

TEN THINGS YOUR CONSERVATION COMMISSION CAN DO

Land and Water Conservation Summit, University of Rhode Island
Dan Novak, RI Association of Conservation Commissions
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“My mind is as vast as the sky. My actions are as fine as a grain of sand.”

- Padmasambhava, an ancient Indian Buddhist master, quoted in Ethan Nichtern’s *One City: A Declaration of Interdependence*, 2007



TEN QUESTIONS

What state/local mandates authorize municipal conservation commissions?

What are the routine logistics, procedures and tools needed to carry out our job?

What are the elements of a good – and legally defensible -- advisory review?

What are the ingredients of a really productive meeting?

What is – or should be – the relationship of the local CC to the other town boards?

What is the essential and empowering “permission” often overlooked by CC members?

What is the incentive for new members joining? What kind of orientation is helpful?

How do we become leaders in our respective communities versus clueless appointees?

How can a statewide network or association of CC’s best support local work?

What is – or should be -- the larger context, the bigger picture that guides our work?

And then there’s the question you want to ask!.....

What state/local mandates authorize municipal conservation commissions?

1. State originating statute (Chap. 35 of title 45, Chap. 203, RI Public Laws 1960)
2. Local founding ordinance (e.g. West Greenwich in 1977)
3. Rhode Island Environmental Advocacy Act 2004

What are the routine tools needed to carry out our job in responding to requests for advisory opinions in the town review process?

1. ability to read a variety of maps – e.g. plat and lot, topographical, engineering, GIS-digital -- and interpret initial master (conceptual) plans
2. familiarity with local terrain and conditions, use of town comprehensive plans and environmental goals with town conservation inventories (open space, resource and prominent geo-features in relation to town/community values and priorities)
3. use of guiding principles and documents in advisory reviews
 - a. the legal, proper and/or optimal siting of proposed projects (taking into account town comprehensive plan for growth, conservation/environmental inventory and criteria)
 - b. applying and recommending appropriate overall design and construction criteria (efficiency & green building standards, “conservation development”)
 - c. assessment of whole town/region and long range effects of a given project (considering likely effects and different scenarios of development and asking the question of what constitutes optimal/healthy development)

What are the elements of a good – and legally defensible -- advisory review?

1. reasons rendered in advisory reviews should be grounded and based on explicit principles, criteria, and documents
2. fair and reasonable procedure of hearing, discussion and evaluation followed
3. the realization that our decisions are not regulatory but oriented toward the best legal and recommended current practices

What are the ingredients of a really productive meeting?

1. Use of Roberts Rules of Order (or some consensual equivalent) that govern routine procedure (e.g. posting and circulating agendas in advance and in accord with the state Open Meeting Act, adequate discussion, recording votes, clear decisions, recorded minutes, etc.)
2. The observance of open and fair hearing in an atmosphere that is transparent, respectful, orderly and utilizing recognized discussion/consideration among participants, building consensus whenever possible, and including statements of minority dissent where strong disagreements occur
3. Going beyond routine efficiency procedures to achieve a group member culture that is energetic, dynamic, inquiring, collaborative and creative – and not hung up on positions of power

What is the essential and empowering “permission” often overlooked by CC members?

1. Self permission. Not being afraid to initiate! We have the right, power and confidence to act! Not being timid, fearful or passive... Not waiting for some power on high to ask you to do what you may see as utterly appropriate, necessary or pressing. You don't have to wait forever to act rightly, responsibly or with forethought.
2. Acting in such a way as to initiate and embrace relevant/useful projects... Do your research and homework on all reviews and selected projects in such a way as to create a track record of success -- and consequently a respect gained in the town. Start small and build your strength. Have the aim of being the best and most forward looking board/group/agency in town.

What is – or should be – the relationship of the local CC to the other town boards?

1. One of assistance and support, providing both information and perspectives... The Conservation Commission should do due diligence in its reviews and do its “homework” in a way that anticipates the needs and answers the questions of other town boards; building a cooperative, collegial and/or supportive relationship with other town boards and agencies; we should become a helpful town resource and “go to” body
2. We should be a constant reminder of the town’s environmental goals and ideals in all town board deliberations.

What is the incentive for new members joining? What kind of orientation is helpful?

1. Having your own local CC manual, handbook or informational pamphlet
2. Getting beyond the warm body syndrome and looking for skill sets and people that advance the cause of environmental long term thinking and good planning
3. Having a sense of the “big picture” -- an overall sense of urgency/importance in not only protecting what is in one’s backyard but having an broad overview of how multiple environments – biological and cultural, local, regional, statewide, federal and global – intersect and are increasingly interdependent, how global systems influencing local outcomes, and especially vice-versa
4. Having the capacity for outrage about toxic, dangerous or destructive conditions
5. Having a sense of empowerment that says individuals and small groups can exercise passion and work in concert collectively secure breakthroughs
6. Actually taking the time to orient new members not only to our tool-box but to the full dimensions of our task, and how all CC work is on-the-job, learn-as-you-go training!
7. Being the genuine environmental “antennae” of the town and the creative repository of its long range vision of what a real community can be like...

How do we become leaders in our respective communities versus being clueless appointees?

1. Yes! “The answer to how is yes.”
2. By beginning to think of ourselves as such in the context of the 21st century conditions... including the unthinkable and the unprecedented

How can a statewide network or association of CC’s best support local work?

1. Connect via antique telephone trees, email, static website, social media, or ----???
2. Do annual meetings and local liaison/representatives work?

What is – or should be -- the larger context, the bigger picture that guides our work?

1. We should employ highly specific criteria but not be caught in narrow thinking! With the breath of vision and inspiration we should be researching, exploring and encouraging eco- and optimal design approaches, advanced and low-tech clean energy technologies, and non-grid forms of energy generation, thus being able to respond with resilience to changing global/planetary conditions, being intimately appreciative of the particular communities of which we are a part....
2. What do you think? Your urgent issue? Does it converge with others?
3. New instruments and models of mapping, assessment and coordinated response?
 - A story: During a recent local outrage a developer’s logger/surveyor used a hand held iPhone, with neat “apps” that included GIS mapping and GPS location, demonstrated how a property boundary could be surveyed and marked electronically.
 - A tech-fantasy: What we need are hand held devices that can encode rapidly changing global conditions and, using a zoom in and out lens, can move from planet to region and eco-zones to a pin-point locale and include the various perspectives we might use to evaluate the appropriateness of a given project, e.g. its proximity to ecologically sensitive or community valued features.
 - An alert-communication-nexus fantasy: would be the communication analogue of the above device that would allow tracking changing issues in a way that would alert CC’s immediately and put them in touch with other enviro- organizations in such a way as to anticipate or respond in real time to a threat (or opportunity) forming. That is, to be able to zoom in and out from global to local and from local to global scenario effects. This kind of practice would enlarge our vision by sensitizing us to all the various contexts (natural, regional, and social-political-cultural environments) we habitually deal with. In this way we could form temporary coalitions and ad hoc alliances to respond quickly and effectively. Thus, say if there was an “outrage” occurring next door or in local/regional planning stages, my CC could alert both area residents, other related CC’s (e.g. in the RIACC network), statewide entities (like ECRI and GS or CRMC) and state agencies (like DEM) to confer and collaborate in coordinated fashion in responding to the threat/opportunity.

Appendices

- A. One town's CC PR pamphlet
- B. One town's advisory review criteria
- C. One town's Conservation Inventory of Open Spaces
- D. RI/DEM Manual for Conservation ("Creative") Development
- E. One town's public forum: "Citizen Conversations on the Future of WG"
- F. "Local Settings" -- some possible future scenarios for conservation commissions

Three References *One City: A Declaration of Interdependence*, Ethan Nichtern (2007)
On the Map, Simon Garfield (2013); *Relational Reality*, Charlene Spretnak (2011)

A Magical History Tour of the 20th/ 21st Century with Highlights of the Environmental Movement

Early 1900s – the preservation of national treasures (John Muir & T Roosevelt)

1914-1918 – "The Great War" (WW I) and subsequent influenza epidemic

1920s – party time, governmental corruption and wildly inflated financial speculation

1930s – The Great Depression, FDR, public works projects of the CCC

1940s – WW II... wartime production massively revs up American industry

1950s – Cold War and scientific expertise, scientific management of natural "resources"

1960s -- *Silent Spring* and the turbulent "Sixties:" radical social-political-consciousness movements... critique of scientific rationality and industrial civilization... new visions of the planet... iconic Earthrise photo, first Earth Day celebrated, the Whole Earth Catalog

1970s -- the attempt to mitigate widespread industrial pollution -- federal legislation passed, The Clean Air and Water Act, EPA founded; state DEM agencies of regulation, and enforcement; local/municipal conservation commissions mandated and/or established

1980s – governmental "deregulation" of industries side by side with national environmental advocacy organizations like Audubon Society, the Sierra Club, UCS, and The Nature Conservancy – spearheaded by activist/protest groups like Greenpeace

1990s – "innovation" becomes a business mantra; the internet and PC technology; the search for a defining vision for America manifested in the liberal/conservative struggle

Early 2000s -- new "eco-design" ideas converge with the social justice movement; global climate change acceleration generating population, energy, and global resource concerns