Conservation Commission
2018
Annual Report

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Introduction

“The purpose of the Conservation Commission shall be to serve as a research, advisory and advocacy group on environmental and conservation issues relating to the city.” – South Portland City Code of Ordinances

The South Portland Conservation Commission accomplished much in 2018 – and our work has served the above mission statement well.

From proactive communications with city leadership to engagement with city residents on how to improve the quality of our freshwater streams, the Conservation Commission hereby presents a report on our 2018 activities, and goals for 2019.

Communications with City Staff and Others

In order to increase visibility of Conservation Commission projects, we:

- Continued to develop the “Conservation Corner”, updates from the Commission that are included in the citywide newsletter
- Have emailed the City Council on environmental issues that impact the city to provide the Commission’s input. The intent is for the Commission to be proactive and engaged with issues that directly correlate with the Commission’s mission, and to formally document our opinions and thoughts to provide guidance
- Have emailed the Director of Water Resource Planning, the Planning Director and the Storm Water Manager to solicit feedback on issues that the Commission should work to tackle in the 2019 calendar year
- Have communicated with the Director of Water Resource Planning frequently to ensure we are working in support of city-wide initiatives related to freshwater.

Improved Community Communication

The Conservation Commission seeks to improve the visibility of and clarity about its mission and its ongoing strategies to maintain and improve our natural assets. To better communicate with the citizens of South Portland regarding conservation subjects we are requesting voluntary citizen emails so we can distribute SPCC meeting minutes, announcements and other SPCC news. The Conservation Corner will also offer a link to the SPCC’s Facebook page.
Freshwater Wetlands Compensation Fund Community Service Grants

The South Portland Conservation Commission, in partnership with the South Portland Water Resources Department, administers the Freshwater Wetlands Compensation Fund. The purpose of the fund is to implement projects that compensate for the loss of natural wetlands as a result of development activities within the City. Beginning in 2017, the Commission established a program to make Community Service Grants to local groups, individuals, associations, or businesses to support environmental improvements that contribute directly to the quality of South Portland’s freshwater resources. A separate wetlands report will be sent to the City Council in May 2019.

Grants are authorized in Chapter 27, sec. 1526, of the South Portland Code of Ordinances to maintain the functions and values of the community’s freshwater wetlands and to ensure the health and safety of the residents of the City while preserving economic vitality. Individual grants of up to $2,500 are awarded on the basis of budgets presented by applicants. Particular emphasis has been placed on improvements to the watersheds of five South Portland brooks that have been formally designated as urban impaired streams. Water quality proposals are being solicited to complete projects of direct public benefit within particular locales, neighborhoods, streams, or ponds within one of these five watersheds. Projects may include rain gardens, pesticide mitigation, eradication of invasive species, and other means that would improve the health of the five impaired streams.

Any group, individual, or business based in South Portland or otherwise demonstrating a specific commitment to the City may apply for a grant. Priority is given to proposals that depend on volunteer leadership and participation. Additional value is placed on projects that strengthen groups or associations that have ongoing commitments to community missions beyond the scope of the specified grant.

Three initial grants were awarded in 2017; these projects were funded through 2018. The projects from South Portland High School and Mahoney Middle School are implementing separate efforts to enhance the City’s storm water management practices.

- In 2018, South Portland High School teacher Tania Harding’s students successfully installed a rain garden with surrounding vegetation and pathways inside the school’s courtyard. The project will help to absorb and filter storm water runoff. For their next project, they will restore an existing rain garden in front of the school at the student drop-off zone. This rain garden was installed at the time of the school renovation several years ago and has not been maintained.

- In 2018 teacher Julie Pitt’s Mahoney students, known as the Green Team, began a multi-year process of improvements to a section of Trout Brook that adjoins school grounds. Last year, the Team helped to re-introduce trout to the stream. This year, it will begin a process of removing invasive plant species from the banks of the brook. This project will complement a much larger City project that has moved the brook to a point where it may escape the “urban impaired” designation. The Conservation Commission will support funding a bridge over Trout...
Brook to facilitate travel between Mahoney and Brown Schools and to preserve the brook’s banks from trampling.

- In 2019 SPHS students will be renovating a poorly installed and poorly maintained rain garden at the main bus stop student entry.

- In 2019 Mahoney Middle School students will continue working on invasive species around Trout Brook.

The Open Space Committee

It had become clear during the inventory process that the lack of an up-to-date Open Space Plan prevents effective evaluation, protection, and preservation of open space in the City. Although the 2001 plan created an evaluation process and provided a prioritized list of properties, it concentrated on private properties and lacked recommendations for mechanisms for long-term preservation of both public and private properties. It was also noted that the 2001 Open Space Plan was never formally ratified by the City Council nor was it incorporated into the Comprehensive Plan. The Conservation Commission decided to make the development of a new Open Space Plan a priority.

The Conservation Commission presented a plan for revising and rewriting the 2001 Open Space Strategic Plan to the City Council. The plan was ratified and $30,000 in funding was allocated for an environmental consultant. After the dissemination of a detailed RFP, the local consultant firms of FB Associates/DeWan & Associates was chosen as the consultant for this project. As follows:

- A representative community-based committee containing representatives from city boards and commissions, business owners, developers, community members, the South Portland Land Trust and other appropriate interested parties was convened.

- Review the 2001 Open Space Plan to ascertain which elements can be preserved as the basis for a revised plan. Several additional topics have been generated over the past 16 years that need to be incorporated into a revised Open Space Plan. These topics include, for example, a greater emphasis on preserving habitats, creating more neighborhood connectivity through trail access, improving conditions for pollinators, preserving wetlands, conserving rare and native species, eliminating invasive species, paying closer attention to geologic features, researching historical and cultural significance, and understanding recreational and educational significance.

- Create a prioritized list of public properties that need to be preserved.

- For future properties that may become available for preservation, create a strict and thorough property evaluation and rating process for the Planning Department, Planning Board, and City Council to use in determining viability for preservation. Most protected would be property that already has protection to remain in its current use. Least protected are properties that have no public value beyond sale or development according to its current city zone.

- Research methods to acquire and preserve open space (e.g. city ordinance, conservation easement, and other means), the corresponding perpetual security of each, and recommend the best methods for the city to implement preservation of open space.

- Add the revised Open Space Plan to the Comprehensive Plan.
• Establish an Open Space Plan implementation sub-committee to work with City officials to ensure the complete adoption of the new plan and to facilitate any new or revised ordinances required for implementation.

The Open Space Committee met monthly beginning in March 2018. The community-based project was launched with a survey that was taken by 700+ community members and a followed by a public forum on July 31, 2018. The OSC created three subcommittees (Land Bank, Acquisitions, and Protection) to further delineate needs and recommendations. The final draft of the Open Space Report and new plan is currently being edited and is expected to be presented to the City Council in May 2019.

O’Neil Street Re-Use Committee

The Conservation Commission remained active on this committee, which has resulted in a unique community-based approach to reusing public property. The new development includes 38 units with a one acre park in the center. The proposed storm water management program includes tree plantings and several rain gardens.

Mildred Street Project

Members of the Commission heard from residents of South Portland who were concerned about the condition of “the gully,” a small, freshwater pond that lies between the Green Belt and Mildred Street in the Pleasantdale neighborhood. Because that neighborhood is scheduled for storm water separation in 2018, it was a good time to understand and possibly remediate the condition of the pond. The Commission took advantage of the previously scheduled storm water separation project and worked collaboratively with the Water Resources Department to combine the two projects, saving time and money.

Using funds from the Wetlands Compensation Fund, the Commission funded a proposal from the engineering firm Woodard and Curran to study the pond. Residents of the neighborhood were invited to two public meetings to share their perspectives and concerns. As a result of the report, we learned:

• The pond was once an inlet connected to the Fore River
• The pond receives the storm water runoff from approximately 80 acres in the Broadway/Elm Street neighborhood
• Residents are most concerned about the odor of the pond
• The high culvert under the Green Belt (former railroad) prevents tidal flushing except during astronomical high tides

Preliminary results suggest that lowering the culvert to allow more tidal influence in the gully and installing a baffle box treatment on incoming storm water could be the preferred intervention. As of April 2019 the new culvert has been installed and cleanup efforts have begun.

Freshwater Compensation Fund

Current balance of the fund is $
2019 Goals

1. Support the new Open Space Plan by participating in the ad hoc Open Space Implementation Committee.
2. Support the new Open Space Plan by convening a community-based subcommittee of the Conservation Commission focused on active acquisition of additional open spaces in the City.
3. Continue work on Trout Brook to help remove that waterway from the Urban Impaired Streams List.
4. SPCC proposes using the Freshwater Compensation Fund to support environmental and engineering studies to determine how to eradicate the invasive species and restore Old Joe’s Pond.
5. SPCC supports maintaining the Piggery property as open space.
6. Work with the Long Creek Watershed Committee to conserve part of Sable Oaks.
7. Continue to promote the FWCF grant program and to encourage the residents of South Portland to proactively improve the freshwater resources of our city.
8. Coordinate efforts on helping the City prepare for global warming and sea level rise.
9. Increase public outreach.