



## Connecticut Association of Conservation and Inland Wetlands Commissions, Inc.

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### THE HISTORY OF CONSERVATION COMMISSIONS IN CONNECTICUT

"Nothing in the world is so sure of success as an idea whose time has come". With these affirmative words, the conservation commission movement in Connecticut began to evolve.

The speaker was Ward E. Duffy, then the editor of the Hartford Times, and his forum was the First New England Conference on Conservation, held at the Harvard Business School in 1960. The theme of the conference was "Solving Your Town's Natural Resources Problems". The solution discussed was the conservation commission concept, which had been developing in Massachusetts since 1957.

Duffy returned from the conference full of enthusiasm for the commission idea, and passed this enthusiasm on to a coalition of citizen leaders, including members of the League of Women Voters, conservation groups and garden clubs. They enlisted the support of two state legislators, Roger Eddy of Newington, a Republican, and Ward Pinney of Bloomfield, a Democrat. At the request of Eddy and Pinney, the Connecticut Legislature's Research Council drafted a bill that tailored the Massachusetts Conservation Commission Act to Connecticut law, tastes, and needs. The bill was successfully shepherded through the Legislature by the coalition in 1961. Under this law, conservation commissions could be established "...for the development, conservation, supervision, and regulation of natural resources, including water resources...." This goal would be accomplished by "...conduct[ing] researches into the utilization and possible utilization of land areas...." and by "...keep[ing] an index of all open areas publicly or privately owned....."

Subsequent legislation in 1963 (Public Act 490) and 1969 (Public Act 284) clarified and added to the responsibilities of conservation commissions. The 1963 act provided for making recommendations to planning commissions, if one existed,

rather than to the chief executive or legislative body. The 1969 act included supervision and regulation of resources in duties of conservation commissions, required approval of the legislative body for acquisition of land and easements and gave power to make regulations, including charges for use of land and easements.

With direction from the 1961, 1963 and 1969 legislation, the number of conservation commissions in Connecticut grew rapidly. By 1963, 34 towns had commissions; by 1970, 102; and by 1975, 152 Connecticut towns had separate conservation commissions.

Several factors gave impetus to this initial growth. The enabling legislation set broad guidelines for commission activities but gave each town discretion to form the local commission and tailor its duties according to community needs. Concerned citizens seized upon this opportunity to address environmental needs in the ways most suited to their towns.

These local efforts were aided by state support through the Connecticut Department of Agriculture and Natural Resources. Under Commissioner Joseph N. Gill, who strongly favored the commission concept, the department helped the new commissions to organize and provided them with technical assistance.

In 1963 the Connecticut legislature established a grant-in-aid program for land acquisition by municipalities. This program also aided commission growth and influence. The grant-in-aid idea was originally advanced in a 1962 document titled *Connecticut's Natural Resources - A Proposal For Action*, written by William H. Whyte for the Department of Agriculture and Natural Resources. The report stressed the role commissions could play in natural resource planning and protection, and discussed the advisability of requiring a town to have a conservation commission in order to warrant a grant. While the 1963 legislation did not require this action, it did allow for municipalities to designate the commission to make application for the grant and stipulated that conservation commissions, where they exist, must approve open space grant applications prior to submission. Thus, the law not only suggested, but also made provisions for, commission participation in open space acquisition.

In 1964, the Connecticut Association of Conservation Commissions (CACC) was formed. CACC helped educate the new conservation commissioners and provided a means of communication among them through special programs, field investigations of land use areas, circulation of movies and literature, and a newsletter, *Connecticut's Environment*. The Department of Agriculture and Natural Resources printed this newsletter and the chief of the department's Soil and

Water Conservation Division, Joseph Ward, also served as secretary-treasurer of CACC. This dual role enabled a close connection between the department, the local commissions, and their statewide organization.

In 1971, most of the state-level environmental functions were transferred from the Department of Agriculture and Natural Resources to the newly formed Connecticut Department of Environmental Protection (DEP). The Department of Agriculture became a separate agency. While there were significant changes in leadership, DEP continued to support the establishment and development of conservation commissions. Specifically DEP provided assistance in publishing the CACC newsletter, and in 1976 Elizabeth Jester of DEP published the first Handbook for Conservation Commissions.

In 1972, the state legislature passed the Inland Wetlands and Watercourses Act. The Act states; *It is hereby declared to be public policy of the state to require municipal regulation of activities affecting the wetlands and watercourses within the territorial limits of the various municipalities or districts.* The legislation allowed municipalities to carry out this policy through a commission of their choosing. In some cases, separate regulatory bodies called "Inland Wetland Agencies" were formed; in others, this power was conveyed to an existing commission. In many towns the conservation commission was given the responsibility resulting in a joint Conservation and Inland Wetland Commission/Agency.

While the 1972 legislation increased the ability of each municipality to conserve its environment, the creation of the inland wetlands agencies with regulatory mandates overshadowed the role of conservation commissions. Some conservation commissioners with technical training saw a greater need for their abilities in the inland wetlands agency and transferred out of their town's conservation commission. This loss of leadership, combined with no defined regulatory role, caused some conservation commissions to lose sight of their purpose and to stagnate. In some towns the conservation commission was dissolved for lack of leadership, focus, and community support. By 1993, only 138 of the 169 Connecticut towns had a conservation commission; 81 of these were separate, 57 were joint conservation and inland wetlands commissions. Unfortunately this disturbing development continues to weaken statewide conservation efforts. By 2001 144 towns had a conservation commission however only 74 were a separate and active conservation commissions, while 70 were joint conservation and inland wetlands commissions. Over time these joint commissions have become preoccupied by in their inland wetlands regulatory responsibilities and have little time for conservation commission duties. The 53% decline of in separate

conservation commissions (from 152 in 1975) has reduced municipal conservation oversight at a critical time when communities are experiencing significant growth in population and development.

In 1974 CACC, recognizing the need for expanded education and information services, reconstituted itself as the Connecticut Association of Conservation and Inland Wetlands Commissions (CACIWC), the name it currently holds, and began publishing a quarterly newsletter called *The Habitat*. DEP continued its support by financing the publication and distribution of *The Habitat*. However, in 1993 budgetary constraints forced DEP to discontinue this practice, a position still in effect in 2002.

Even as the role of conservation commission was declining in many communities the state legislature continued to recognize the importance of conservation commissions by passing enabling legislation to assist commissions in carrying out their responsibilities.

In 1973 Public Act 293 increased the maximum number of conservation commissioners from 7 to 11, and in 1979 Public Act 84 provided provision for alternates.

In 1993 the state Legislature increased the potential role of conservation commissions by giving them the authority to inventory natural resources, formulate watershed and drought management plans, make recommendations to other municipal agencies on proposed land use changes, and supervise as well as manage municipally-owned open space.

In 1995 an Act Concerning Greenways changed designation of the municipal Plan of Development to the Plan of Conservation and Development, and enabled conservation commissions to propose greenway plans for inclusion in such plans. The revisions in this act clarify the importance of planning for conservation at the local level and emphasize the need for the planning and conservation commissions to collaborate on the formulation of comprehensive and rational conservation plans for their municipalities.

In 1997 an Act Concerning Acquisition of Open Space Land established an unprecedented five-year open space grant program for municipalities. The program provides funding for towns with open space plans, and requires conservation commission approval of open space grant applications submitted by a town.

For active conservation commissions that have maintained their focus and momentum, the 1993, 1995 and 1997 legislative actions provide excellent opportunities. For those separate conservation commissions that had been largely inactive these new opportunities, particularly the 1997 open space funding legislation, provided a new sense of purpose, support and direction.

In 1998 CACIWC responded to conservation commission and municipal requests for assistance by publishing the Handbook for Connecticut Conservation Commissions, A Guide to the Principles and Practices of Local Environmental Administration in Connecticut. Many commissions bought a handbook for each commission member, and some municipal officials requested copies to assist them in establishing a separate conservation commission. At the same time CACIWC began efforts to promote and establish a separate conservation commission in all of Connecticut's 169 towns.

By 1999 the impact of the State's Open Space Program was guiding many towns in the direction of open space protection. This new program encouraged the established and active conservation commissions to develop open space plans and actively seek town funding to match the available state grants. In towns without a separate conservation commission municipal officials have recognized the need for leadership in open space planning and acquisition and have initiated actions to establish a commission.

In 1999 *CACIWC.org* went on-line. The primary objective of the web site is to provide an efficient and economic communication and education link for municipal commissions, and, in doing so, assist conservation and inland wetlands commissions in carrying out their statutory responsibilities.

In 2001 CACIWC published, *CELEBRATING CONNECTICUT'S CONSERVATION COMMISSIONS, Inspiration and Guidance for Local Action*. The descriptions of the 144 projects conducted by various Connecticut conservation commissions provide a guide to the imagination and creativeness of conservation commissions in raising the environmental consciousness of their communities. The projects also serve as a resource for newly activated commissions or those searching for new inspiration.

CACIWC will continue to support such efforts with direct assistance to towns and promotion of the need for separate conservation commissions.

*CACIWC Board of Directors  
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