

Conservation Department (171)

Discussion with Conservation Agent John Jannell on March 14, 2023
Finance Committee: Elaine Baird and Lynn Bruneau

Expenses	Salaries	Expenses	Total
FY24	158,303	20,755	179,058
FY23	150,037	20,255	170,292
FY22	138,028	19,271	157,299
FY21	129,108	4,306	133,414
FY20	121,387	3,139	124,526
FY19	120,817	3,829	124,646

Primary roles/responsibilities include the following:

- Working w/ the Conservation Commission, responsible for administering the Wetlands Protection Act and the Orleans Wetlands Protection Bylaw (more rigorous than the state law)
- Management of Town-owned lands under Commission jurisdiction (270 acres, 15 of which are accessible to the public)
- Administrative and clerical support for the Conservation Commission, including preparation and filing of forms for all applications, preparation of weekly meeting agendas and minutes, posting of agendas and legal ads, financial planning and bill processing including grant funding
- Providing expertise to the Commission, property owners and other Town Boards/Committees; preparing/distributing public info re the Wetlands Protection Act
- Helping to implement management plans for Town-owned conservation properties (15 land management plans); coordination of and participation in conservation land management initiatives.
- Review and updating of the Orleans Wetland Regulations as needed.

Estimated Annual Fee Revenue for FY24 - \$13k-\$15k estimating 55 Notices of Intent and Requests for Determination; 160 Administrative Reviews and 50 miscellaneous other filings.

Wetland filing fees can be used for supporting Conservation Department operations. The FY24 budget includes a request for an additional \$15.2k to help off-set the cost of maintaining Conservation properties. Fees s/be kept in line with those of neighboring towns and to help support Department operations (eg, property maintenance). Mr. Jannell confirmed that the Town Administrator takes \$10k per year from the Wetlands filing fee account for staff support.

In the chart above, the up-tick in Salaries from FY22 to FY23 and FY24 reflects a change in Town strategy - to begin paying for Clerical overtime (at time-and-a-half) instead of providing time off (at time-and-a-half). This added \$4300 to the FY23 budget and \$4514 to the FY24 budget.

The jump in Expenses from FY21 to FY22 and afterwards reflects the addition of approximately \$15k per year to the budget for the maintenance of Conservation properties. Without that additional \$15k, operational expenses are relatively flat from year-to-year.

Mr. Jannell noted that year-to-date (mid-March), his Repair/Maintenance of Public Property account is almost fully depleted and he will need additional funding in order to complete a number of small projects before year-end. He may be able to transfer very small amounts from other expense accounts to help solve this problem; however, the Finance Committee reminded him that he could request a transfer from Fin Comm's "Reserve Fund" to cover costs between now and year-end for projects that warrant timely completion (now, rather than after July 1 - in the next fiscal year).

(Refer to the minutes from January 6, 2022 Finance Committee meeting where Fin Comm hosted Mr. Jannell and members of the Conservation Commission and the Open Space Committee for a discussion of the roles and responsibilities and focus and priorities of these groups for additional background information.)

Mr. Jannell noted that although his Department and the Conservation Commission often have to work hard with property owners and their landscapers to ensure that all understand local, state and federal regulations and limitations, things rarely escalate to the level of litigation - with just two examples in Mr. Jannell's 12 years with the Town.

The Department collaborates with other groups in Town to identify and address common objectives - eg, the proposed wetlands restoration project at Putnam Farm and the overall expansion of usable farming space at Putnam Farm, with solar-powered irrigation. The Annual Town Meeting Warrant will include a draft Article, asking for \$75k in funding to support additional Cons Comm projects - focused on the Putnam Farm Wetlands Restoration project as well as restoration of the swimming area at Pilgrim Lake. Much of the Cons Comm project work is done by DPW resources (typically "off-season") as well as by volunteers and various "friends" groups and occasionally Americorps resources when they can be scheduled.

The Conservation Department has begun preparing for the conversion of their paper records to electronic records in "Laserfiche", working through files and eliminating unnecessary paperwork and multiple copies.

Clearly much is accomplished by a limited number of resources in protecting the Town's conservation lands.

Finance Committee follow-up: confirm the purpose of the annual "pull" of the \$10k from the Wetlands Protection Fund as part of the annual Town Budget funding process at Town Meeting. Per Mr. Jannell's understanding, this is for "staff support". What "support" is provided, by whom, different from other Town Departments, Boards/Committees?