

January 9, 2025

To: Cheshire Town Council

From: Cheshire Environment Commission

RE: Environment Commission Annual Report for 2024

This is intended to serve as our annual update to the Council regarding activities of the Environment Commission.

The Commission continues to meet on a regular basis. Only three meetings were cancelled this year, for various reasons. We lost Commissioner Tom Hickey to the new Veteran's Commission and have gained Peter Prohaska and Sean Henri. We have a full and engaged commission.

At the meetings we have been discussing the Plan of Conservation and Development, scheduling walks of town properties, and making suggestions to the appropriate authorities regarding new projects in town, including the disc golf course at Cheshire Park and the NEMBA mountain biking course at Yankee Expressway Highlands. We intend to collaborate with other Commissions on overlapping topics whenever possible.

We have been following the WPCA, their sewer map updates, and the Water Pollution Control permit violations at the treatment plant during the rainy season. The Commission applauds Dave Milano and Public Works for their "find and fix" work this year. The proof will be in the pudding when the rain returns. We see that the WPCA has updated the Town Sewer Service Area Map, and we are encouraged by its simplification, and that the changes were chiefly administrative. We plan to take one final look at the new map and then move on.

Another project of the Commission is the investigation of HOAs in town, specifically whether they remain active when the development is completed, and whether the detention ponds are maintained.

We discussed a proposed Native Plant Policy early in the year. To our dismay, we were informed in August that a Native Plant Policy would conflict with Planning and Zoning authority and therefore could not be considered. Subsequently, the Town Beautification Committee offered a Native Plant Resolution, which the Environment Commission wholeheartedly supports. The Resolution was passed by the Town Council on Tuesday, December 10, 2024. The Environment Commission also applauds the Town Beautification Committee for their Memorandum to Property Developers/Interested Parties on September 9, 2024. This Memorandum includes lists of appropriate and not appropriate plants, and locations to purchase appropriate plants. Thank you to the Town Beautification Committee for their progress on this matter.

Members of the Commission spent hours on the PoCD worksheet and were disappointed to be included in a meeting with two other Commissions requiring a lot of time. It was unfortunate that participants did not receive the completed worksheets until the day before the meeting, and it was apparent that not everyone had time to read them. We intend to resend our worksheet early in 2025 and meet again to more fully discuss the conservation section of the POCD.

The Commission frequently discussed the condition of our open space properties. A recurring issue is the uneven maintenance of properties requiring mowing. The pull-off at Fenn Road is often left unmowed, as is the perimeter trail; only the path leading to the river is mowed, apparently done by a neighbor. The Fenn property is supposed to remain a meadow, an increasingly rare habitat in Cheshire. If left neglected, it will soon revert to scrub and then forest. Boulder Knoll meadows have been mowed but trails are neglected. We are drafting proposals for addressing these concerns.

The possibility of installing a bridge over the Mill River was a chief reason for purchasing the Fenn Road property. It would give hikers the ability to park safely on Fenn Road and access the DeDominicis property without the dangerous parking on Old Lane. We are disappointed that there has been no forward movement on this and ask again that the Town Council put this item in the capitol budget.

The Commission is currently investigating a new name for the Yankee Expressway Highlands property. Attention will need to be given to the Fenn Road property name as well.

Members of the Commission have made site visits throughout the year, notably to Yankee Expressway Highlands and Roaring Brook. The visit to YEH was informative, especially for the lack of available parking on the weekend visit; it was full of mountain bikers' vehicles and Commissioners had to double park on the grass. This will be frustrating to hikers, especially once mountain biking is officially sanctioned, and for this reason we would like the Town Council to explore the possibility of additional parking for this property.

Invasive Plants and their control are another frequent topic at meetings, and slow progress is being made on this. At the May Open Space Users and Abutters meeting, EC Chair Ms. Schnitzer told all attending that volunteers could not by themselves manage all the invasive plants in town, and that the town needs to budget for this. Following meetings with John Gawlak, Parks and Rec Director, a walk-through of Roaring Brook was conducted with a State Forester in October. A report will be forthcoming that will shed light on the invasive plant problem there, with the expectation that Town Council will budget for management of those invasive species in the 25-26 budget. It is hoped that this survey by the forester will lead to an official management and maintenance plan for Roaring Brook.

Commission members have attended certain relevant annual meetings and symposiums, which have provided valued insight and education regarding conservation, the environment, and land management. These include meetings and symposiums held by Connecticut Invasive Plant Working Group, Connecticut Association of Wetland Scientists, and Connecticut Association of Conservation and Inland Wetland Commissions.

Town Manager Sean Kimball has approved the establishment of a Cheshire Trails Stewards group, which will be responsible for monitoring and maintaining open space trails and properties. This group is currently in the planning stages and will be supervised by John Gawlak, Director of Parks and Recreation, and managed by members of the Environment Commission.

The Commission extends its gratitude to Parks and Recreation and Public Works for their ongoing cooperation and assistance in the management and development of open space initiatives. Our thanks also go to the Town Council and the Town Manager, whose support has been crucial to our progress.

In conclusion, we have had a very active and productive year, and we are looking forward to an equally fruitful year ahead.

Warm Regards,

Karen Schnitzer, Chair  
And the Environment Commission

Cc: Sean Kimball, Town Manager  
John Gawlak, Director of Parks and Recreation  
Marek Kemet, Director of Engineering  
Andrew Martelli, Director of Economic Development  
Michael Glidden, Town Planner