subcommittee to the CPC working on inventory and posing draft policies and implementation strategies for Comprehensive Plan chapters: Agriculture & Forestry, Critical Natural Resources, Water Resources. The CC gathered inventory data that included a list and description of parcels protected by a local land trust, and information about quality of town streams related to fisheries. Typically each CP strategy includes when implementation is to begin and who's responsible. The CC's recommended strategies included quite a few that had the CC responsible for implementation including but not limited to: identifying areas of prime farmland and suitable mechanisms for protection; sponsoring an annual farmers appreciation dinner featuring farmland protection speakers; providing information about water quality BMPs to farmers and foresters; over seeing preparation of an Open Space Plan. Developing an ordinance (Planning Board responsibility) requiring open space subdivisions protecting at least 50% open space in significant areas indicated in Open Space Plan was another notable strategy. These and other strategies that can make a difference in protecting quality of place would most likely have not been part of the updated CP had the CC not been involved. The updated CP was found to be consistent with the Growth Management Law by the State in April 2010 and was adopted at Skowhegan's June 2010 Town Meeting.

Manchester's CC successfully advocated that the Town CP update process should utilize existing boards and committees as subcommittees of the CPC. Manchester's CC served as a subcommittee to the CPC working on inventory and posing draft policies and implementation strategies for CP chapters: Agriculture & Forestry, Critical Natural Resources, Water Resources. Inventory information gathered by the CC included a list of local farms and farm fields and descriptions of all lakes and ponds in town. The CC's recommended strategies included but were not limited to: establishing a protocol for early notice of and opportunity for CC review of site plan review projects; researching dark skies standards to be included in Land Use Ordinance; inventorying vernal pools; requiring low impact development (LID) standards or phosphorus banking system for higher density development within Cobbossee Lake watershed; providing educational materials encouraging use of phosphorous-free fertilizers and alternatives to pesticides; designating 100% of revenue from timber harvesting on town-owned land to use toward purchase, protection or stewardship of high value natural areas identified in Open Space Plan; working with public and private partners to extend and maintain trails; developing an "electronic Farmers Market" on Town website for farmers to list products for sale; informing landowners of presence of critical natural resources and potential means of protection. Many of the CC recommended strategies included the CC as a responsible party to implement. Again without CC involvement these and other

CC recommended strategies that can make a real difference in protecting quality of place would most likely have not been part of Manchester's CP. The updated CP was found to be consistent by the State in February 2012 and was adopted at Manchester's June 2012 Town Meeting.

Litchfield began its CP update at the beginning of 2012 and copied some of Manchester's approach of using existing boards and committees for some CPC subcommittees. The Litchfield CC was responsible for two CP chapters: Critical Natural Resources and Water Resources.

For more information about CP updates in general and copies of Skowhegan's, Manchester's and other state-consistent CPs go to

<http://www.maine.gov/doc/commissioner/landuse/complanning/index.shtml>

For more information about the experience of CCs with CP updates in Skowhegan, Manchester and Litchfield the respective CC chairs are listed with Town office phone numbers: Iver Lofving, 474-6904; Garry Hinkley, 622-1894; Terry Tracy, 268-4721. Town office staff should provide further contact information to reach any of these chairs.

Fred Snow MEACC Board Chair with experience as a community planner providing technical experience with CP preparation involving existing boards and committees including CCs is also a resource, 623-1217, fws319@aol.com