

# Conservation Advisory Council Town of Hillsdale, NY

David Lewis, Chair  
Amy Davidsen  
Mary King  
Gretchen Stevens

## MINUTES CAC MEETING, 20 MARCH 2025

The meeting was convened at 7:00pm at the Town Hall. David, Amy, and Gretchen were in attendance (Amy by phone); Mary was absent. Jamie Carano Nordenstrom (Town Council liaison) was also absent.

### Approval of Minutes

The February minutes were approved with edits.

### Old Business

#### **Water Testing**

David spoke to Jake Gardner of the New York Rural Water Association about free water testing for the town. Jake reported that the NYRWA works with the NYS Department of Health which has obtained a grant from the Center for Disease Control (CDC) for water testing for municipalities. If Hillsdale were to obtain NYRWA services for water testing under this program, the DOH would determine where to do the testing. David will talk to Mike Dvorchak about whether we should pursue this. Jake may have additional knowledge about funding sometime in April.

We still do not know whether or when water testing was completed at the three town buildings, and what were the results.

#### **Paving Memo**

At their 18 March meeting, the Town Council decided in favor of chip sealing Texas Hill Road, Appletree Lane, and Stonehill Drive. The CAC memo in response to Richard Briggs's request was not submitted in time for the meeting. We decided to tighten the draft memo and add an upfront abstract or summary. Once finalized, we plan to send the memo as soon as possible because it includes information and ideas that will be relevant to future decisions about road maintenance and paving.

#### **Planning Board Cases**

Gretchen reported on the Planning Board's review of the Gellert subdivision project on Whippoorwill Road and the Berk project on Ridge Lane. Both are still in process. The CAC had submitted a preliminary report on our preliminary site visit to the Berk parcel (attached).

### **CAC Web Page**

Robina told David that she will be overhauling the whole town website, and does not want to fix the CAC web page until that overhaul is complete.

### **CAC position**

We have received no applications for the open CAC position. A person who had expressed interest in the position to Mary decided against applying. David agreed to post an announcement on the community Facebook, and Gretchen agreed to draft a press release for The Columbia Paper.

### **Hazard Mitigation**

The Columbia County Multi-jurisdiction Hazard Mitigation Plan is out for public review until 15 April. Gretchen agreed to write a piece about it for the Hillsdale town newsletter, encouraging Hillsdale residents, landowners, and businesses to review the plan and submit comments.

### **Vision Statement for Comprehensive Plan**

We will review Amy's draft statement in time for the April CAC meeting.

### **Culvert funding**

Amy spoke to David Orr, the Director of the Cornell Local Roads Program (CLRP) which hosts the New York State Local Technical Assistance Program Center (NYS LTAP). NYSLTAP-CLRP provides training, technical assistance and information to municipal agencies responsible for the maintenance, construction, and management of local highways and bridges in New York State, including questions about CHIPS funding.

David said that CHIPS funding can be used for culvert replacement and suggested that the Town should consider using CHIPS funding over other grant funding, as it is more certain. To date, Hillsdale's CHIPS funding has been used for other road maintenance work, but culvert replacement could be prioritized. Amy agreed to draft a CAC letter to the Town Board about this. Hillsdale's 2019 Road Stream Crossing Management Plan, which identified four highest priority culverts and many others for replacement or removal, makes us eligible for certain grants for culvert replacement. Page 19-20 of the report lists the possible funding sources, including CHIPS, and pages 21-20 lists the four priority culverts. Gretchen agreed to look into the availability of grants from the NYS Department of State and the Hudson River Estuary Program.

### **Open Space Plan**

Gretchen will send the current draft of the Open Space Plan to Amy, and will try to complete the next draft for CAC review soon.

### **New Business**

We discussed no new business.

## **Adjournment**

The meeting was adjourned at 8:24pm.

## **Action Items**

- David:           --Post the CAC position announcement on the community Facebook page.  
                  --Talk to Mike Dvorchak about using NYRWA for pilot water testing program.
- Amy:             --Draft memo to Town Council about CHIPS funding for culvert replacement
- Gretchen:       --Draft press release for the CAC position  
                  --Explore NYSDOS and HREP funding for culvert replacement  
                  --Draft article about the Hazard Mitigation Plan for the Hillsdale newsletter  
                  --Revise and shorten the paving memo  
                  --Complete the next draft of the Open Space Plan  
                  --(carried over) Prepare note to CLC about stakeholder input to the Columbia Co  
                  Conservation Plan  
                  --(carried over) Ask CLC and FEP for possible referrals for the CAC position.
- Mary:            --(carried over) Submit regular reports to the Town Council about EMC activities.
- All:              --(carried over) Review the draft vision statement for the Comprehensive Plan.  
                  --(carried over) Obtain sign-in codes from David for the CAC calendar.  
                  --(carried over) Review Amy's draft memo to the Town Council requesting a 2026 budget  
                  line for the Comprehensive Plan update.

# Conservation Advisory Council Town of Hillsdale, NY

David Lewis, Chair  
Amy Davidsen  
Mary King  
Gretchen Stevens

## Berk Parcel, Ridge Lane Report on Preliminary Site Visit

9 March 2025

### **Background**

On 21 February 2025 the Conservation Advisory Council (CAC) visited the 23-acre Berk parcel near the north end of Ridge Lane. We did not tour the whole site, but focused on the areas of proposed disturbance. The day was cold (20s °F) and the ground was covered with ca. 8 inches of snow. This report describes our observations, some of the conservation issues around development of this site, and some preliminary recommendations.

This is a forested parcel at the top of the Taconic Ridge and entirely within the Hillsdale Ridgeline Overlay District and the Taconic Mountains Significant Biodiversity Area. The parcel is drained by a small stream that flows southeastward to the Green River.

A ca. 250-foot-long driveway and a ca. 1/10-acre house site had been cleared. We were surprised to find a well standpipe and an electrical meter already installed. The house site is on a small, gently-sloping shoulder from which the land slopes away more steeply to the northeast, east, and southeast. The clearing is bordered on three sides by forest, and on the southeast by a ca. 0.3-acre shrubland. The summits of distant hills were visible over the treetops to the southeast.

The house is visually obscured from Ridge Lane by local topography, and does not appear to be visible from other public roads. If so, the Berk project may be exempt from Planning Board review according to §245-31A(5)(b) of the Hillsdale Ridgeline Regulation. The Planning Board must determine the visibility before deciding whether to continue their review of the project.

The parcel has a medium-age deciduous forest dominated by sugar maple and white ash, with most overstory trees in the range of 10-20 inches diameter at breast height (dbh). Other common tree species were red oak, black oak, white oak, black cherry, and black birch. Large white pine (36+ inches dbh) and eastern hemlock (20+ inches dbh) were present as individuals and in small groves. The shrub layer had seedlings and saplings of the overstory trees, along with American hornbeam, Japanese barberry, multiflora rose, maleberry, and meadowsweet, with sweetfern along the edges of clearings. Non-native invasive shrubs (multiflora rose, Japanese barberry) were present in patches but not abundant. Large standing snags in various stages of decay were common.

## **Conservation Issues**

### Large Forest

The Berk parcel lies within one of the largest forest areas in Hillsdale, part of a Regionally Significant Forest of over 6000 acres (CP&EA 2020). It has been identified by The Nature Conservancy as part of a Forest Linkage Zone that links the largest forest patches in the Northeast and is thus important for maintaining regional ecosystem health, ecological connections, and travel corridors for wildlife (Anderson et al. 2016). Figure 14 in the Hillsdale Natural Resources Inventory (CP & EA 2020) shows the large forest areas and linkage zones. The Berk parcel is also within the Taconic Mountains Significant Biodiversity Area (SBA) designated by the NYSDEC for its large forests, support of rare species of plants and animals, and support for water resources in lowland areas. The forests of the Taconics are considered among the highest quality northern hardwood forest communities in the Hudson Valley region (Penhollow et al. 2006). The intention of the SBA designation is to alert landowners, developers, municipal agencies, and other land use decision-makers to the potential for impacts to ecosystems and water resources, to guide planning, environmental reviews of land development projects, and to promote conservation and stewardship of lands in and near these areas (Stevens and Travis 2018).

Forest fragmentation is the most significant threat to the Hudson Valley's forest ecosystems (Strong 2010). Driveways, roads, and clearings intruding into the interior areas of forests invite the intrusion of non-native invasive plant species, nest predators and brood parasites, and cause a host of other disruptions. The ecological effects of lights, noise, wandering pets, contaminated runoff, spread of non-native invasive plants can extend long distances into the forest, and render large areas no longer suitable for the plant and animal species that depend on the special habitats of the forest interior (Environmental Law Institute 2003).

### Light Pollution

The Taconic Mountains are an important corridor for migrating birds that take advantage of the thermal air currents and updrafts to propel their flights. Birds are drawn to night lights along their migration routes and often become visually entrapped in the lit area, circling the lights and depleting their energy needed for migration and putting them more at risk of colliding with buildings and infrastructure. Night lights also disorient, entrap, or kill a wide range of other organisms. Lights can reduce reproductive success of birds and amphibians, disrupt communication between animals, and interfere with predator-prey relationships. Lights are very disruptive to the wildlife that depend on darkness for hunting and shelter. Light pollution has been associated with huge reductions in insect populations, and is a significant contributor to catastrophic worldwide insect declines.

## **Discussion and Recommendations**

The cleared house site on the Berk parcel is a modest size and is within 200 feet of Ridge Lane. If the clearing is not enlarged, the house would be closely surrounded by forest and shrubland and have a viewshed extending only to those nearby habitats. This appears to be a responsible location for a house on this parcel, minimizing the fragmentation of the forest and minimizing impacts on the viewshed.

If the project is subject to further Planning Board review, the CAC looks forward to reviewing the eventual site plan. In any case, our initial recommendations are the following:

- Minimize additional tree-cutting for construction of the driveway, house, and yard.
- Keep the driveway as narrow as possible and maintain a closed canopy to reduce the fragmentation effects on the forest.
- Minimize outdoor lighting and use motion-activated, shielded, and directed downward (instead of outward or upward), and use insect-friendly light technology. LED lights that are filtered to be yellow or amber attract many fewer flying insects than blue or ultraviolet lights.
- Minimize the area of windows and use other architectural measures to reduce the amount of light pollution reaching into surrounding habitats.
- Leave the forest undisturbed as much as possible. Maintain standing snags, downwood, and all layers of the forest structure (ground layer, shrubs, understory, and overstory) to support the full complement of forest biological diversity.
- If removing non-native shrubs, use mechanical means instead of herbicides, and disturb the soils as little as possible. Disturbed soils are an invitation to further infestations of non-natives.

## References

- Anderson, M.G., A. Barnett, M. Clark, J. Prince, A.O. Sheldon, and B. Vickery. 2016. Resilient and connected landscapes for terrestrial conservation. The Nature Conservancy, Eastern Conservation Science, Eastern Regional Office, Boston.
- CP&EA. 2020. Town of Hillsdale natural resource inventory. Report to the Town of Hillsdale. Community Planning and Environmental Associates, Berne, NY. 201 p.
- Environmental Law Institute. 2003. Conservation thresholds for land use planners. Environmental Law Institute, Washington, DC. 55 p.
- Penhollow, M. E., P. G. Jensen, and L.A. Zucker. 2006. Wildlife and habitat conservation framework: An approach for conserving biodiversity in the Hudson River estuary corridor. New York Cooperative Fish and Wildlife Research Unit, Cornell University and New York State Department of Environmental Conservation, Hudson River Estuary Program, Ithaca, NY. 139 p.
- Stevens, G. and K.B. Travis. 2018. Columbia County natural resource inventory. Columbia County Environmental Management Council and the Columbia Land Conservancy. Hudson and Chatham, NY. 291 p.
- Strong, K. 2010. Town of Hillsdale habitat summary. Report to the Hillsdale Conservation Advisory Council. Hudson River Estuary Program. 15 p.