

A

CONSERVATION PLAN

FOR

OLD SAYBROOK,

CONNECTICUT

November, 1967

A Conservation Plan for Old Saybrook, Connecticut

YOU ARE CORDIALLY INVITED TO

AN INFORMATION MEETING ON

BREATHING SPACE FOR COMMUNITY LIVING

AND DISCUSSION OF A

NATURAL ENVIRONMENT PLAN FOR OLD SAYBROOK

ON MONDAY EVENING, NOVEMBER 13th AT 8 O'CLOCK

AT THE KATHLEEN E. GOODWIN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

OLD BOSTON POST ROAD

There will be a panel composed of members of the Planning, Park
& Recreation, and Conservation Commissions.

GUEST SPEAKER: Mr. Allen H. Morgan
The noted photographer and authority on natural resources

Old Saybrook, Connecticut

November, 1967

To the Board of Selectmen, the Planning Commission and the people
of Old Saybrook:

Here is a general plan for conservation in Old Saybrook, prepared
by your Conservation Commission, established in 1965.

Its purpose is to serve as a guideline for protecting a portion of
the natural assets which make Old Saybrook a good place in which to
live. It is not our intent to limit the growth of the town. Rather it is to
suggest a framework of natural areas and green spaces around which
this growth might be channelled. From this base, a series of specific
recommendations will follow.

Fair consideration of this first report and thoughtful discussion
of it could help crystallize the Town Development Plan which we so
urgently need. Explosive unplanned growth brings an explosive rise
in the mil rate. Wise community planning can help steady the mil rate
and keep Old Saybrook the attractive town we know. Decision is needed
NOW.

Much can be accomplished with your active participation and
support. Working together we can maintain the important human values
of our town. We'll be happy to have your comments and suggestions.

OLD SAYBROOK CONSERVATION COMMISSION

Mrs. Robert H. Sherwood, *Chairman*
Richard D. Tietjen, *Vice Chairman*
Christian Fenger, *Treasurer*
William G. Luke, Jr., *Secretary*
Daniel F. Flynn
Mrs. Donald P. Gregory
Garrison N. Valentine

In 1960, the population of Old Saybrook was 5,274 souls, or more than double the 1950 population of 2,499. In 1960 it was estimated that there might be as many as 11,000 people living in Old Saybrook by 1980. The present growth rate, if continued, will result in a population far in excess of 11,000 in three more years, or by 1970. As the Town contains something over 11,000 acres, including beach, marsh, and the waters of the Connecticut River within its boundaries, this means that by 1970 there will be slightly over one acre for every man, woman and child in Saybrook.

Not bad? Well, certainly not good, when you consider, first, that this represents a reduction from an average of five acres per person 15 years ago, and secondly, that the total town area must be reduced by more than 5,000 acres of water, cemeteries, industrial land already occupied, and other unusable land, the deduction of which results in a per capita acreage of under one-half acre instead of our one acre figure. So our "country" town suddenly takes on an urban aspect.

It seems appropriate that any consideration of the use of land, tidal, and water areas of the Town of Old Saybrook should proceed with the recognition that we are now, and always have been, a rural residential community. There are now 11 corporate industrial enterprises in the Town. The other commercial activities are chiefly oriented towards serving the needs of a residential or summer transient population. They can be grouped into retailers for family needs and demands such as markets, drug stores, automobile sales and repair, hardware and the like; entertainment facilities including restaurants, clubs, motion picture theatres; tourist facilities like motels, marinas and yacht service facilities. All of this points to the inescapable fact that modern Old Saybrook is a place where people *like* to reside.

And why not? Our town is uniquely blessed with a happy combinations of assets. We occupy approximately equal shorelines of sandy, saltwater frontage on Long Island Sound and tidal marsh and deep-water mooring space on the Connecticut River estuary. Saybrook is

endowed with ample historical significance as the fourth oldest Connecticut town (1635), and impressive evidence of this past in its fine old houses and shade trees. Small wonder that despite its rapid recent growth and new highway connections, it remains one of the most attractive and sought-after residential areas in the state. Small wonder that it has become one of the most important and profitable summer resorts on the Eastern Seaboard. Of course we can change all this if we wish. If in becoming "a crossroads of southern New England", we solicit industry and commercial enterprise beyond that considered absolutely essential to our economy and tax structure, or if we simply sit back and let raw economics take its course, then we can, indeed we shall quickly convert Old Saybrook into a crowded, bustling, dirty, noisy city.

In short, we would have a highly effective commercial center but highly undesirable place in which to live. While no doubt feasible and profitable to some, such a conversion would seem to be a thorough waste of an area so perfectly adapted to the residential requirements of today, namely the peace, quiet, recreational opportunities, rapid commuter linkage with metropolitan areas, and retail support of domestic needs.

The basic premise of this document, therefore, will be that Saybrook is a town ideally suited for residence. The basic goal of your Conservation Commission is to keep foremost in the concerns of the Town the needs of the people of today and of those who will inherit what we leave them for tomorrow.

Present Status

What is the present land use situation? An inventory of Old Saybrook total acreage reveals the following:

Urban (including 600 acres of highways)	3,045 acres
Woodland	4,780 acres
Open or agricultural	490 acres
Marsh	1,160 acres
Water (interior)	200 acres
Water (North and South Coves, Conn. River)	1,725 acres
Total	11,400 acres

Observe that by subtracting from the total acreage the urban and water areas (result = 6,430 acres) and dividing by population, the one-half acre of open land per capita in 1970 is derived.

Of the above-mentioned open land, it is estimated that over one-half consists of poorly drained, shallow or bedrock soils and tidal flood plain unsuitable for building, primarily from the sewage disposal point of view. This same land is, however, of inestimable value to recreation, preservation of natural resources, and view control. Without detriment to the economic development of the Town, therefore, over 3,000 acres of land, some in big pieces, some in tiny isolated parcels, could remain in its present natural state.

The present ownership of our 6,430 acres of open land is as follows:

1. Publicly owned 594 acres
2. Private open lands — likely to remain open for
some time 85.6 acres
and
3. Private open lands — future uncertain 5,750.4 acres

If nothing is done about encouraging the most beneficial use of these lands, it is apparent that the biggest proportion of them will be subject to forms of development not necessarily in the best interests of the Town.

Available Measures

There are several tools already at hand which may be used to conserve, protect and insure the enjoyment of natural areas within our town. They are:

Zoning: This is an established way to control the use of land within the Town according to an overall plan of development calculated to meet the needs, and suit the best interests, of the Town, in lieu of the otherwise haphazard growth which can destroy land values. Zoning ordinances have been in force in Old Saybrook for many years. Unfortunately, zoning is so responsive to development pressure that it cannot, alone, do the job indefinitely.

Private restrictions: Private landowners can legally restrict the use of their land in various ways even when transferring it to others. Thus an individual who might want to maintain the rural nature of his land either for his own benefit or for the public can insure this for long periods of time, even after his death or after he has sold the property. But not every individual is motivated to do this; many of us would rather sell land at a profit regardless of the use to which it might be put.

Tax reductions: Many landowners who would otherwise be in favor of holding their land in its natural state feel they cannot afford the tax burden of doing so. One of the incentives offered under the new "open space" legislation in Connecticut is the re-evaluation, on application, of all land designated "open space land" on a town plan of development, to its current use value without regard to the more intensive use of adjacent land. Further the tax burden can be eliminated entirely by placing the land in trust ownership with use rights reserved to the owner, or by transferring the land to the Town itself with the owner's use reserved for him.

"Open space" program: In 1963 Connecticut passed legislation enabling towns to designate areas as "open space land," and by doing so to gain access to federal and state funds which can meet up to three-quarters of the land purchase price. This legislation does NOT give a town the power of eminent domain, nor is it a zoning statute. It DOES open the door to funds, and makes available a tax reduction to the landowner if he applies. Especially important, it places no restrictions on the landowner's use of, or power to sell, his land. Green space areas can be so designated by the Planning Commission upon recommendation of the Conservation Commission.

Building and sanitary codes: These act to insure that structures, particularly residential dwellings, are erected in a safe and sane manner, that they are not "built upon sand" or upon land so badly drained as to result in overflowed septic tanks and wet cellars. Such codes protect the home owners against shoddy building practices; they also protect the land from over-development. Old Saybrook has not, yet, enacted any regulations of this type.

Recommendations

The Commission recommends to the people of Old Saybrook that immediate steps, both public and private, be taken to protect our natural heritage from helter-skelter development. Specifically, we urge:

1. That the following areas be designated by the Planning Commission as open spaces on the Development Plan of Old Saybrook:

- a) *wetlands* (marshes) with particular attention to Beamon Creek, Plum Bank and Back Creek, Oyster River, Ragged Rock Creek, Ayers Point, Hagar Creek and Mud Creek.
- b) *beaches*, meaning the present Town Beach, plus such land as the Town may designate as additional Town Beach, within the limits of its ability to purchase.
- c) *greenbelts and parks*, including all public land now designated or in use for recreation (such as the Dibble tract, so called) as well as the Fort Site Park. Consideration should also be given to maintaining a portion of the privately-owned "Town Woods" as a greenbelt along the Middlesex Turnpike.
- d) *watersheds*, being a narrow band around and including all ponds and streams.
- e) *high ridges* where composed of badly drained soil (U. S. Soil Conservation Service Class D-1 or below).

The Commission will review the Town's land use on a continuing basis and make additional recommendations from time to time to the Planning Commission.

2. That the Town appoint an historic district study committee as a necessary preliminary to the formation of a town historic district commission under Public Act 430 (1965). The Conservation Commission can, and should, participate in the preservation of the historic landmarks in our Town, but machinery exists to create a commission whose sole purpose will be to devote itself to this important task.

3. That the Town take full advantage of the technical know-how and coordinated planning now available to it as a member of the newly established Estuary Regional Planning Agency, as provided for under Connecticut General Statutes Sec. 32-7. By working closely with our neighboring towns in the lower Connecticut Valley, we can join in a broader development plan reflecting our common interests and in a broader conservation plan for keeping our environment attractive.

4. That a sizeable addition to the Town Beach be acquired at the best obtainable price to help satisfy the Town's growing needs.

5. The enactment of a fair and well-considered building and sanitary code at the earliest possible date.

In Conclusion

The preservation of open space is nothing more than the recognition that undeveloped land is not wasted or unused land, but rather an essential breathing space in a crowded world. As such it is as much a part of development planning as, say, the allocation of industrial areas in a zoning plan. The Conservation Commission is pleased to note the spirit of advanced, enlightened development-planning already well-established in our town government. The interest in regional coordination shown recently is an example. We pledge ourselves to respond to both public and private conservation planning needs; by disseminating information, by continuous study of conservation problems, by working with other Town boards and commissions in their planning efforts, and by translating these plans into action wherever possible.