

MEETING NOTES

Columbia County CONSERVATION ADVISORY COUNCILS Roundtable

March 7, 2012, Churchtown Firehouse

7:00 to 9:00 p.m.

Convener: Columbia Land Conservancy

16 Attending including the towns of Copake, Claverack, Kinderhook, Ancram, Hillsdale, Germantown, Taghkanic and City of Hudson

- Hudson, with its open spaces and waterfront, could also benefit from a CAC.
- Ancram's CAC started about two years ago and has a web page on the town's website, www.townofancram.org. The website includes links to many resources in addition to their own materials.
 - They're working on biodiversity mapping of the entire town and Hudsonia Ltd. is digitizing it under a NYSDEC grant. So far, 8,000 of the town's 28,000 acres are mapped
 - The CAC has produced memos on open burning, mowing schedules, hydro-fracking, telecommunications towers and other topics, which are on the web site.
 - They're doing biodiversity walks for Ancram citizens, showing them Fens and other habitats. They're also doing a Fen map for the town (which has 20-30 of them.)
 - They provided input to the town Agriculture and Farmland Protection Plan, particularly with regard to water resources and related Best Management Practices for farm operations.
 - Their CAC includes people with a wide variety of disciplines, and they make the point that it's critical that their input on issues be fact-based.
 - The CAC is still working on integrating itself with other town boards.
- Taking a CAC to the level of a board makes it a required reviewing body. The governing law allows this for CAC's that have completed open space or natural resource inventories. A town board then adopts a resolution elevating the council to a board. The review is already provided for in General Municipal Law and does not need to be specifically provided for in the town code. Information on this is included in materials from the CLC Conservation Advisory Council workshop in January 2011, and particularly in the Westchester CAC guide. All materials are posted on the CLC website at <http://clctrust.org/events/18/conservation-advisory-councils/>.
- CAC requirements are not always clear. Ancram has had experience being "FOILED" (Freedom of Information Law) for emails and minutes and wishes it had been clear what

their responsibilities are as an advisory council in re minutes and communications. While minutes may not be required, they've learned it's important.

- The Town of Claverack is working on standards for emails – what should be saved -- given the FOIL. This can be a big burden on town staff and volunteers given the volume of emails.
- The recommendation is to take minutes, keep a regular schedule of meetings and be sure all changes are posted on the town website, and in the newspaper when possible. Some towns achieve the latter with one newspaper listing after the organizational meeting each year, and then keep to that schedule.
- While Ancram's CAC is still working on integrating itself into the town's business, they feel they do have a "mandate" by virtue of their new comprehensive plan, which underscores the importance of all the values and resources that the CAC addresses.
- Stuyvesant experiences some "push back" from landowners, particularly farmers, on these issues. Although there is strong support for agriculture recognized in the town.
- How to start?
 - Hudsonia Ltd. has had funding in the past for biodiversity training, which is how Ancram's CAC group formed. Those long-term trainings (10 months) are very expensive to do, however there may be funding this year for their short-courses (three days) which towns could participate in. Hudsonia teaches a "habitat approach" to mapping.
 - However towns don't have to focus on biodiversity or habitat mapping. There is so much else to do and the key is to make yourself useful to the town.
 - Hillsdale's CAC started informally with a series of land use workshops that were very popular and promoted interest in these issues. They focused on topics that they felt would breed interest and produced nice flyers. The series first helped boost the effort to update their comprehensive plan, and then to form a CAC.
 - It might be useful to have a town supervisor such as Art Bassin or Art Baer, who have come to be supportive of CAC's, to speak to the Board of Supervisors about what a help they can be to a town.
 - Some towns, such as Kinderhook, feel there is too much of a division of attitudes in the town to start a CAC at this time.
 - Karen Strong can start the ball rolling by doing a Habitat Summary for the town, which she has done for several towns in Columbia County. Pulling that together and doing a public presentation can spark interest in something like a CAC. There is a waiting list given her time availability, but towns should speak to her about it.
 - Finding members is not always easy. In Hillsdale it has been more difficult than in Ancram. They also had to lobby the town board to have five slots rather than just three.

- Hillsdale's CAC is mainly active in supporting the work of the planning board, although they have also researched and provided information on small, residential-scale wind turbines.
- The Farmscape Ecology Program at Hawthorne Valley Farm works primarily with individual landowners rather than at the town level. They have a group known as the "Participatory Natural Resource Group" that goes out into the field together to record the plants and animals observed. These sites are mostly privately owned and they are open to suggestions for properties where this can take place.
- The Town of Claverack has a great deal going on right now with several committees in connection with their comprehensive plan, so they have elected not to form a CAC immediately. However there is support for forming one. They observe that some town boards do not know a lot about CAC's or what they can do and there may be a "fear factor" in that it will mean telling landowners what they can and can't do with their property.
- There is an untapped opportunity for the County Environmental Management Council and local CAC's to work together. Fortunately, a couple of local CAC members are CEMC representatives. It's in the law in Dutchess County that the EMC is made up of EMC members (their county EMC has since been abolished.)
- CLC has produced a brochure specifically for town boards to introduce the idea of forming a CAC. These can be obtained from Ellen Jouret-Epstein, and a .pdf of the brochure is on the CLC website on the CAC resources page, <http://clctrust.org/events/18/conservation-advisory-councils/>. We can also arrange for a presentation to a town board for anyone thinking about forming a CAC.

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