

What's Happening Around New Hampshire

Belmont

At their town meeting this year, residents of Belmont voted to change the purpose statement of their zoning ordinances (changes in *italic*):

"In order to retain the natural beauty of Belmont, to encourage the most appropriate use of land, and to conserve its natural resources, to preserve significant wildlife habitat and habitat links and buffers..."

While this is a major achievement, it is only one part of an overall plan that Belmont is implementing, according to Town Planner Candace Daigle.

The town is currently updating its master plan, which hadn't been done in ten years. Over 50 volunteers, representing a real cross-section of the town and a variety of perspectives, are participating.

In preparing for the update, the town has been able to incorporate new thinking and terminology into the plan. For instance, "aquifers" and "unfragmented forest blocks" are terms that weren't broadly used ten years ago but are now critical concepts in land conservation planning. The town has a better knowledge base today, and there are more resources available to help Belmont apply that knowledge, according to Daigle. For example, Audubon's Carol Foss recently made a presentation on green infrastructure to the Conservation Commission.

UNH Cooperative Extension also has been very helpful during this process. Belmont made use of Cooperative Extension expertise during their natural resource inventory and while drafting their conservation plan.

The natural resource inventory is crucial to the plan. The co-occurrence maps that resulted from the natural resource inventory provide a graphic representation of where valuable natural



Tracking the movements of rare species, such as the Blanding's turtle, helps communities learn about which lands to protect for wildlife.

The Three Infrastructures Presentation

A presentation on the Three Infrastructures and Minimum Impact Development is available to the planning community and municipal officials.

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resources overlap. And things do overlap—a lot. What the inventory showed was that wildlife habitat tends to occur in areas that have other values: for watershed management, maintaining open space, or preserving community character.

Daigle cautions that there is a long way to go. The wording change is in the purpose statement of the zoning ordinance, a broad statement that identifies the reasons why a community initiates zoning. No regulatory teeth accompany this statement. However, upcoming site plan amendments, which will revise current requirements, will add strength to the purpose statement. For instance, one amendment will require that people use native plants or non-invasive plants that provide wildlife forage for vegetative buffers and screening.

Daigle goes on, "We will modify the subdivision regulations to incorporate language that identifies wildlife habitat as one of the significant features that we hope to protect."

The goal during this stage is to find as many voluntary ways to meet the purpose of the zoning as possible. As Daigle says, "Part of it is education and part allowances in our regulations."

The town has not chosen to require that wildlife habitat or any other non-regulated resources be protected by mandate.

More guidance or direction may come with the master plan update, which is not yet completed.

This whole process began when Jeff Marden—a member of the Planning Board, as well as a hunter and outdoorsman—suggested the language change for the zoning regulations. Marden is on several of the master plan subcommittees and is familiar with wildlife habitat and its importance.

As Daigle says, "This is one small part of what the community is trying to do. It is a significant acknowledgement—part of a mindset to maintain what we feel is the true community character of Belmont while realizing that growth is inevitable."

For more information on this project, go to www.belmontnh.org.

PHOTO BY LAURA DEMING