

Town of Stonington Conservation Commission  
Minutes of a Special Meeting held on March 6, 2023  
Town Hall Meeting Room, 152 Elm Street, Stonington, CT

**1. Call to order** - Chairman Stuart Cole called the meeting to order at 7:04 pm. Members present were Frances Hoffman, Michael Schefers, Ben Baldwin and Stephanie Hayes-Houlihan. Members RaéVen Kelly Dinwoodie and Jim Friedlander were not present. Members of the public were present.

**2. Review of Town Developments and Proposals**

**a. PZ2235SD Old Stoneridge, LLC** – *Residential Subdivision application for the creation of two lots. Property located at 111-113 Montauk Ave., Stonington. Assessor's Map 131 Block 3 Lot 6. Zone RR-80.* The CC reviewed the application on 1/23/2023 and asked for more information. A town attorney opinion letter regarding subdivision family exemptions and LLCs which discussed ownership interest in an LLC transferring between family members was distributed by town planner Keith Brynes by email. Normand Thibeault, Jr., P.E., of Killingly Engineering Associates, LLC said that the proposed transfer did not qualify for the in-family waiver under the subdivision regulation. It was noted that the property abuts the Avalonia Land Conservancy's Knox Family Farm Preserve, a rear property which has a long access easement over other land from Route 1. The historic character of the site of the Stoneridge speakeasy, its stone walls and its two circa 1800 residences was noted as worthy of investigation and possible preservation.

Mr. Thibeault said the owner does not wish to transfer an open space set aside in fee and that, in his opinion, the town is better served by the fee-in-lieu of open space due as the wetlands and steep slopes are restrictive to development, but that a 5-acre, 150-ft. wide conservation easement along the ALC land without additional public access might be an alternative. A discussion was held regarding the benefit of a set aside, without improved access, versus a fee-in-lieu of open space. Stuart Cole said this is an ideal site for an open space set aside. He said the process is that a subdivider must show the minimum 15% open space set aside and the Commission must see if it meets the requirements; the applicant may then request a fee-in-lieu of open space which the Commission might determine to be more appropriate. Mr. Thibeault stated that much of the land adjacent to ALC is wetland and thus cannot be developed and a fee-in-lieu of open space would add funds to the open space acquisition fund, a win-win for the town. He also said that in other towns a swap might be possible such as a set aside of another property, like the soccer field the owner built for the town, but such credit is not permitted.

**MOTION:** The Commission does not accept the proposed fee-in-lieu of open space and asks the applicant to present a plan for a conservation set aside, most probably as an addition to the abutting Preserve (Michael Schefers, Frances Hoffman). Stuart Cole, Frances Hoffman, Michael Schefers and Ben Baldwin voted in favor and Stephanie Hayes-Houlihan abstained. The motion passed. Ben Baldwin noted that the application had several statements needing updating such as not having been part of a previously subdivided tract, not in a flood hazard area, and a CAM application must be made and the map include the coastal boundary. Mr. Thibeault said several changes had been made at the request of the town planner.

**3. Old Business**

*f. Discussion of process for preparing and adopting new Open Space Plan* - Michael Schefers said the Town Clerk says subcommittee members can only be Conservation Commission members while all can participate. Jennifer Herbst has participated fully and may become a Conservation Commission alternate. The agendas and minutes of the Open Space Subcommittee are posted on the Conservation Commission webpage, for now. The next meeting is on 3/15/2023.

**5. New Business**

*a. Discussion of a letter in support of external funding for the creation of a riverfront park on the "Circus Lot" off Noyes Ave., Pawcatuck* – Stuart Cole said the First Selectman had asked the Conservation Commission to write a letter of support for the proposed acquisition of the "Circus Lot" and the creation of waterfront park. He read a proposed draft, included below. **MOTION:** To approve as read (Fran Hoffman, Stephanie Hayes-Houlihan). Passed unanimously.

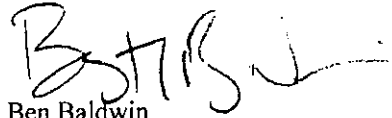
b. Carlene Donnarummo brought a 12/4/2022 new article from The Day, "Rain garden project underway," describing the Eastern CT Conservation District's work installing rain gardens and planted buffers; the Stonington sites were not identified.

c. Our contact at the Planning Department has yet to be identified. Keith Brynes will be missed.

**6. Review of draft minutes – 1/23/23 – MOTION:** To approve the minutes for the meeting held on 1/23/2023 as written (Michael Schefers, Stephanie Hayes-Houlihan). Passed unanimously.

**7. Adjournment - MOTION:** To adjourn the meeting (Stephanie Hayes-Houlihan). Passed unanimously at 8:35 pm.

Minutes submitted by



Ben Baldwin

Secretary, Town of Stonington Conservation Commission

Letter:

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Ms. Danielle Chesebrough  
First Selectman, Town of Stonington  
152 Elm Street  
Stonington, CT 06378

March 7, 2023

**SUBJECT: Letter of Support for Funding to Assist the Town of Stonington with the Creation of a Riverfront Park in Pawcatuck, CT**

Dear Ms. Chesebrough:

This letter is submitted by the Stonington Conservation Commission in support of the town of Stonington seeking external funds to help support the creation of a riverfront park along the Pawcatuck River, as envisioned in the conceptual design shared with the community in February 2023.

The "Circus Lot", the locally referenced name for the parcel of land where the future riverfront park is located, is a 5.6-acre parcel of land along the Pawcatuck River in the village of Pawcatuck. The Pawcatuck River is designated by the National Park Service as a Wild and Scenic River, and serves as a vital source of river recreation. Stretching out along both CT and RI, and finally releasing into Little Narragansett Bay, the Wild and Scenic Pawcatuck River is a natural treasure in our community.

The property is presently owned by the town of Westerly, which acquired the land when it took over the Pawcatuck Public Water System, however, plans for a production well on the "Circus Lot" are permanently shelved, which allows Stonington the right to purchase the property back from Westerly. Within the deed, Stonington retained the rights to construct and operate a park at this property if Westerly ceased using the land for its water system. Stonington is allowed to acquire the undeveloped space, with over 550 linear feet of Pawcatuck River frontage, for the deeded reverted price of \$35,000.00.

Stonington has already conducted Phase I and limited Phase II environmental testing, done a topography and wetland survey, and completed conceptual drawing of a future waterfront park. The town also has the funds to purchase the property, but requires external funding support to create enable safe and enjoyable public access to the parcel.

The purchase and then creation of a public waterfront park by Stonington would allow for the conservation and restoration of the land, while also allowing for much needed public recreation along and in the Wild and Scenic River, for current and future generations.

In the summer of 2021 the Town of Stonington, North Stonington, Westerly and Hopkinton celebrated the launch of the Lower Pawcatuck River Quad Town Canoe and Kayak Trail. This was the result of years of efforts from many individuals. Further, this would not have been possible without support from the Mashantucket Pequot Tribal Nation. One of the biggest challenges in setting up the trail, was the fact that North Stonington did not have a water access point of their own. The Mashantucket Pequot Chairman Rodney Butler, was incredibly supportive and worked with the Town of North Stonington to provide public access.

In total there are six sites for entering or leaving the river, with the option of extending one's time on the river by going the additional 5 miles to Napatree Point, and returning.

The Circus Lot would be a wonderful addition to the Kayak/Canoe Trail. It is in walking distance of downtown Pawcatuck, and across the street from a Dairy Queen. It also abuts two undeveloped lots along Route 2, which are more likely to see redevelopment if located next to a beautiful public park, instead of the overgrown, vacant lot currently.

When developed, the property offers numerous benefits and offering to residents and visitors alike. The future park envisions:

- a safe kayak/canoe put-in/take-out, with off street/onsite parking
- fishing/ riverfront viewing platforms
- picnicking features, such as tables/benches
- an overall, family-friendly, riverside park environment for people of all ages and abilities to enjoy.

For all the above reasons, the Conservation Commission voted unanimously on March 6, 2023 to approve the further seeking of funding for the Riverfront Park.

Sincerely, signed -- Stuart G. Cole

Stuart G. Cole, Chairman Conservation Commission

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Conservation Commission minutes and letter attachment approved at a regular meeting on 4/24/2023