

2016 Conservation Commission Report

The Grantham Conservation Commission (GCC) is charged with encouraging the public and governing bodies to advance “the proper utilization and protection of the natural resources and for the protection of watershed resources” of Grantham. It serves as an advisory board to the Grantham Selectmen, and as such, its recommendations usually need to be ratified by the Selectmen before they become actionable. Unlike the Planning Board and Zoning Board of Adjustment, which have statutory authority and whose members are elected by the public, the Chair of the GCC is appointed by the Selectmen, and its members are usually nominated by the chair and approved by the Selectmen.

Last fall, Richard Hocker turned over the role of chairman of the Commission to David Wood. With only a short hiatus while Sheridan Brown served as chair, Dick had served as chairman for a total of 15 years. To the great relief of his fellow commissioners, he has agreed to remain on the Commission, continuing to share his reservoir of knowledge about both the commission and the forests of Grantham. This year also saw the addition of Dennis Ryan and John Larrabee as members and Nikki Arsenault as the recording secretary.

This year, in its effort to insure the “proper utilization and protection of the natural resources” of Grantham, the Commission, together with the assistance of many volunteers from the community, completed the construction of a 38-foot Brookside Park bridge designed by Commissioner Rich Kaszeta and with the help of the Student Conservation Association installed an ADA-compliant trail from the parking lot to the Sun Rocks. Simultaneously, with the help of additional volunteers, the Commission restored a small apple orchard in the park and completed a hiking loop with signage pointing out some of the park’s interesting features. Finally, with the IT assistance of Don Fitzpatrick, the QR codes printed on the signs take the user to a fuller online explanation of the points of interest. It is a pleasure to announce that by the end of the year more than 1400 visitors have signed the park log book and, no doubt, many more have enjoyed this remarkable little gem.

The mandate to provide for the “proper utilization of natural resources” implies to the Commission that the public should not only have the right to access public lands but should be able to learn easily how to access them. Consequently, several of the Commissioners have begun to work with the Upper Valley Trails Alliance to add Grantham’s trail system to an online data base called Trail Finder. Once fully implemented, the data base will allow the user to hunt for trails throughout Vermont and New Hampshire based upon their location, level of difficulty, and use (snowshoeing, hiking, trail bike, etc.). Once the trail of interest has been identified, the user will be able to download the information to a smart phone and follow their progress along the trail using GPS - all for free. The project should be completed in 2017.

The “proper utilization of natural resources” also implies that the trail system within Grantham’s forests should be improved and expanded. The Smith Lot, a delightful town-owned property on Miller Pond Road, near the Town Forest, currently lacks any hiking trails. The Forest Management Plan for the property recommends logging, which is planned this winter. As planned, the logging will not only provide some funds for the town, but by properly placing the

skidder trails and logging yards should provide the beginning of a trail system and a more diverse wildlife habitat.

The 2005 Master Plan Community Survey established that the preservation of Grantham's rural character was among the community's highest priorities, and indeed some of Grantham's open space is well worth protecting. The NH Fish and Game Wildlife Action Plan (Sept, 2015) reported that substantial portions of the town are among the "Highest Ranked Habitats in New Hampshire". In the hope that a comprehensive review of Grantham's open space would help to guide future conservation efforts, the Commission in 2013 recommended that the Selectmen establish an Open Space Committee. That committee was empowered by the Selectmen with Susan Buchanan serving as the Commission's representative. Its recommendations together with the newly revised Master Plan now provide a body of information with which to prioritize future land conservation efforts. Fortunately, most of Grantham's open space, even though not permanently protected, is not currently threatened with development. Nevertheless, the funds available to the Commission for land acquisition are currently insufficient to influence land use decisions, and the Commission is looking into mechanisms that might offer the Selectmen more flexibility in negotiations with land owners.

Finally, this year saw the completion of the perambulation of town boundaries, mandated by New Hampshire law to occur every 7 years and delegated to the Commission by the Selectmen. The perambulation of the boundaries with Enfield, Croydon, Springfield and Plainfield was completed in 2012. In 2016, the perambulation of the boundary with Plainfield on Grantham Mountain was completed and included discovery of two boundary markers not found since the fire of 1953. The report of the complete perambulation has been submitted to the Secretary of State and is available in the town office.

Other activities of the Commission this year included support of the Pollinator Project, cooperation with GVS on trail improvements, review of cutting applications for compliance with Shoreline Water Quality Protection Act requirements, participation in Old Home Day and Health Fair programs, and organization of a well-attended dedication celebration of the Brookside Park improvements.

If you are interested in volunteering for Commission projects, please contact David Wood, Commission Chair, at 865-7473.