

GROTON CONSERVATION COMMISSION

Minutes

February 8, 2008

Chairman Marshall Giguere called the meeting to order at 9:00 a.m. in the Selectmen's conference room in Town Hall. Members Craig Auman, Bruce Easom, and Peter Morrison were present. Members Wayne Addy, Holly Estes, and Ryan Lambert were unavailable. Conservation Assistant Barbara Ganem was also present.

The purpose of the meeting was the discussion of the FY'09 budget for Conservation and Water Safety, in view of the request from the Finance Committee and the Board of Selectmen to reduce labor costs by 5% and by 9%. Member Easom noted that eliminating staff that is not essential to the core work of the Conservation Commission seems appropriate. He suggested giving the Water Safety component to the Parks Commission or to the Board of Selectmen. The beach lifeguards are paid out of expenses as the work is contracted out to the Lowell YMCA. Members questioned what the liability for the Town would be in the long term. In addition, the docks were just recently purchased using CPA funds. The closing of the beach has to be a decision of the Board of Selectmen.

C. Auman questioned whether it would be possible to increase the revenues coming in for beach use enough to cover the expenses. He felt it would be unreasonable to charge enough to have the program break even. P. Morrison reviewed the services that are expected from the Town – fire, ambulance, police, and schools - and asked whether the beach could fall into this category. There are other options for swimming lessons in town including the Country Club. C. Auman asked what services the lifeguards provide, and it was noted they are supplying Band-Aids for minor wounds and clean the beach and portapotties. The Toomey Center also brings their students to the beach twice a week. Members thought the decision to close the beach would have to come from the Selectmen and Finance Committee within the context of the overall Town budget, but the Commission should lay out a benefit/liability analysis.

Even if the beach is closed it will be necessary to maintain the Sargisson Beach Conservation Area i.e., removing trash, fallen tree limbs, monitoring for vandalism. Typically at least 2 lifeguards are on duty at all times (after the death of Molly Bish while lifeguarding alone in a western Massachusetts town). Residents must sign up separately for the swim lesson program. Commissioners thought the hours of operation could be changed, but would still have to accommodate the swim lesson program which is run during weekdays for about a month during the summer. Out of town registrants must also purchase a beach parking sticker. Increasing user fees is certainly an option. The number of stickers sold is less than 250, and the amount of money brought in during FY'07 was \$6820.

The request for funding for a GPS unit is actually around \$7500, not the \$6400 proposed last year. The funding for this would come out of the Stabilization fund.

Mr. Auman pointed out that, although the WPA work load is down, there has been an increase in the number of properties for which the Commission has responsibility. There are constraints for associated with the use of Community Preservation funds. Maintenance of conservation land is not an approved use of those funds. In addition WPA filings have follow up involving Certificates of Compliance. There is a larger percentage of building on marginal lands, many of which have extensive wetlands that require a filing before the Conservation Commission. There are continuing filings for docks and septic system upgrades. P. Morrison indicated he would want unanimous support from the Selectmen for land management funds if they insist on using the Conservation Fund for land management purposes. No legal fees have been approved for some time and many times CPC funds cannot be used for this purpose. The acquisition of several large parcels recently, i.e., Surrenden Farm and Academy Hill, is likely to result in increasing land management expenses.

Member Auman questioned whether some of these maintenance tasks can be picked up by the Highway Department. Mr. Morrison pointed out that deferring maintenance can sometimes result in increased costs down the road. He gave the example of the Crosswinds area where neighbors had gotten together to prepare a Forestry Management Plan which was never implemented. The Town ended up paying around \$10,000 to clear trees from the area. He suggested looking at the management budget from a cost per acre perspective.

The GPS unit is useful in assuring property boundaries are not encroached upon, and M. Giguere gave the example of Deerhaven where it was determined junk was located on land for which the Town was about to accept a Conservation Restriction. This fact forced the developer to remove the trash in a timely manner.

B. Ganem said she would prepare a second memo to the Finance Committee/Board of Selectmen explaining the six budget scenarios and spelling out the impacts.

There being no further business, the meeting was adjourned at 10:15 a.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Barbara V. Ganem
Conservation Assistant

Approved as drafted February 12, 2008.