

Conservation panel commits to working with the Town Council on deer problem

By Sam Bari

The Conservation Commission at its Sept. 13 meeting discussed its commitment to working with the new Town Council to establish a pro-active position on the issue of deer overpopulation and herd management.

A Sept. 5 memorandum addressed to the Town Council from Conservation Commission Chairman Chris Powell said: "On several occasions, after considerable research, we have recommended strategies for managing our ever-increasing deer population. However, in every instance these efforts were met with emotional opposition and as a result nothing has been done to effectively manage our expanding deer population."

The memo went on to note that Powell attached two memos that were sent to the previous Town Council outlining the commission's most recent efforts and recommendations. The document also noted that the commission has initiated an educational strategy to better inform island residents about deer and their potential impact to the island's flora and fauna.

A July 22, 2004 memorandum summarized the urgency of the situation: "It is our opinion that the longer we put off the tough decisions the larger the deer population will become. The population is already at three times the recommended carrying capacity and it is estimated that without intervention that the current deer population on

the island will double or triple again in the next several years. The problems associated with an exponential increase in the numbers of deer have been well documented on Block Island, Prudence Island and in many communities across the country, where herd health has deteriorated and widespread habitat damage has occurred. These problems are: Increased vehicle strikes, a drastic increase in the incidence of Lyme disease, loss of habitat for other wildlife species, and starvation and death of deer that have outstripped their food resources."

The concluding paragraph of the same memo said: "We realize that the issue of deer management is one that provokes strong emotions and controversy from caring conservation-minded members of the community. Ecologically, however, there are no predators to maintain natural balance, and the unchecked overpopulation of deer is detrimental to the health of the herd as well as the rest of the island flora and fauna." The document also stated that, "Experience from other communities in the state has shown us that we must act swiftly and appropriately in order to avoid a more difficult, irresponsible and unfortunate situation in years to come."

Powell also said, "The problem is complex, and no solution will please everyone. We hope that educating and informing residents of the island about the gravity of the situation will take some of the emotional response out of

the equation. But we can't sit back and do nothing. Not taking a proactive position on the issue is inhumane for the herd, and will adversely impact the environment as well as the residents of the island."

In other business, John Somyk represented himself in his request to address the commission concerning a wetland setback and variance for a home he is building at 401 Seaside Drive. The Planning Commission already approved the application. During his presentation, Somyk asked for a recommendation for a variance of setback of 25 feet from freshwater wetland to present to zoning. He reduced the 1,846 square feet of original impervious coverage down to 1,698 square feet with a footprint of 1,100 square feet for the two-story, three-bedroom dwelling. The state Department of Environmental Management set septic fields and wells. After the presentation and discussion, the commission recommended that he have a conservation easement to protect access to the bay. The vote to recommend approval for a variance with a recommended buffer of 50 feet to protect bay access was unanimous.

The commission also approved invoice for \$125 for the trimming of trees and bushes on the Kit Wright Nature Trail.

Powell also reported that the Conanicut Island Raptor Project is progressing as planned with school students helping with tracking the birds.



Moonrise

The recent full moon reflects off of Great Creek. The Newport Bridge can be seen in the distance.

Photo by Barbara Dickinson

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