

Getting Started: Environmental Action In The Community

Helpful Guidelines To The Creation Of An Environmental Conservation Commission In Your Area; A Bright Future Foreseen.

by Charles C. Morrison, Jr., Director, Office of Community Assistance

EXPERIENCE with existing conservation commissions has turned up a few basic pointers which will help in getting properly established and in paving the way for successful operation.

Your commission should be established by local law, rather than by resolution. The reasons for this are set forth in the first part of the article, and the model local law by which this can be accomplished is available from the Department of Environmental Conservation. You should have this in hand when you go to your local legislature to request establishment of the commission.

1. Also have a carefully prepared slate of candidates ready when you go to your local legislature to ask for the creation of this agency. The first rule for the success of a new commission or council is to be sure that people are appointed who are willing to work. Much more is involved than attending an occasional meeting. Members should be prepared to spend several hours a week, or more, on environmental conservation work, in addition to meetings. Commissions carrying a lot of "deadweight" obviously will not get much done.
2. The commission should have a balanced membership, representing various viewpoints toward conser-

Part one of this article, which appeared in the December-January issue of THE CONSERVATIONIST, gave the background which led to the present concept of Environmental Conservation Commissions. This new approach to environmental conservation action in the community coordinates the efforts of a concerned citizenry, formalizes and strengthens the programs on a local level and establishes a working bond which brings technical assistance and direct financial aid to localities from the State. In part two the author, basing recommendations on experiences of existing commissions, gives helpful suggestions to those embarking on formation of a commission, and views the future of this dynamic approach to the solution of environmental problems.—Editor

vation issues and including men and women of all ages. The younger generation should be represented adequately as specified in the State laws.

3. If possible, every member should have some special skill to contribute.
4. Contrary to what might be expected, experience in various commissions has shown that those with a professional (governmental) interest in local affairs often are not the best ones to include in the membership. At best representatives from other official agencies have divided loyalties and at worst they

may represent opposing interests. This is not to say that such people cannot be very helpful but only that their "expert" views should not dominate commission affairs.

5. There is no point in creating a commission whose membership is comprised of the same people who are on all of the other local committees and commissions. The creation of an environmental conservation commission offers an opportunity to infuse a vital new element into local government.
6. A commission may want to have "associate" members, people who assist as volunteers and who then comprise a body of experienced persons from which future commission members can be drawn.
7. Work should be divided equally among all the commission members. A committee structure should be developed for this. A chairman who tries to do everything by himself usually ends up with an ineffectual commission.
8. Effective commissions meet at least twice a month, not counting subcommittees, with an occasional emergency meeting in addition.
9. Commissions may start off slowly—educating themselves about their community and its problems, about conservation issues, about how oth-

er commissions have achieved success in other places, and so forth. Some commissions have "gone underground" for as long as a year.

10. A new commission should recognize that a period of public education about the issues probably will be needed. Conferences, seminars, speak-ins, as well as opinion surveys and general surveys of community environmental conditions, are among the tools to be used vigorously in these early stages. A well-planned publicity campaign will help. Assume a "clearing-house" role for environmental information in the community. Work with the power structure and in the schools.
11. Commissions that don't take precautions to properly advise and keep in close touch with the local legislative body are in trouble. Commissions should remember that the elected representatives of the people alone hold the power to govern. All the other agents of government hold power only by extension. Don't be a "runaway" commission. (And this does not mean that a commission has to be meek and subservient. Heated, but rational, public controversy is one way of resolving an issue.)

12. Good working relationships should be established with other groups and agencies in the community, taking care to explain the commission's purposes carefully and asking for their direct assistance and involvement. Allies should be sought not only among public agencies, but in community service clubs, business and industrial organizations, conservation and planning groups, youth groups, etc. Planning agencies, the Cooperative Extension Service and the Soil Conservation Service can be particularly helpful.
13. Maintain close liaison with the regional offices of the Department of Environmental Conservation.
14. When the groundwork has been laid thoroughly, the commission should zero in on a specific project of a highly "visible" variety—one which may be concluded successfully at an early date. This will give the commission a feeling of accomplishment and it should build its reputation for action.
15. A few commissions have recovered from unsuccessful starts. But it is much easier to make a good start in the first place.

(The above suggestions are adapted in part from *The Conservation Leader*, March, 1969.)

The Movement Is Spreading

The local environmental conservation commission idea is spreading. All of the New England States have them now. New Jersey and New York are into it. The movement has leap-frogged to California. It is going so fast that the statistics in a definitive book on the subject, published in 1969, already are out of date.

The Commissions are getting support from State government now in most of these States, usually in the form of technical assistance and promotion. In the case of Massachusetts, the program has received impetus by using the commissions as a vehicle for grants-in-aid for wetlands, natural areas and open space acquisition.

So far, New York apparently is the only State that has passed legislation authorizing direct State financial aid for council operating expenses at the county level and it seems to be the only State which has been so specific about the total environmental quality responsibilities of the agencies at all levels of an interlocking city, town, village, county and regional structure. All of this is very much in keeping with the major reorganization of New York State's total environmental control efforts, as is the requirement for county or regional environmental plans and status reports.

Private conservation organizations of a statewide character are giving support to the local commissions, too. Perhaps the most significant development in this area is the emergence of statewide associations whose membership is comprised of the local councils and commissions themselves. This type of unifying mutual self-support complements that which can be provided by the State. Steps toward creation of such an association are expected soon in New York.

The idea of establishing an agency within local government for environmental overview and advocacy is not one which must be copied everywhere in one "correct" fashion. Rather, it is an idea which can be adopted to a diversity of local needs. And it is an idea whose time has come. Do you have one in your community? (For additional information and assistance, contact the Department's Office of Community Assistance in Albany.)

Middletown urban beautification project.



The Conservationist is an official publication of the N.Y.S. Dept. of Environmental Conservation, published every two months at the Department's office, Albany, New York 12201. No advertising accepted. Subscription rate \$2 per year. Special rate of \$1 per year for subscriptions received by a primary or secondary school in New York State, or at such schools by teachers. NO STAMPS PLEASE. Second Class postage paid at Albany, New York. Additional entry office at Poughkeepsie, N.Y. Printed in U.S.A. POSTMASTER (Re undeliverable Second Class matter): Please send form 3579 to THE CONSERVATIONIST, Albany, New York 12201. © 1970 by N.Y.S. Dept. of Environmental Conservation.

