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What Must a Conservation Commission Do?

Municipalities are creations of the State and may act only as authorized by state legislation. The New Hampshire Revised Statutes Annotated (RSA) are therefore the authority to consult on the powers of conservation commissions. Additional responsibilities may be given to a commission by local ordinance, but these responsibilities must be consistent with the powers delegated by state statute.

RSA 36-A authorizes towns to establish conservation commissions and lists their specific responsibilities, plus additional activities which commissions may, but need not, undertake. The statute directs every conservation commission to:

1. "... conduct researches into its local land and water areas ..."

This charge is integral to virtually every activity of a commission, since one can hardly make a recommendation on the proper use or protection of natural resources without knowing what those resources are.

2. "... seek to coordinate the activity of unofficial bodies organized for similar purposes ..."

An issue is more likely to be resolved or a project undertaken if all concerned can agree on the scope of the problem or project and the desired outcome. A town meeting or city council bombarded with requests from groups of citizens with different proposed solutions to a natural resources concern is less likely to solve a problem than one approached by several groups with one solution in mind. A conservation commission, as a part of municipal government, is in an ideal position to assemble representatives of concerned groups in order to develop mutually satisfactory goals.

3. "... keep an index of all open space and natural, aesthetic or ecological areas ... all marshlands, swamps and other wetlands ..."

The word "index" conjures up visions of 3x5 cards and file boxes - not necessarily the best way to organize information about natural resources. The objective is an organized, written compilation of the various resources of a municipality. The most useful form for such an index is a map showing the location of various features accompanied by a written description of the resources by category, e.g. bodies of water, scenic overlooks, etc. describes how a conservation commission might go about preparing such an "index".

4. "... keep accurate records of its meetings and actions ..."

Minutes are required. Because a conservation commission is a public body, it must comply with RSA 91-A, the Right To Know Law, which requires public meetings, posting of meeting notices, and timely availability of minutes.

