

Conservation Commission

Report to Town Meeting

Fall 2021

The Conservation Commission's role includes vetting applications under the Wetlands Protection Act and Winchester's Wetland Bylaw for projects that impact wetland resources, including those within the floodplain, 100 feet of these resources, and 200 feet of the Aberjona River, Horn Pond Brook and other perennial streams. Considering the town used to be called Waterfield, there are numerous projects that are brought to us for guidance and approval.

We are also charged with managing our town's open space, and promoting access and awareness of these spaces to further enable engagement with our natural environment.

We have not produced a report to the Town since the commencement of COVID, however, we can report that this pandemic has put almost no impediments to our processing of applications as we have been holding meetings (via zoom) since April 2020 on our 2x/month basis. I attribute this to the good coordination between our administrator, Elaine Vreeland, and our commissioners, who are all tech-savvy enough to manage this different presentation/hearing process.

As mentioned above, the bulk of our volunteer time is spent reviewing applications for projects spanning backyard decks to major developments, but we have also expanded our purview to adjacent town's projects that will impact our community, e.g., the Vale project at the old Gelly factory in Woburn. We interact with large entities like Eversource, the MWRA, the MBTA, the DOT, and the DEP. We have worked with the Engineering Department to improve the environmental aspects of projects such as the North Reservoir Dam renovation, and with the Planning Board to craft our town's Master Plan, in addition to interacting with the Select Board, Capital Planning Board, and other committees to pursue our goals of sustainability and conservation.

We are proud to report that we have secured 20 acres of land at Winning Farm as open space, and are in the late stages of gaining another 18 acres of land adjacent to the Aberjona River at Washington Park. Preservation of these spaces is not only essential for climate resiliency but is also a great point of pride considering we are 8 miles north of Boston.

Article 8 on the Warrant would, upon a vote of support from Town Meeting, further expand our responsibilities of land stewardship to the Town Forest-- a 26-acre forested area at the southern edge of town. We think that this responsibility fits well within our wheelhouse, and that the Town Forest would benefit from a management plan coordinated with the management of our other conservation areas. We plan on investing in tree plantings that are beneficial to wildlife corridors, and in further promoting access and knowledge of this great open space resource.

I note that we have recently modified our agenda and now start our meetings with items related to open space, preservation, promotion of activities related to urban forests, improving our bylaws, writing rules/regulations, public outreach, and pursuing goals outlined in the Open Space and Recreation plan. Our goal is to restore this area to its former beauty, and we look forward to seeing the fruits of our investments in time and money in the coming years.

Lastly, I'd like to highlight our commission's investment in the downtown as well. Since 2019, we have been improving the waterfront along the Aberjona River as it flows through our scenic downtown - an effort named "The Aberjona Initiative". Our downtown waterfront jewel has been neglected over the years, resulting in significant overgrowth of invasive plants, which obscure view sheds, diminish habitat along the banks, and disrupt engagement between our residents and the river. We have invested significant amounts of our modest funds improving Judkins Pond, Mill Pond, Skillings Road, and downstream of the Center Falls Dam, including eradicating invasive plants and installing native plantings that are both beautiful and beneficial to wildlife. This is a multi-year effort, and our current investment is unsustainable. We are actively looking for alternate funding sources to maintain this revitalization for the benefit of all.

(Please click on the link below for the Aberjona Initiative presentation)

[Aberjona Initiative: Restoring our Scenic Aberjona River](#)