

## **Report of the Montpelier Conservation Commission for the City of Montpelier Year 2009 Annual Report**

The Montpelier Conservation Commission (MCC) is charged with advising the City Council, the Planning Commission and other city officials on issues concerning Montpelier's natural resources and engaging residents to protect and enhance the City's natural environment. This year's highlights are described below:

### **EnvisionMontpelier**

The Conservation Commission continued as an active participant in EnvisionMontpelier, a long-term, visionary planning project designed to lay the groundwork for strategies and activities that will contribute to Montpelier becoming the country's first sustainable state capital. Several Commission members participated on the Natural Environment Committee to establish goals relating to air & climate, land and soils, biodiversity, food, water, energy, waste management and education which resulted in a Draft Community Action Plan. The Commission continues as an active participant in the planning process as the City moves forward with revisions to the City Master Plan.

### **High School Students join the Conservation Commission**

Montpelier High School students Liam McSweeney and Devon Brownlee served as the first student representatives on the Commission following City Council approval of the Conservation Commission's request to allow two high school students to join as members of the Commission. The students were active participants in meetings and brought their perspective to deliberations about a variety of issues. They were particularly involved in the EnvisionMontpelier effort to plan for a sustainable future for the City of Montpelier.

### **Addition to Hubbard Park**

The Conservation Commission took the lead in applying for funding from the Vermont Housing and Conservation Board (VHCB) to purchase a ±9 acre parcel that abuts Hubbard Park. The parcel is located very near to the Park Director residence, office and workshop, and includes portions of key trails that follow the perimeter of the park. Purchase of the property will permanently protect these important trails and provide a buffer between the park buildings and adjoining private land. The VHCB grant paid for ½ the purchase price and ½ the cost of a survey of the property. The Commission provided an in-kind local match by voluntarily conducting the fieldwork to identify the boundaries of the new parcel and preparing a Baseline Documentation Report required by VHCB. The balance of projects costs were provided by the Montpelier Conservation Fund. The Conservation Fund was created after a petition effort by coordinated by the Conservation Commission and subsequently approved by Montpelier voters to create a dedicated fund for conserving lands and waters within the City for agricultural, forest, wildlife, recreational or natural area use.

### **Riverbank Enhancement**

Restoration activities continue along the banks of the city's rivers. A group from the International Volunteers for Peace pulled invasive bush honeysuckle along the banks of the North Branch of the Winooski in North Branch River Park and planted several hundred trees. Many of the recent riparian plantings on the banks of the Winooski near the bike path on the edge of the high school playing fields have been heavily impacted by beaver activity, especially along the Winooski. The Commission is considering ways to control this activity or provide for more armoring of the young trees stems. A meeting to solicit comments from the general public is planned for early 2010.

### **Community Gardens**

Two new community gardens were created under the supervision of Americorps/VISTA member Katie McKinstry with assistance from Parks Director Geoff Beyer. The gardens are both located on private land: a narrow parcel along the south side of one of the buildings of the new Vermont College of Fine Arts (VCFA) and a plot located off Easy Street (near the intersection of Towne Hill Road and Upper Main Street). The International Volunteers for Peace provided much of the manual labor to prepare the beds, add soil amendments, install fencing at the Easy Street site, construct tool sheds at both sites and install benches and playground equipment at the VCFA site. The Commission hopes these will be just the first two of many "community garden parks" to be established in residential areas around the City. The Commission especially wants to thank Katie for all her hard work on this and other conservation related projects and wish her the best she goes on to pursue graduate studies in water resources at Yale.

### **Upper Winooski Basin Planning**

The Conservation Commission has been an active participant in the on-going Upper Winooski Basin Planning effort. This stakeholder-driven process has brought together a range of interests including conservation commission members from all of the towns in the upper Winooski, advocates for natural rivers, supporters of small-scale hydropower, fishermen, and interested community members. The goal is to create a plan to guide watershed-wide project implementation that includes potential projects in Montpelier. Issues such as flood control, recreation, and habitat preservation exemplify the diverse topics addressed in the basin plans. The Commission supported geomorphic assessments that have been conducted on most of the river reaches within the city limits. These assessments will be used to update and complete vegetation management plans for the Winooski, Dog, Stevens, and North Branch Rivers.

### **Sabin's Pasture**

Commission members have played an active role in the on-going stakeholder efforts led by Trust for Public Land, the City Council, and the Zorzi/Aja family to reach an agreement on a proposed plan of conservation and development for Sabin's Pasture. An Act 250 permit application was filed by Trust for Public Land and a preliminary ruling was issued in 2009. District Environmental Commission #5 is awaiting submittal of engineering plans, details for the stormwater management, and required state permits prior to issuing a final ruling. These documents are anticipated in the future under an application amendment.

### **Montpelier Growth Center Designation**

The Conservation Commission provided input and expressed concerns regarding the City's initial application for Growth Center Designation. In a letter to Director of Planning and Community Development Gwen Hallsmith and a follow up meeting, the Commission expressed strong support for the overall growth center concept, but was concerned that the growth center application process failed to account for the natural community inventory and associated mapping that the City had invested in as a means of better understanding its natural assets. The growth center boundary included several locations identified in the natural community inventory that the Commission believes should be targeted for conservation. As a result of these discussions, the natural community inventory and map was added to the Growth Center application materials and the application also identified ways the City would ensure protection of those areas in any subsidized development that occurs as a result of the Growth Center designation. The Vermont Downtown Board approved Montpelier's application for Growth Center status in August. The Commission is committed to monitor any future developments within the growth center boundary to ensure that areas of high biodiversity are recognized and protected. Full text of the Commission's letter to Planning Director Hallsmith is on the Conservation Commission page of the City website.

### **ATV Access to State Lands**

The Conservation Commission stated its opposition to the Agency of Natural Resources' (ANR) proposal to open state lands to recreational All-Terrain Vehicles and drafted a letter to Washington County Senator Ann Cummings, who serves on the Legislative Committee on Administrative Rules that reviewed the ANR proposal, encouraging her to oppose this rule. The Commission outlined serious concerns about ANR's failure to properly study and plan for management of the environmental impacts associated with expanded ATV use, especially at a time when ANR lacks staff to accomplish its core mission, let alone manage ATV use on public land. The Commission was pleased that the Legislative committee voted to object to the Agency's rule by a unanimous bi-partisan majority of 7-0. Though the rule was formally adopted by the Agency of Natural Resources, the Commission expects that this decision will be challenged in court and may be taken up by the full Vermont Legislature. A full text of the Commission's letter to Senator Cummings is posted on the Conservation Commission page of the City website.

### **Community Workshops**

The Commission plans to sponsor increased educational programming in 2010 on natural resource related topics for its members and members of the Montpelier community. The Commission will conduct a spring training with a field component on invasive exotics, or non-native plants. In partnership with the Nature Conservancy and the Vermont Invasive Plant Committee, a "Wise on Weeds" workshop will provide residents with technical advice on identifying, removing and reducing invasive plants and seeds from natural areas, gardens and landscaping. In June, the Commission will co-sponsor a workshop with Vermont Coverts and the Vermont Department of Fish and Wildlife on natural communities. Vermont Coverts is a non-profit organization dedicated to educating landowners about improving wildlife habitat through proper forest stewardship. The Commission welcomes suggestions from the public on other program offerings that can benefit the residents and their environs.

Commission members, alternates and liaisons during all or part of the year included Geoff Beyer, Erik Esselstyn, Christopher Hilke, Roy Schiff, Kris Hammer, Karen Freeman, Anthony Iarrapino, Bill Finnegan, Devon Brownlee, Liam McSweeney and Katie McKinstry. The Conservation Commission is an active group of enthusiastic Montpelier residents who are eager to assist the City in protecting its valuable natural resources. The Commission meets at 7:00 pm at City Hall on the second Thursday of every month. All meetings are open to the public. For more information contact Kris Hammer at 223-0577 or [kris@vlt.org](mailto:kris@vlt.org). We welcome the participation of each and every resident.

Kris Hammer, Chair  
Montpelier Conservation Commission