CONSERVATION BOARD
February 27, 2024
Hybrid

Present: Gian Dodici (chair), Bob Beck, *Steve Bissen, *Anne Clark, Jeanne Grace, *Kate McKee (alternate), Andrew Miller, Nancy Munkenbeck, Craig Schutt, Tim Woods
Liaisons: *Spring Buck (Town Board)

"*" denotes attendance via Zoom

The meeting was called to order at 7:01 p.m. No minutes from the January meeting were available for review.

Report: EMC

S Bissen reported that he had been out of town for part of the EMC meeting, so he had nothing to update.

Report: Rail Trail Task Force

B Beck shared his frustration and impatience with the progress of the bridge construction, as there have been many back-and-forth discussions between lawyers. As of a week ago, the surveys still needed to be approved by the DOT in Syracuse; once approved, the project will go out to bid. Hopefully, this won't go out too late, so that construction can occur this year.

B Beck also mentioned ongoing negotiations with Bellisario regarding the trail through his property. In early December, the Task Force finally got approval for a permit from the Army Corps of Engineers to get through the wetland beneath the Bellisario embankment, minimizing the impact to the wetland (to approximately a half-acre). Once through there, the next hurdle is to get across the Heidelberg Materials property in order to get to Pinckney Rd. He continued that the Task Force then needs just one more easement to get to Etna (Leonardo property, between Pinckney Rd and 366).

When questioned about the possible use of eminent domain, B Beck responded that no final decision has been reached about this. We have not ruled it out, but it would be an absolute last resort if employed. We want to work with our neighbors to get the trail built. T Woods countered that there are some people who do not want their land to be used for the trail. B Beck understood this but anticipates that the trail will be built out in its entirety.

Report: Agriculture Advisory Committee

C Schutt had nothing to report, as the Ag Committee did not meet in February.

Report: Town Board

S Buck reported that she had no report for the Town Board but did meet with Rick Young. She now has a list of planned roadwork locations for 2024 that she will distribute to Board members. She suggested that the Board identify critical areas that they could provide advice on ahead of time.

She also mentioned undertaking a tour of Lower Creek Rd with Rick Young to inspect the ditches mentioned at last month's meeting. Of these, he explained to her what they did and the challenges that they have run into over the years to keep the water moving without having the road get flooded. She relayed that he is open to feedback from the Board. The location itself

is difficult to manage, as there is a limited amount of space to utilize. During rain events, the water comes up over the road, so in trying to manage that, there are concrete inserts that go into a concrete trench. They have used stone infill to try to slow the water down, a type of rock that does not roll so that it slows the water down without getting washed away. S Buck did not know the frequency of such flooding.

S Buck added that R Young would also be absolutely happy to conduct tours for the Conservation Board; just contact him.

G Dodici looked forward to seeing the list of planned roadwork locations. Should the Board have any follow-up questions, they will reach out to S Buck as a liaison with R Young to coordinate a meeting.

S Buck also conveyed the Board's interest in engaging with the DRYC as they look at the use of the space north of Town Hall. She thought that there might be a great educational opportunity to have a demonstration area there that showcases pro-pollinator plants and sustainable-focus plantings.

Report: Climate Smart Communities Task Force

On January 18, 2024, The Town Board authorized the Climate Smart / Clean Energy Communities Task Force to conduct a community campaign for clean heating and cooling (Resolution 37 [2024]), allowing the Task Force now to go forward with the publicity for this initiative to encourage clean energy installation.

A Clark updated the Board on the Climate Smart Communities Task Force's new clean energy campaign to encourage the installation of air-source heating, air-source water heaters, and geothermal water heaters. If they get enough people to install such systems, they become eligible for more higher-level NYSERDA grants, which will help with their goals of weatherizing the DPW building and other projects that lessen dependence on fossil fuels.

This is being undertaken in cooperation with Cornell Cooperative Extension (CCE), who are on record as saying that they can help those wanting to install such systems with the paperwork for state funding assistance. In fact, they encourage residents to do this, as the paperwork is a little onerous; CCE is ready to help, and they know exactly how to help.

A Clark emphasized the importance of filling out a survey by those who have installed such systems since June 2023. The survey aims to show that 10 heat pumps have been installed within Town limits, which would qualify them for a grant of $10,000; notice of 25 installations would qualify the Town for a grant of $20,000. CCE has made the form municipality-blind in the hopes that they can use the same form throughout the Cooperative Extension system in an effort to get more municipalities on board with clean energy installation.

She went on to say that there was discussion about the possibility of homeowners showcasing their installations to inspire others, although there was some uncertainty due to the specter of COVID-19.

T Woods added that on February 13, the Climate Smart Communities Task Force hosted a two-hour workshop with Jerry Sheng (Climate Smart Communities Coordinator, Cornell Cooperative Extension Tompkins County) on preparing Dryden for extreme weather events (flooding, extreme heat, drought, etc.) caused by climate change. He was in attendance, as were B Beck and N Munkenbeck, and was surprised at how many people there did not know how the Town and County handled weather extremes and disasters. J Sheng will compile the notes drawn up by the participants into a master document; participants will reconvene to

discuss the results about how extreme weather events are handled and how the populace would be affected. Everyone knew a little bit about a variety of topics; by sharing this little bit with each other, everyone got educated. A Clark built on this, stating that the workshop also earned Dryden more points with NYSERDA by getting people together to talk and plan.

Board members then discussed their past experiences with droughts and snowstorms.

To end her report, A Clark mentioned that members from both the Conservation Board and Climate Smart Communities Task Force attended the pollinator pathways presentation back in December 2023. Following that, the Dryden High School Sustainability Club decided to create a pollinator-friendly garden at the school, with Brandon Hoke (Tompkins County Environmental Council) as an advisor. She suggested that the Board interface with the Sustainability Club on the topic of continuous pollinator pathways, land that facilitates pollinator movements and connections. She feels that some of the ditches that do not need to be ditched could serve such a purpose.

T Woods has been talking with local farmers over the past few years, about the disappearance of bird species that populate open field and hedgerow environments (e.g., pheasants, meadowlarks, turkey poults). A Clark acknowledged this, saying this is due to the modern farming practice of utilizing every inch of a field rather than leaving breaks. She highlighted the importance of maintaining fields for bird populations, mentioning the success of fields given to the Wetland Trust, which now has meadowlarks regularly nesting in them.

This reminded S Buck of a discussion from a previous meeting, regarding DPW mowing an area north of Dryden Lake too early. She and R Young found a location from two years ago that was mowed early at the request of the Town and Village to create parking for some sort of event, but she needed clarification from the Board that this was in fact the location that was at issue. S Buck will send around a map to ensure they are discussing the same location.

On the topic of educating people, N Munkenbeck thought that Dryden Dairy Day would be an opportune time to have a presence. The Dryden High School Sustainability Club could explain pollinator pathways and things that could be planted, which usually are native plants.

T Woods asked about the status of the Dryden Lake Dam. C Schutt responded that, as of last fall, DEC hoped to make a decision about it (concerning design and future plans) this year. S Buck promised to gather more information about the dam for next month's meeting.

Briefly returning to pollinator pathways, G Dodici wondered whether the funds for the seed were coming from grants, as seed and site prep for pollinator establishment are expensive. A Clark responded that she did not know but will inquire.

As an advisor for the elementary school's Garden Club, K McKee would be interested in connecting with the high school's Sustainability Club to possibly collaborate on a pollinator-friendly garden and pathway. She stated that the Garden Club has collected a fair amount of money from the annual rummage sale that they run. With grants, a combined project could be interesting. A Clark praised the gumption of the two student members of the Climate Smart Communities Task Force and thought they would welcome the contact and the possibility of extending their efforts into other Dryden schools.

Report: Owasco Lake Watershed Management Council (OLWMC)

A Clark reported that she missed their last meeting, but they continue to monitor for HABS and for nitrogen and phosphorus inputs. Thus far, she has not encountered much that the Board can really interact with. However, stream monitoring is one of the things that they are very keen on and do quite carefully. Should the Board be interested in monitoring, say,

ditch inputs into streams and stream inputs into lakes, she feels that the OLWMC would be pretty happy to discuss such actions with the Board.

G Dodici said that Community Science Institute (CSI) does a good job of water quality monitoring for Dryden, so we have data. We just need someone to go through the data and look for patterns. He looks for patterns in salt levels to see if salt content has increased over the years due to the amount of road salt being put down, but there does not appear to be any indication of that from the data.

A Clark hopes to work with Grascen Shidemantle (Executive Director, CSI) in monitoring the headwaters of Owasco Inlet (on Hile School Rd) for algal growth during the warm season.

S Bissen added that Six Mile Creek is one of the cleanest waterways around and serves as a benchmark for all other streams in the area in regard to water quality. G Dodici reasoned that this is because there is no farming; it is all horse pastureland, and the horses are fenced in. A Clark contrasted this to the Owasco Inlet headwaters, which lies at the intersection of an organic dairy farm and another farm.

New Business: Regenerative Agriculture

T Woods sent a letter to Marc Molinaro, our Congressperson, encouraging him to look into regenerative agriculture, as he serves on the House Ag Committee. Though he has yet to receive a response from Molinaro, he hoped that the Board could discuss it more among themselves. He would like to compare the benefits of regenerative ag with the industrial processes currently employed in New York State. Regenerative ag is very conservative farming. It builds soil instead of destroying it. It is not heavily dependent on petrochemicals like most ag is today.

He wants the Board to advocate for more public education on the subject, more funding opportunities similar to what has been discussed with other projects, incentives for farmers to get off heavy government subsidies, and to talk about the drawdown power of regenerative ag to get rid of the legacy load of carbon in the atmosphere.

A Clark asked what crops in the area would be vocal enough to get people to switch to the regenerative agricultural model. T Woods referenced the book *Dirt to Soil* by Gabe Brown, a North Dakota farmer who saw increased profits and productivity after transitioning to regenerative farming. In comparison, those surrounding farmsteads that still utilized standard farming methods were having trouble making money due to heavy soil depletion, heavy erosion, lots of wind damage, and the input costs for topsoil year after year after year.

Given that the huge majority of ag in New York State is dairy and feed crops, those would be the farmers that the Board would want to talk to regarding regenerative farming's assets of less overhead and less petrochemical input (fuel, power herbicides, pesticides, etc.). From an economic standpoint, we might be able to get some of them to transition such that they make more money getting off the subsidies for feed crops.

N Munkenbeck pointed out that three dairy farms (Becks', Shermans', and Dedricks') are located within the municipal limits of the Town of Dryden. She then contrasted North Dakota with Dryden, specifically in that monoculture is utilized in North Dakota whereas the Dryden farms practice rotational cropping and no till drill. T Woods asked about the profits under their current approach, to which was given the answer: "They're making enough money to keep going. If they could make more money doing something else, they would."

N Munkenbeck further conjectured whether there was something else at play in North Dakota. If the one is successful and the others are not, what is going on? People talk to each other. If somebody's doing really well, they tend to do that. She wondered what was going on in the minds of the neighbors who are witness to the guy that is doing well.

T Woods has talked to local dairy farmers who have just gotten off the subsidies because they have relied on them for so long. It is tough to stop using GMO seed because of how Monsanto operates that. There is indeed a fear factor over doing something new and over the lead time needed to get things going. (The Shermans found that the two years it took to transition to organic were rough.) Those are all reasons to not do it, but what about the environmental reasons (e.g., residues that build up in the soil or that are in your product, which then get into the human system). They don't have an answer to that. They also do not have an answer to the tillage and bare ground throughout the year; a lot of this will oxidize, releasing carbon into the atmosphere, and they are not being held responsible for that.

C Schutt differentiated between the local dairy farmers, saying that the Shermans, who are organic, make many passes on their fields for weed control; they spend a lot more money on fossil fuel as a result. The Becks practice minimal tillage; they do not make a lot of passes on the ground.

Though she believes in the overall direction of regenerative agriculture, A Clark emphasized the need for localized solutions, as well as incentives to assist farmers through their transition. She then asked if there were any model regenerative ag farms in upstate New York. T Woods knew of one, Tom Brown's off of Salt Rd; he has been practicing regenerative hay farming for over 20 years. His 6-foot-round wrapped bales, certified organic, are a high demand product among the Amish in Lancaster County, and they are willing to pay for the quality.

N Munkenbeck mentioned the success of Trinity Valley Farms, who had relinquished their organic certification due to cost, yet continued to prosper because of customer loyalty, a gift shop, and a bake shop. They also bottle their own milk and use a methane digester to power their dairy barn.

G Dodici asked members what the Conservation Board could specifically do to encourage regenerative farming in the Town of Dryden. Ideas included the identification of successful local regenerative agriculture farms and possible tours of their facilities, as well as a booth at Dryden Dairy Day to educate the public. G Dodici is very supportive of this. C Schutt suggested they talk with Dryden Agriculture Advisory Committee.

G Dodici thought that the Ag Committee might be the best venue for continued discussion. He added that if members had detailed questions about regenerative agriculture, to send them to T Woods or to the USDA. He asked T Woods to put something together that the Board could promote but drew the line at going out and selling regenerative agriculture at, say, state fairs; there are professionals doing this already. Though general public outreach is important, the real target audience is the agricultural community, the producers in the Town of Dryden.

N Munkenbeck suggested implementing requirements within the Town that incorporate sustainable agricultural practices into new solar projects. Grazing sheep is most common, though, in Europe, hay is also used; currently, the growing of crops on solar sites is being studied.

T Woods opined that, as much as the Board embraces the efforts of the Climate Smart Communities Task Force, nothing they do will draw down the historic load of carbon from the atmosphere. Most of the projects they undertake cut down on the production of CO_2 and

pollutants, but they do nothing to draw down what is already there and sequester it into the soil's natural carbon cycle. Regenerative agriculture is the only process that will do that specifically.

N Munkenbeck offered that it might be useful to connect with people who can actually measure the effects of carbon sequestration because there is money for that. Someone from Cornell (potentially a grad student) could be our resource person and head an evaluation team that would evaluate local soil samples over the years to prove that things are being regenerated (via increased mycorrhizal numbers).

T Woods added that Cornell Ag, as a department, is heavily subsidized by USDA and the US government. He also mentioned that early last year, Cornell Cooperative Extension began some regenerative agriculture projects.

G Dodici advised T Woods to send around a list of jobs and should anyone want to volunteer to help him out, they could sign up.

J Grace pointed out that none of the Board members have big dairy farms, none are taking the economic chance to switch to something new. To go to a big dairy farmer and ask them to switch based on the fact that we watched a documentary or read some books is not going to convince them to switch. That advice coming from someone who has already changed their farm to regenerative agriculture would be more meaningful to someone who is currently farming than Conservation Board members knocking on their doors.

There being no further business, on motion made by G Dodici and seconded by N Munkenbeck, the meeting was adjourned at 8:50 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Loren Sparling
Deputy Town Clerk