

## MEETING NOTES

### Columbia County CONSERVATION ADVISORY COUNCILS Roundtable

October 13, 2011, Churchtown Firehouse

Convener: Columbia Land Conservancy

- 21 people attended from 9 towns and the City of Hudson, in addition to Karen Strong/Hudson River Estuary Program, and Ellen Jouret-Epstein, convening for Columbia Land Conservancy.
- Hillsdale and Ancram were the only towns present with an established Conservation Advisory Council (CAC). New Lebanon and Gallatin have CAC's but did not attend. Other towns (e.g. Stuyvesant) have authorizing legislation but no established CAC. The Town of Copake has a conservation committee, not a CAC. Chatham has support for forming a CAC. (Gretchen Stevens, Director, Biodiversity Resources Center, Hudsonia LTD, and Hillsdale CAC member, did a helpful presentation to the Chatham Town Board earlier this year.)
- One major question is how to recruit CAC members.
- Another is, what qualifications should CAC members have? Some people question a CAC's credentials, so it's useful to have members with scientific, technical backgrounds. It's easier for people to question oppositional environmentalists than they do scientists.
- The Ancram CAC has been active for about two years. Many of the members already knew each other, from involvement with other issues. There are now six members (previously eight, two have moved out of town.) The town supervisor Art Bassin is very supportive and used his extensive email list to recruit people with interest. They have members with scientific, natural resources and farming backgrounds. Town law does not specify qualifications for members.
  - They have produced a number of papers and reports, some of them commissioned by town boards, which provides receptivity for them. These are available on their web page, which can be accessed from the Ancram town website: <http://townofancram.org/CAC/>.
  - The CAC is working on a biodiversity map of the entire town, an effort that began when the town participated in a year-long Hudsonia training program. The current mapping is being done by hand, until they can find funding to have the work digitized. More than 7,000 acres have been mapped.
    - The question was raised as to what laws are in place to allow the CAC to use the map – to call for protection of vernal pools, for example. The answer is that some laws will be included in the town's new zoning law.

- The CAC has completed a review of the town's proposed zoning regulations and provided detailed comments. After advocacy on their part, many of the comments are finally incorporated in the proposed law.
- CAC members review and comment on proposals before the planning board. This relationship is facilitated by the fact that there are three members in common on both boards.
- One issue in contention is whether "shall" language, rather than "may" language, will be in the law, which would make it mandatory rather than suggested for the CAC to review and advise on projects or issues. There is still some resistance to the CAC's involvement with projects, which is seen as potential interference, conflicting with property rights, or creating complications and delays in project reviews. Conservation issues are still sometimes not taken seriously or are mocked.
- The town supervisor's recommendation is that all voices be heard, or they could become disruptive in order to be heard. The supervisor's leadership is definitely needed.
- All activities are on a volunteer basis, there is no line for the CAC in the town budget. The members expect to raise money when and where needed.
- It's important to "show up," voice opinions consistently, and eventually you teach people about the importance of these issues. One member of the CAC has a writing background and is interested in using educational outreach to teach people in a positive way.
- SEQR: Doesn't the SEQR process back up the CAC's opinions?
  - Austerlitz: there is a feeling that "SEQR is enough" and a CAC's review isn't necessary. There is the feeling that regulatory agencies (e.g. NYSDEC) can be relied upon for the work that a CAC might do. However, not all resources are regulated, and regulations don't necessarily provide the protections that a town might want to impose.
  - And while SEQR is a powerful tool, the information provided in the review has to come from somewhere.
  - CAC's can provide "watchdog functions" to see that the existing regulations are actually followed, which is not always the case.
  - Where are the SEQR form changes? The updates are not yet completed, which is complicated by NYSDEC staff cuts. The changes will incorporate more information about sources of information that boards and citizens themselves can access.
  - Karen Strong/NYSDEC points out that a lot of information is available even if a town is not ready to undertake a process like biodiversity mapping. Towns can also request her to do Habitat Summaries for them, which provide a great deal of

information from existing sources. She has already worked with at least New Lebanon, Ancram, and Gallatin, and will begin work soon with Taghkanic.

- Hillsdale's CAC is 4 to 5 years old. One thing that led to it was a series of land use lectures started by citizen perhaps ten years ago. It was much more popular than expected and that helped galvanize interest in volunteering. As a result, Hillsdale's comprehensive planning effort has multiple issue-centered committees with as many as 75 different volunteers. The CAC is one outgrowth of that.
  - The town board and planning board initially were reluctant about the role of the CAC and wanted to limit it to three members. There are five members now. However the CAC "sunsets" every two years. The town board must re-authorize the board and each member must reapply.
  - The relationship with the planning board grew when CAC members started attending meetings regularly. Eventually they asked to be able to pose questions, and those in turn prompted longer discussions about issues. Finally the CAC began to be asked to comment on projects by the planning board, and now their advisory role is fully integrated. They also get time at planning board meetings to present topics, and are asked to visit applicant sites and to produce review reports. They now meet twice each month because there is so much to do.
- Chatham, which does not yet have a CAC, described an analogous situation arising from its Agriculture and Farmland Protection Plan, to ensure that agriculture issues be integrated with other land use decisions. One of the plan's recommendations that have been implemented is that a farmer representative be included on both the town planning and zoning boards. Reciprocally, the plan also called for a town board member to be represented on the ongoing Chatham Agricultural Partnership.
- The Town of Stuyvesant is known to have local authorizing legislation for a CAC, but has not established one (at least, not a current CAC). A copy of the legislation has not been found. A suggestion was made that the Local Government office at the Department of State should have a copy of that.
- Several attending spoke about the political cycles in town changing the dynamics and support or opposition to things like CAC's.
- Funding was available starting in the 1970's, and through the 1990's, to start and support Environmental Management Council's (EMC's) and CAC's statewide. [Columbia County is said to have created an EMC in 1974. However there was opposition at that time to establishing CAC's in each town that might have influence on local decision-making.]
- There is an annual meeting that NYSDEC sponsors for EMC's and CAC's. Karen Strong will send out that information.
- Other resources, allies, strategies:

- The Alan Devoe Bird Club website has bird records. Bill Cook (Claverack and Columbia-Greene Community College) maintains their siting records.
- How can we plug in scientists who live in the county, even part-time? How can we identify them?
- We shouldn't limit ourselves to scientists – there are other long time residents who are very knowledgeable about the county and its natural resources.
- Find an issue that speaks to people across the board, and is more widely accepted without controversy – e.g. groundwater issues.
- We need to hold each others' hands!
- What does it take to convince a town board? Does a \$0-budget make the difference? Town boards can have short-sighted mentalities about money and budgets, overlooking the long-term savings of near-term decisions. And the economic benefits to environmental planning must be pointed out.
- It's important to be present, lend helping hands to issues already before the town, to get known for *doing things*.
- Gretchen and Karen will put together some notes about valuable skill sets for CAC's to have, for use in recruiting members.
- Farmscape Ecology Program is very valuable resource.
- Hudson River Estuary Program and Hudsonia
- Kinderhook [now, Stockport Creek] Watershed Alliance
- Sportsmen's clubs
- Trail groups
- CLC
- Columbia-Greene Community College – what environmental science programs do they have? In general, how to get youth and students involved?
- We need to get publicity for this work.
- EMC-CAC relationship: attend monthly EMC meetings, read EMC minutes.
- The EMC is surveying each town for its environmental zoning regulations. The data is being compiled and will be made available (e.g., CLC's CAC web page) so that county residents can search for relevant existing codes when creating or updating town zoning laws.
- Hudson River Watershed Alliance Digest with events.
- Orton Family Foundation website for planning resources.
- CLC will post these notes on a CAC web page under the Community Assistance Program, along with materials from the CAC workshop that CLC offered with Hudsonia and the Estuary Program, last January. Other documents and links are welcome (e.g. the site can link to Ancram's own CAC web page, which contains its documents.)
- The group would like to continue to meet, on a quarterly or trimester basis. Ellen will set up a future date, polling attendees.