

How Much Land to Conserve?

Submitted by Sandy Goodspeed

Conservation Commissions were created in 1963 (Chapter 36-A of the NH Revised Statutes Annotated) “for the proper utilization and protection of the natural resources and for the protection of watershed resources of said city or town.” As a member of the Epping Conservation Commission, I support conserving our land, wildlife, and natural resources, and protecting our water. I also believe Ralph Waldo Emerson (Socrates, Ben Franklin, Aristotle, Seven Sages, or Terence?) had it right: **“Moderation in all things.”** Development, better roads, and business needs are also important. So, just how much land should we conserve? The only thing I’m sure of is this: ***we must be reasonable.***

Let’s start by examining the funding of Conservation Commissions in NH. According to state law (RSA 36-A:5 I), the Conservation Fund is non-lapsing, meaning it carries over from one year to the next. For most expenditures, the Commission is allowed to spend the money by a majority vote of the Commission. Money held in the conservation fund can be used for a variety of expenses including: natural resource inventories, maps of town properties, wetland evaluations, purchase of land or conservation easements, training and education for conservation commission members and interested citizens, guest speakers and publications about conservation.

By far, the most popular source of money for municipal conservation commissions is the Land Use Change Tax, LUCT, (RSA 79-A:25). This is money paid to the municipality when land that was enrolled in the Current Use assessment program is removed from current use to be developed. The reasoning behind this investment in the conservation fund is that the money acquired when land is removed from open space is logically used to protect more open space. This makes a lot of sense to me.

If I understand it correctly, LUCT is charged at 10% of the current value at the time of the change in land use. (The value of “current use” land is based on its income producing capability solely for growing forest or agricultural crops, and not its real estate market value). That means if 100% of the LUCT income to the town is used for conserving new land of the same value, only 10% of the amount of land will be conserved. So, the question is this: is conserving land amounting to 10% of the amount of land taken out of conservation a good thing?

As of March, 2015, the Conservation Commission receives 10% of the LUCT in Epping, with a \$50,000 cap per year. That means Epping is conserving (at most) only 1% of the amount of land taken out of current use.

Does that seem like enough to you? For your information as you ponder that question, here is how much of the LUCT our neighboring conservation commissions receive as of the year noted:

Exeter, 0%

Fremont, 50%, 1999

Newfields, 50%, 1990

Newmarket, 50%, 1989

Nottingham, 100%, 2007

Raymond, 50%, 2008

As a concerned citizen and a member of the Epping Conservation Commission, I would like to hear from you. Please share your thoughts about conservation – sandygoodspeed@comcast.net.