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## Pilot Conservation Commission Circuit Rider Program

Rockingham Planning Commission

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# Pilot Conservation Commission Circuit Rider Program

A Final Report to

The New Hampshire Estuaries Project

Submitted by

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# Pilot Conservation Commission Circuit Rider Program

## Executive Summary

The purpose of this pilot project was to increase the effectiveness of the three Conservation Commissions in the Exeter River watershed. The Towns of Kensington, Kingston, and Sandown were selected based on their interest in the program and their need for professional planning assistance. Rockingham Planning Commission staff attended monthly meetings of each Conservation Commission to discuss and implement short-term and long-term projects.

The three Conservation Commissions selected two natural resource protection projects to work on with RPC assistance. The scope of these projects ranged from very basic, such as establishing a process for record keeping in Kingston, to more advanced, such as in-depth discussions on protecting wildlife habitat in Kensington and development of several land use regulations in Sandown. With just several hours of professional assistance each month, each Commission was able to complete projects that will increase their community's ability to protect natural resources.

## **Pilot Conservation Commission Circuit Rider Program**

### Introduction

For decades, the Rockingham Planning Commission (RPC) has provided professional planning assistance to municipal Planning Boards in the region. Known as the Circuit Rider Program, this service enables smaller communities with little or no paid staff to receive hands-on, technical guidance from land use and transportation planners. With development pressure increasing in every community, the RPC wanted to gauge the interest and effectiveness of Conservation Commissions in a similar service. Three towns in the Exeter River watershed were selected for the pilot project. The Exeter River is one of the tributaries to Great Bay and several communities in this watershed are projected to have the fastest growing populations in the region over the next decade.

### Project Goals and Objectives

The goal of this project was to increase the ability of Conservation Commissions to protect natural resources from the impacts of development. The objectives included:

- meeting monthly with each Commission,
- identifying their short and long-term goals,
- discussing their level of impact on natural resource protection decisions locally and in the region,
- and providing them with the tools and information needed to make more timely and effective decisions.

### Activities

RPC staff attended monthly meetings of the Kingston, Kensington, and Sandown Conservation Commissions. The first round of meetings consisted of discussions on each Commission's short and long-term goals. A summary of these discussions by town follows:

- Kingston – establishing and maintaining operating procedures per NH RSA 36-A, including the posting of agendas, recording of minutes, and maintaining files; research on funding land protection with money from the town budget, including using the current use penalty tax; increasing the effectiveness of communication between the Commission and the Planning Board; working with Friends of Kingston Open Space (FOKUS) to protect land from development.
- Kensington – meeting with landowners interested in land protection; organizing a workshop with the Planning Board on protecting wildlife habitat per the NH Fish and Game manual; developing land use regulations to protect wildlife habitat; determining a way to fund land protection locally, in addition to the current use penalty tax.

- Sandown – drafting changes to local land use regulations to protect water resources; increasing effectiveness of communication with the Planning Board regarding the review of subdivision and site plans; review of municipally owned land not protected by conservation easement; developing a process to work with developers before subdivision plans are drafted to increase protection of natural resources.

### Results and Discussion

The following projects selected by the Conservation Commissions were all begun and/or implemented with the support of RPC staff:

- Kingston – Staff sorted through 15 years of old files stored in the former Chair's garage to establish a record keeping system and library for the Conservation Commission; identified landowners of large parcels and invited them to Estate Planning and Land Protection workshops held in Raymond and Kensington; posted a meeting notice with monthly meeting schedule in the Town Hall and library; provided information on current use penalty taxes collected by other Conservation Commissions in the state; drafted a warrant article requesting 50% of the current use penalty tax for local land conservation; outlined a process for gathering support for this warrant article by residents and local boards; reviewed three development proposals and assisted with communication to the Planning Board from the Conservation Commission stating concerns with the proposals relative to natural resource protection; provided current information on the permitting of seasonal and permanent docks by NH DES on Kingston Lake; developed information on aquifers and groundwater protection for residents concerned with development activity along Rt. 125.
- Kensington – reviewed the Town's Master Plan and land use regulations to determine existing mechanisms to protect wildlife habitat; organized a workshop led by Darrel Covell of UNH Cooperative Extension for the Planning Board and Conservation Commission on wildlife habitat protection; provided sample land use regulations to increase protection of wildlife habitat; assisted with the prioritization of land for protection; discussed a process for raising local funds for land protection, including a warrant article for 2004 Town Meeting proposing a conservation bond; provided information on ATV use/abuse on Town owned conservation lands; invited identified landowners to a workshop on Estate Planning and Land Protection in the Kensington Town Hall; worked with the Exeter River Local Advisory Committee to host a vernal pool workshop in Kensington; provided information on the Federal Farmland Protection Program; worked with the Rockingham Land Trust to protect land in Kensington owned by SAU-16.

- Sandown – reviewed existing land use regulations to protect water resources; drafted a Shoreland Protection district ordinance, Aquifer Protection District ordinance, and updated the Wetlands Conservation District ordinance; invited identified landowners to workshops on Estate Planning and Land Protection held in Raymond and Kensington; reviewed land owned by the town and prioritized parcels that should be protected by conservation easement; provided draft conservation easements for these parcels; provided a list of organizations that may hold these easements; outlined a process for reviewing development proposals that would enable the Conservation Commission to discuss more effective natural resource protection measures with developers; provided information on how other Conservation Commissions in the state are using the current use penalty tax; reviewed three subdivision proposals and assisted with review by the Exeter River Local Advisory Committee; provided information on wildlife habitat protection and the role river buffers play in protecting water quality and water quantity.

### Conclusions

The Conservation Commissions and the RPC agree the pilot project was very successful and all the goals and objectives were met during the year the project was in place. The Commissions truly valued the staff support and the information and workshops provided on their behalf. RPC staff learned first hand about the kind of obstacles that prevent Conservation Commissions from being more pro-active about natural resource protection in their Town and the region. The most common obstacles, in addition to lack of time, include the lack of relevant information needed to make decisions, lack of awareness of the resources available from the RPC, state agencies, and other organizations, and lack of support from Selectmen and other local decision makers. This information will be used by the RPC to develop support programs for Conservation Commissions in the future.

Unfortunately, none of the Commissions involved in this project believed they could secure funding needed to have RPC staff support. This does not come as a surprise to the RPC given the weak funding of Conservation Commissions in general and the numerous demands on municipal budgets. However, two of the Commissions involved, Kensington and Kingston, have applied for Targeted Block Grant funds from the RPC to implement projects begun under the Pilot Conservation Commission Circuit Rider Program. If selected for funding, the Kensington Conservation Commission will develop educational materials to support a warrant article requesting a conservation bond at 2004 Town Meeting, and the Kingston Conservation Commission will use the funds to jump-start a land conservation program in conjunction with the Friends of Kingston Open Space.

### Recommendations

It would be impossible for the RPC to provide this level of assistance to every Conservation Commission in the region or even in the Exeter River watershed because of the amount of time involved and the lack of local funding. However, the Commissions have a great deal to learn from one another; in fact, the question RPC staff heard most often during this pilot project was, "What are other towns doing?". To facilitate discussion among Conservation Commissions in the region, the RPC will begin hosting quarterly meetings for all the Commissions this fall. This program will be modeled after a similar project developed by the Lakes Region Planning Commission. Two of the meetings will include a host speaker on a specific topic of concern and the other two meetings will be facilitated roundtable discussions based on questions raised at the meetings. Information gathered during the course of the Pilot Conservation Commission Circuit Rider Program will be used to develop this new project.