

To a New Conservation Commissioner

Francis L. Cormier (Derry) President's Report to the 1986 New Hampshire Association of Conservation Commissions Annual Meeting

I have often found newly-appointed conservation commission members unsure of what they can or should do. Consider yourself to be the first, best, and sometimes last line of defense of your community's natural resources. The same natural resources that the State of New Hampshire charges you to protect.

You are the temporary steward of those resources. You are entrusted with their protection until the next generation inherits them. The richness of that inheritance depends on the priorities you set today. All of us were born into a rich natural environment. The quality of environment that you pass on depends on how effectively you perform as a community leader, and how willing you are to take risks. Leadership and risk-taking often go hand-in-hand.

It is a lot easier to stand up at town meeting to ask for funding for a sign for the town forest than to fight for funds for land acquisition. It is infinitely easier to plant flowers and trees on the town common than to stand toe-to-toe with an irate developer, defending your commission's position on a dredge and fill application. But planting flowers and hanging signs are not leadership or risk taking roles.

Once I addressed a regional meeting of conservation commissions. I spoke on prime wetlands; others talked about wetlands inventories and cluster development. During the question and answer session, one commissioner in the audience posed a question that went unanswered. The next day I knew how I should have answered his question. He had expressed disappointment with the evening's program. His community was undergoing rapid growth: wetlands were being destroyed, farm land was disappearing; too many septic systems were being installed. He had hoped that the meeting would give him the solution, but it had not.

He was seeking a single answer. But natural resources are being attacked on many fronts: from above by acid rain and air pollution, from below by hazardous waster, septic systems, and leaking underground storage tanks, from the ground by over-development and bad development. There are as many answers as there are problems. Your task as a community leader and risk-taker is to match the problems with the proper solutions.

The first step is to define the problem. You do this by assessing the difference between the present conditions and a more desirable state of affairs.

The second step is to determine the causes of the problem. What is causing the gap between the present conditions and the more desirable state of affairs?

The third step is to develop alternative approaches for solving the problem. If you don't have the expertise to do that—and most of us don't – then you have to go out and acquire it. You can do this by reading, by attending meetings, workshops, seminars, conferences, by

consulting experts, and by talking to other conservation commissioners who have dealt with similar situations.

The fourth step is to assess the consequences of each alternative. What are the benefits of each approach? Who wins? Who loses? Is the time right for this solution? Will the public support this solution? Abe Lincoln once said "Public sentiment is everything. With it, nothing can fail. Without it, nothing can succeed."

The fifth step is to select a solution from among the alternatives.

The sixth step is to implement the chosen alternative. This is where you have to take risks, for the best-laid plans are useless unless they are implemented. Now you have to exhibit your leadership skills, your organizational skills, and your political skills.

The seventh and last step is to evaluate the implemented solution. Hindsight is always more accurate than foresight. Did the solution actually solve the problem? Did it create additional problems? Can it be improved?

Therefore, my advice to a new commissioner is to:

- Educate yourself
- Analyze your community's problems
- Become a leader
- Take risks