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 2017 – 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 2017 activities, and goals for 2018.

Change in Number of Commissioners

In early 2017, the Conservation Commission approached the Council and requested a change in the number of members in order to make the Commission more efficient, tight-knit, and functional. The Council approved a change in membership to seven total Commissioners, halving the previous number.

The experience has resulted in stable membership and a more productive group. It was noted that current Commissioners do not represent each existing district; subsequent nominations once existing Commissioners’ terms have expired will need to represent each district.

Communications with City Staff and Others

As part of the late 2016-2017 transition, the Conservation Commission noted that communications with city staff was limited at best.

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

- Started the “Conservation Corner”, updates from the Commission that are included in the city-wide newsletter
- Have emailed the City Council on environmental issues that impact the city to provide the Commission’s input. This has been done without the Council’s request for 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 Stormwater Manager to solicit feedback on issues that the Commission should work to tackle in the 2018 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.
Conservation Commission Binders

In early 2017, the chair of the Conservation Commission created binders for all staff that will remain with the Conservation Commission. These binders contain basic and foundational documents to assist the Commissioners with project planning, voting and other work as necessary. Each commissioner can add whatever documents are helpful to him/her, but the binders will stay with the Conservation Commission upon a commissioner’s completion of their term.

From Brooks to Bay

The South Portland Conservation Commission received a grant from the Casco Bay Estuary Partnership to increase the public’s awareness of the five urban impaired streams in our City (Trout Brook, Kimball Brook, Red Brook, Barberry Creek, and Long Creek). Members of the Commission and representatives from area environmental agencies planned a public forum and field trips to the streams in order to accomplish this goal.

On April 26, 2017, we held the forum at South Portland High School. Speakers from the Maine Department of Environmental Protection, the Casco Bay Estuary Partnership, and South Portland Water Resource Protection informed attendees about the condition of the streams and how human and natural factors have influenced water quality.

In addition to the presentations at the forum, area environmental organizations set up information tables so that attendees could gather more information and ask questions. Participants included the Cumberland County Soil and Water Conservation District, Friends of Casco Bay, U.S. Fish and Wildlife, USM Environmental Studies, South Portland Pest Management Advisory Committee, South Portland Land Trust, and Long Creek Watershed Management District.

Stream Walks

In 2017, the South Portland Conservation Commission hosted a series of Stream Walks to raise awareness about Urban Impaired streams (http://www.southportland.org/departments/water-resource-protection/stormwater-management/impaired-streams/) in South Portland. These Walks were publicized on the Conservation Commission’s Facebook page (https://www.facebook.com/SouthPortlandConservationCommission/) and using the Nextdoor website/message service for South Portland and the surrounding area. The Commission also emailed interested South Portland residents that submitted their email addresses at the Brooks to Bay Freshwater Streams Forum (Wednesday, April 26, 2017). Each educational hike was guided by a different leader chosen because of their background and understanding of a particular stream. Participants were educated on the history, ecology, challenges and ongoing work to preserve these important waterways.

Trout Brook

On Saturday May 13, 2017 Wendy Garland, the Non-Point Source Coordinator for the Maine Department of Environmental Protection guided a Stream Walk at Trout Brook. The group met and left from the stream crossing at the brook’s culvert on Boothby Ave (near Beaufort St.) where there is a new storm filtering installation. The group then walked through the South Portland Land Trust Land
to Sawyer Rd and came back through the area off of Marsh Road. The discussion focused on the status of Trout Brook, the need for fallen trees to create habitats, the invasives found there, the trout population, and the impact of development in the area.

**Barberry Creek**

On Saturday May 20, 2017 South Portland Conservation Commission members Bob McKeagney, Jody Meredith and Bret Bergst provided a guided steam walk of Barberry Creek. The group met at the trail head behind Docks Seafood Restaurant (15 Evans St.) in South Portland. Participants walked a roughly one mile creek segment that runs along the trail behind Docks and talked about the history of the creek and its surrounding area and how these changes have impacted flow and water quality over time. After returning to the start, the group crossed Broadway St. to the Forest City Cemetery to see where Barberry Creek empties into the Fore River.

**Kimball Brook**

The South Portland Conservation Commission led a Kimball Brook stream walk on Saturday, May 27th. The hike allowed participants to learn more about the stream that forms the ponds in Hinkley Park and eventually joins Trout Brook to flow into Casco Bay. This Stream Walk was guided by Fred Dillon, South Portland's Stormwater Coordinator. The group met up at the Hinkley Park parking lot on Highland Avenue and the walk lasted about an hour.

**Red Brook**

On Saturday, August 5, 2017 former South Portland Mayor and South Portland Land Trust member Tom Blake led a stream walk of Red Brook. This stream, which originates in Scarborough, passes under Route 295, and enters Clark Pond. Participants walked the section in South Portland Land Trust’s area near Home Depot. The group met at the south side of Home Depot at 9 am. While on the walk the group learned about the history, ecology and challenges of this stream. The hike lasted about an hour.

**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 decided that the City's bi-weekly newsletter is a ready-made tool that is ideal for this process. Conservation Corner will feature one topic per issue with a brief description of the issue and links to reference documents on the city's web site. Our first article provided information about applying for grants from the Fresh Water Compensation Fund. In the future, immediate priorities and long-term goals will be communicated through this medium.

**Portland Harbor Dredging**

The commission did some background investigation regarding the project whereby a cad cell will be excavated in the Fore River approximately between the Coast Guard Station and Southport Marine into which excavated sediment from pier areas in Portland and South Portland will be deposited. We interviewed Bill Needleman of the City of Portland who was one of the lead ad hoc committee
members for the project. We also interviewed Ivy Frignoca, executive director of Friends of Casco Bay, also part of the ad hoc committee and an advocate for the environmental health of Casco Bay. We interviewed Tom Meyers, former transportation director of South Portland by email and he provided us with background information and documentation of other cad cell projects in Boston and Providence Rhode Island. The commission sent a letter to the council agreeing with the findings of the ad hoc committee that this process is the best alternative for disposal of the dredged waste.

**Portland Pier Development**

The city reviewed the proposed project to dredge around the Portland Pier, located on Front Street between The Saltwater Grille and Portland Pipeline property and to extend the pier in order to develop local aquaculture and other marine businesses. We sent a letter to the city council with our opinion that this was a worthwhile use of the city shoreline and suggested that they might, instead of dredging the area close to shore, instead use that to install a parking pier as the site appears to be lacking in that area, especially if more berths are contemplated with pier extensions.

**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.

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.

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. Students from South Portland High School and Mahoney Middle School are implementing separate efforts to enhance the City’s storm water management practices.
• High school students will be installing a rain garden in the, as yet undeveloped, internal courtyard at the school. The project will help to absorb and filter storm water runoff. In a separate project, they will work on external sites on school grounds that will have a positive impact on water quality as it flows through the City’s storm water drainage system to Anthoine Creek and the Fore River.

• Mahoney students, known as the Green Team, will continue 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. It will plant appropriate native species that will help to reduce erosion and enhance the overall water quality of Trout 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.

Open Space Inventory Committee

In August of 2016 the Conservation Commission was asked to appoint new representatives to the existing Open Space Inventory Committee, which had been initiated by the City during the fall of 2015. The creation of this inventory committee was the direct result of community displeasure after developers approached the city to develop public property (Sawyer Park on Westbrook Street and Hamlin School). The specific charge to the committee was to review an Excel spreadsheet of City-owned or -controlled properties to determine whether any of those listed properties had conservation potential. The Inventory Committee included Conservation Commission members, South Portland Land Trust representatives and community participants.

The Inventory Committee had reviewed the property list using a three-tier system of appraisal but was concerned that many existing open space properties are not fully protected under the current ordinances of the Comprehensive Plan. Also the property list did not include any privately owned land that might be suitable for conservation purposes.

The committee members expressed hope that the 2001 Open Space Plan could be reviewed to meet current standards and reported to the Conservation Commission that the committee had served its purpose and that the focus should be on updating the entire 2001 Open Space Plan.

The Conservation Commission Review of the 2001 South Portland Open Space Strategic Plan (OSP) and Input from the Open Space Inventory 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 firm of FB Associates/DeWan & Associates was chosen as the consultant for this project. As follows:

- Allocate a sum to be determined to hire an outside consultant to guide the process in achieving the following broad objectives.
- Convene 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. This process will incorporate a diverse stakeholder group and an open public process with a long-term time horizon to develop a community vision for open space and to create a successful Open Space Plan to support that vision.
- 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.
- Review and update the list of prioritized private properties.
- 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.

O’Neil Street Re-Use Committee

O’Neil Street Property Re-use Committee was formed in early 2017 and began meeting in March. The Committee of 10 people and a hired facilitator consisted of City Staff, a City Councilor, an engineering consultant (Sebago Technics), representatives from the Planning Board, Comprehensive Plan Implementation Committee, Conservation Commission, Energy and Recycling Committee, a sample of neighbors, and residents from other parts of South Portland. They were selected to represent their roles, as well their contribution to a mix of relevant experience, skills, age balance, gender balance and perspectives. The meetings generated robust discussions and an interest in hearing and taking into account public comment.
The final recommendations included the following items pertinent to the charge of the Conservation Commission:

Open/Green Space

- There should be an appropriate balance between built space and open space.
- Public access to functional open and green space is highly desired.
- Outdoor amenities may include a playscape, park, community garden area, or a combination of these.
- The redevelopment should integrate eco-friendly landscape design, including low-maintenance green landscaping with native trees, grasses, etc.

Environmental

- The redevelopment should have a landscape design plan that supports the ecology of the site and is environmentally responsible.
- The redevelopment should integrate all Best Management Practices (BMPs) related to stormwater management to the highest-level standard, i.e. rainwater drains, porous pavement, rain gardens, etc.
- The redevelopment should integrate energy efficiency into building plans wherever practical, i.e. buildings oriented to the sun, solar panels, heat pumps, sustainable building design/materials, etc.

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 stormwater 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 stormwater 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 stormwater 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
The final report on the project is due in January. Preliminary results suggest that lowering the culvert to allow more tidal influence in the gully and installing a baffle box treatment on incoming stormwater could be the preferred intervention.

**Freshwater Compensation Fund**

Current balance of the fund is $231,468.

**2018 Goals**

1. Update the Report on the Freshwater Resources in the City in collaboration with Pat Cloutier and Fred Dillon.
2. Continue work on Trout Brook to help remove that waterway from the Urban Impaired Streams List
3. Continue to promote the FWCF grant program and to encourage the residents of South Portland to proactively improve the freshwater resources of our city
4. Coordinate efforts on helping the City prepare for global warming and sea level rise
5. Increase public outreach