Can Agritourism, etc. Help Cornwall's Farms?

Two years ago a Cornwall resident went to the Planning and Zoning Commission (PZC) to get a permit for a farm stand. Permission was granted, but not to sell products raised or produced elsewhere. The applicant was disappointed and PZC began to question whether this regulation fulfilled its mandate to help farms and business in town.

Meanwhile Anna Timell, PZC member, had been learning about agricultural regulation changes proposed in other Connecticut towns to promote new farm business ideas.

Cornwall's PZC uses the 10-year Plan of Conservation and Development as its primary planning guide, a document that places a high priority on protecting farmland while supporting “development of appropriate forms of farming consistent with the changing nature of farming” today.

With this mandate in mind PZC has written, edited, questioned, and labored over new agricultural regulations with the goal of making it easier for farms to be viable in Cornwall. Across New England, towns are trying to adjust regulations to allow “agritourism” activities such as harvest dinners, breweries, bucolic wedding venues, etc. However, farms need to function primarily as farms, so “incidental uses” such as these need some form of oversight, particularly since farms exist in residential zones. The basic purpose of a farm cannot change, so if weddings, for example, become popular and therefore the main source of revenue, is it still a farm?

PZC has to consider the impact of new accessory uses on public safety and the neighbors. PZC must maintain its oversight responsibilities, but some view the special permit process as cumbersome and expensive.

Under proposed new regulations, additional accessory use will need a plot plan including parking, but not a special permit. Permission will be granted, or not, by the zoning enforcement officer. Also in the regs is a limit on the number of certain activities, for example weddings are capped at three before the farmer has to undertake a special permit process with PZC.

The official responsibilities of PZC are to make sure the town is safe, protect land values, as well as “to preserve and protect farmland and promote farming.” If the new regulations do not require a special permit or public hearing, how will neighbors and the community be able to share their views or concerns?

The concerted effort to try new things to bring vitality to our town is critical. Also, according to PZC Chair David Colbert, the commission’s role “is to weigh the interests of all residents.” Citizens are welcome to weigh in about proposed changes to the regulations at a public hearing to be held at the June 12th PZC meeting at 7 p.m. at the library. The proposed farm regulations are posted on the Cornwall website.

—Emilie Pryor

Future School?

The future of the Cornwall Consolidated School should come a step closer to being decided at the next public meeting on Thursday, June 7, at 6:30 p.m. at CCS. Attendees of previous community meetings brainstormed various ways the school could keep its doors open in the face of continuing decreased enrollment. Now it’s time for some sort of consensus. Regional School District 1 Superintendent Dr. Pamela Vogel and Assistant Superintendent Lisa Carter will facilitate the June meeting, where community members will be asked to take a step back, rethink their options, and vote on different configurations the school might take in the future.

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Options likely to be explored include sharing school space with a nonprofit, local business, day care, elder care, or becoming a magnet school. Once a plan has been agreed upon, according to Cornwall Board of Ed Chair Catherine Tatge, further meetings in the fall would discuss how to implement the new direction.

—Meg Tasey

Septic or Anti-Septic?

A well-attended May 8 meeting of the Water/Septic Study Committee, led by Todd Piker, created an opportunity for invited guests from the Torrington Area Health District (TAHD) and the state DEEP’s Water Planning and Management Division (WPMD) to answer questions submitted by residents on the proposed water/sewer system for West Cornwall. More than 30 questions were submitted in advance.

Many in the audience were not in favor of the project either because of the $4 million price tag and/or the imposition of a treatment facility on the river bank. Asked why the town should spend such a large sum when TAHD had no record of present violations, TAHD deputy director Tom Stansfield and sanitarian Cathy Weber explained that TAHD does not mandate proactive measures, such as state-of-the-art sewer systems. It responds to health crises, say an e coli outbreak linked to infected wells, or pursues complaints and ensures that problems with old systems that are grandfathered in are fixed. Although effluent from septic systems in the central part of the village is seeping into the river and may be contaminating adjacent wells, health officials would not mandate remediation unless acute health issues came to their attention.

A single monitoring well drilled near the covered bridge by WMC Consulting Engineers for its study revealed high levels of bacteria, which may also be in the wells of some residents. Human alimentary systems, however, can adapt to increased bacteria, so residents may not be aware of contaminants in their water. Testing a well is a resident’s choice rather than a TAHD mandate.

Spending money on a proposed sewer system would be a proactive decision by the town for reasons of expanding economic development or preventing future issues of possible contamination, looking ahead to the next five, ten, or 20 years. However, Ann Straut from the state WPMD stated that her agency was “not driving where this goes.” Her expertise helped clarify many questions about the river’s health as well as the complicated issue of a possible “brownfield” left from previous industrial use of the site proposed for the plant.

Once any ground is broken in a contaminated area, cleanup is mandatory. Various industrial activities have taken place on the bank in years past that may have left pollutants. Phase one of a brownfield investigation, which has yet to be conducted, would follow the paper trail of historical and commercial records to learn what substances were being processed there. Phase two would involve digging into the soil to see what, if anything, can be found that needs to be removed or neutralized before the treatment facility could be built.

The experts were in agreement that the engineers’ proposed facility is expected to be state of the art and to function reliably and odor-free. Of course, they could not guarantee the final results.

The Water/Septic Study Committee will be convening its final meeting June 19. It will be the responsibility of the Board of Selectmen to decide how to proceed from there.

—Bill Goulet & Elisabeth Kaestner

Cornwall’s Homegrown Music

The radio, the phonograph, and now the internet make us think of music as something that comes to us from somewhere else, but people have gone on making their own music with family, friends, and neighbors. It’s nothing special, just people pulling out guitars or fiddles or voices singing old songs learned at mother’s knee or new ones from the guy on the corner. Cornwall’s had plenty of it over the years. Still does.

Lorraine Choiniere Hammond, nationally known folksinger, teacher, and song-writer, grew up amid Cornwall’s ballad singing, the soaring voice of Comfort Flanders in the 1940s and 1950s and are recorded by Vermont ballad collector Helen Flanders. Oscar Degreenia’s unaccompanied ballad singing, the soaring voice of Comfort Starr’s fiddle, and the cheerful pluck of Pat and Biddy Bierce’s mandolins were part of the soundtrack of my childhood.”

Some of Oscar Degreenia’s songs were recorded by Vermont ballad collector Helen Flanders in the 1940s and 1950s and are part of Lorraine’s performance repertoire.

In another trace of Cornwall’s past music, Harriet Soulé recalled “the neighborhood Sunday night sings in the long front room of the [Scoville] farmhouse. When we were all seated, with Mrs. Hedden at the piano, the well-worn 1886 Gospel Hymns were passed around. They might have been heard a mile away.”

But Cornwall’s homegrown music is not just something of the past. Still, the Homegrown Band was inspired by Lorraine’s homecoming performances and conducts a monthly contradance in the town hall. Cornwall Bridge hosts a regular sing with guitars and banjos. Yelling Hill often earns its name with sings and jam sessions.

This summer many Cornwall residents will be showcasing this music. The UCC church choir in Cornwall village will sing some of those Scoville farmhouse hymns on June 17 and in early July the Cornwall Historical Society opens its exhibit, “Ballads and Barn Dances: The Homegrown Music of Cornwall.” August events include a kids’ contradance and a third homecoming concert for Lorraine and Bennett Hammond. Check the Chronicle for details.

—Jeremy Brecher

Bats, Fish, and Bridge Repair

After Labor Day, the Covered Bridge is scheduled to be closed for an estimated one month for rehabilitation. The project consists of exchanging laterally oriented timber decking for longitudinally oriented glued laminated wood deck panels (cleverly nicknamed glulam by the Connecticut Department of Transportation), as well as replacing damaged overhead timber truss members. In addition, complete replacement of the underside steel lateral bracing and reconstruction of the roadway approaches and drainage improvements are planned.

The rational Cornwallian might ask: “Why commence such a project at the height of the tourist season and a prime time of year for West Cornwall businesses?” The answer is: blame it on bats, fish, and the weather. Protected bat species reside in the bridge. State regulations prohibit construction projects from March 1 through July 31 where bats dwell. The bats may roost in the cracks and crevices of the masonry abutments under the bridge or within the wooden structure itself. Construction activ-
There are also construction restrictions to protect spawning fish in the river below. Project work is also limited during the winter months because essential construction materials such as concrete and the adhesive for placement of the glulam panels are temperature sensitive and require installation above certain minimum temperatures. Thus, November might be possible if the weather is mild, but should it turn cold, the work would have to cease and the bridge could be closed for the winter.

The glulam deck system will reduce the frequency of maintenance and better protect the steel deck plate that supports the wood planking from moisture that tracks into the bridge from vehicle wheels. The only difference that drivers should notice when travelling through the bridge is that the slapping of the loose planks will be gone. According to First Selectman Gordon Ridgway, the contractor, Mohawk Northeast, renovated the bridge on Lower River Road in record time. Construction time estimates often resemble gambling at roulette, but the contract contains incentives to help ensure timely completion of the project. If the bridge closure is not completed within the time frame outlined, Mohawk will be assessed liquidated damages, which are a monetary estimate of the harm caused by the delay.

Though there will be detour/business open signs for going to West Cornwall, the closure of a major artery will have an impact on the West Cornwall economy. Sean Aylmer, proprietor of Pearly’s, hopes to have developed enough of a loyal following that they will use a detour to come to the café. He also believes Pearly’s will attract the workers on the bridge rehabilitation for breakfast and lunch. —Jim Fishman

Pottery Store Moves Home

When one door closes, another opens. This old adage is fitting for Cornwall Bridge Pottery and its owner Todd Piker. His retail store in West Cornwall opened in 1984. For nearly 10 years before that Todd and apprentices sold pots directly from the pottery on Route 7 in Cornwall Bridge.

Wood firings happened often, resulting in a whole array of lovely, useful pots. “My interest, supported by my father’s good business instincts, was to produce a pot that people could use every day—something cheap enough for most to buy and use, but still personal and nice to look at. When we began, credit cards were just beginning to be used somewhat widely. Retail sales among artisans were almost unheard of. The decision to move the store was complex, but it was the right thing to do,” mused Todd.

Now, 38 years later, that door has closed. The “new” Old Pottery still sits on the hill along Route 7, totally refurbished and almost rebuilt. Open to one and all, its doors lead into a small but uncluttered showroom. Behind that is the production area, and the wood and gas kilns sit out back. Wood firing for Todd has slowed, and gas firings have increased over the last few years. “Wood firing results in some extraordinary pots, but it’s very labor intensive. With the advent of more internet sales and wholesale orders, I have to rely on gas firing,” his co-worker Jordan, who also makes his own line of pots, “wants to use the wood-fired kiln more often.”

Todd and decorator David Bean produce the pots sold on site and through internet sales that have grown exponentially. “We saw the transition coming—and are marketing to that reality, while still welcoming new and old friends.”

For Todd Piker and the Cornwall Bridge Pottery, it’s clear you can go home again. Though never really having left the pottery, the “new” CB Pottery has found itself settling back into its roots. Meanwhile, the old storefront waits patiently for its new owners, James and Idella Shepard of the Cornwall Country Market in Cornwall Bridge. Having purchased the building to prevent yet another West Cornwall storefront from going residual, the Shepards regret that the current septic situation in West Cornwall prevents them from opening a “Cornwall Country Market West.” But they have signed a long-term lease with Housatonic Hairworks and plan to subdivide the old pottery side into two separate storefronts, front and back.

“Ideal tenants could include a natural food store, vintage antiques, clothing, or even furniture, and the floor plan will allow two public restrooms and space upstairs for either offices or studio space. Interested parties are welcome to reach out to us!” Their biggest concern right now “is the resolution of the septic issue facing West Cornwall. How that is solved will control just how far we can go.” —Jane Bean

Congratulations Students & Journalists!

Kudos and best wishes to the 2018 graduates of Cornwall! Since the July Chronicle will be a Youth Edition written and edited by Cornwall’s young people, it will include our customary list of student graduates from middle and high school and their future plans. Please send any information about Cornwall graduates from schools other than CCS and Housy via email to saccardi22@gmail.com.

—The Editors

Letters to the Chronicle

ART@THE DUMP WRAP UP
Forty-six artists participated in this year’s Art@TheDump. Work ranged from altered books to fanciful mobiles. Pieces from March’s Kids’ Recycled Workshop graced one wall. Sales totaled over $3,000; one of the best years yet. Thanks to the Cornwall Association for financial support and to the road crew for tidying up the shed.

First place in the “People’s Choice Awards” went to Lori Barker for her mixed media entries; second to Christopher Hayes for fused glass; and third to James Hackett for welded sculptures. Thanks to Aaron Pequignot for making the trophies.

—Art@TheDump Committee

IDEAS WANTED

The Economic Development subcommittee is updating the Cornwall Town Plan and would like input from Cornwall residents. Send us your thoughts on suitable economic development for Cornwall and how to make the town more inviting to new businesses. Letters should go to Anna Timell at 278 Cornwall Hollow Road (atnevermorefarm@gmail.com) or James Laporta at 195 Great Hollow Road (laportaj@yahoo.com), both in West Cornwall.

—Anna Timell, James Laporta, Co-chairs

CORNWALL MAPPED

Good news: the map, Cornwall, CT Active Roads, 1991 (11x17), created by Bob Beers and Tom Beans, is still in print. Copies are for sale ($5) at the historical society and the library.

—Ginny Potter

CVFD Count

3 motor vehicle accidents
2 fallen power lines
1 false alarm
1 water rescue
2 smoke removals
4 mutual aid calls to neighboring towns
14 emergency medical calls

Cornwall Briefs

• More bridgework. The town has solicited bids for rebuilding the Smith Place and Gravel Bank bridges over Mill Brook. Opening bids are due June 4, with contracts to be awarded June 15.

• Cornwall taxes will likely rise some 4 percent after voters approved the budget at the May 18 town meeting. Also approved: new docks at Hammond beach (cost $35,000, paid from Gates Bequest), purchase of a replacement grader used for leveling the town’s 12 miles of dirt roads (cost to be paid from town reserves).

—Paul De Angelis
THE CHRONICLE NEEDS YOUR SUPPORT

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