

# **Saugerties Conservation Advisory Commission**

March 19, 2026

Zoom Video Conferencing

## **MINUTES**

Present: Skip Arthur, Carole Furman, Stephen Shafer, Ken Goldberg, Mary O'Donnell, Elizabeth Shafer, Mike Harkavy, Leslie Surprenant, Bill Barr, Nicole Roskos, Kathleen Gray, Mary McNamara, 2 unidentified Zoom users 'LizJr' and 'Claudia's iPad'

### **Approval of February 19, 2026 Minutes**

Mary noted that the minutes she received still contained visible editing marks and strikeouts. Kevin said he had already reformatted the document. After that the motion passed.

### **CSFT**

Mary said the draft of the CCAP was essentially finished in terms of content and that what she wanted from the CAC now was proofreading only: typos, spelling, and grammar, not substantive rewrites. She told the group that she would resend the final draft and members could send corrections directly to her, after which she would forward the cleaned-up version to Skip for transmission to the town board. Skip explained to Bill that one of the plan's major pollution issues in town; he said the town board's willingness or unwillingness to create a Solite-related task force would be a real test of whether the CCAP would be treated seriously. Bill asked whether anyone knew if Solite was phasing down because the piles of waste material there looked reduced, and Mary replied that a dedicated task force would be the right way to answer that. She said the CAC had already discussed what such a task force might look like, including representation from Solite, the town board, the CAC, and the DEC, since DEC controls the permit.

There followed a discussion of the Climate Smart Task Force coordinator position. Skip said Linda had been serving more as a placeholder and did not feel able to take on the job in full. He reported that had NYSERDA sent outreach related to Clean Energy Communities (CEC) which he had initially thought was defunct, and that Mary had passed the questionnaire from NYSERDA relating to CEC to Greg Chorvas, who completed it. Mary said the program itself was not gone but being revised for 2026, and she emphasized how important it was that someone inside Town Hall, like Greg, respond, because an outside volunteer could not fully know departmental needs. Skip also noted renewed outreach offering assistance with CEC & CSC programs from the Hudson Valley Regional Council, now through Evelyn Laferriere, and framed that as encouraging because it meant outside technical support still existed. But the core problem, in his view, was capacity: when CSTF had been successful before with CEC & CSC programs, Mary had essentially made the coordinator role into a part-time job, supported by people like Patty Kelly and Susan Murphy, and that labor base no longer existed. Stephanie Bassler had

reached out to him and suggested maybe someone from the CAC or broader community could take on the role, and she also thought she might be able to recruit through her professional networks if given a packet describing the work. Skip floated the idea that the town might instead revive a paid “special operations” or similar staff role and fold the CSTF coordinator duties into that position. He named Vernon Benjamin as a past example of a town employee who had helped push environmental work and grants forward, and contrasted volunteer models in other towns with paid municipal coordinators, including Kingston.

Mary discussed the structural overlap between climate coordination and grant work. She argued that Clean Energy Communities and Climate Smart Communities are grant-generating systems, so if the town hires someone, that person’s job should be thought about in relation to grants as well. Kathleen, speaking from the position of Special Operations Coordinator and former grant writer/administrator, said she is already overwhelmed simply administering the grants the town has won over the last six to eight years and cannot also take on more grant writing or the CSC coordinator role. She described grant administration as in many cases more demanding than the writing itself, citing reimbursement requirements, compliance paperwork, documentation burdens, MWBE contractor requirements, and technical reporting. She also said some grants, especially those involving culverts, bridges, wastewater, or water systems, require engineering-level expertise and long lead times. Bill suggested adding grant-writing experience to the desired skillset for any coordinator and asked whether a grant could fund the position itself; Mary said she had not seen such an opportunity. Mary stated that the town needs a clear tie between grants, CEC, CSC, and departmental needs. She said she would help assemble materials about what the town has already accomplished, even though she noted that many actions expire and have to be redone, and Bill and Skip would work with Stephanie to circulate an outreach packet and potentially recruit a volunteer or candidate.

### **Battery Energy Storage Systems (BESS)**

Stephen said he had already circulated two background emails, one about why BESS is necessary for renewable energy and one on safety. He proposed a factual white paper for the town board and run a local letter-to-the-editor campaign, first on the necessity of BESS and then on safety. Skip said that the CAC’s role was not simply to endorse or reject a project but to speak to the facts of the system.

Mary asked about the new state fire code and wanted to know how many battery storage installations had operated under the new code, for how long, and with what safety record. Stephen answered that the code was adopted in July 2025 but did not actually take effect until January of the current year, so there simply has not been enough real-world operating history yet. He said that the serious incidents people cite usually involved older facilities built under weaker standards, and that the new standards are much more stringent. Mary also raised the question of revenue and assessment, asking what the actual tax value to the town would be and how these

systems are assessed at all. Stephen said that after speaking with Paul Williamson from KCE, he understood that municipalities are still figuring this out, that a PILOT structure would likely be used at first, and that about \$300,000 a year was being discussed as a ballpark number. Skip emphasized that “payment in lieu of taxes” does not mean no payment and said the town might receive roughly \$260,000 per year initially. Carole added that there could also be revenue from electricity supplied back to Central Hudson and possibly community support funds, and Skip said total value could go into the millions eventually.

The subject of safety Mary stated that tests and codes are not the same thing as lived experience (projects in Town A, Town B, Town C before confidence could be fully justified. Bill responded with information from Paul Williamson that the company’s existing units had never caught fire in their operating history. Skip added that the company has apparently had operational installations since 2018 with no battery fire incidents and then noted that the incidence of fire has fallen sharply in recent years. Nicole Roskos asked whether other countries were already using the technology successfully on a large scale. Skip referred to Jeff Seidman’s charts showing that global battery fire incidence has dropped steeply and is now very low. Mike said Governor Hochul seemed to be slowing some renewable momentum and leaning toward nuclear, which he saw as a serious problem for the climate agenda. The BESS discussion turned to questions of siting and permitting authority. Skip reported that state-level legislation was emerging that could move permitting authority for large renewable facilities from local governments to the state, which he thought would inflame local backlash because people would see it as a loss of home rule. Bill noted that environmental organizations generally support BESS.

### **Planning Board**

Carole then added the Planning Board perspective. She said the Planning Board is in an information-gathering stage on BESS and had little to report procedurally, though she thought the proposed site’s proximity to both a substation and a possible new solar field made it seem like a logical energy cluster. Skip corrected her on one technical point, insisting that the storage project is not actually functionally tied to that solar installation even if they relate to the same grid infrastructure. Carole also described a March 25 workshop at the building department conference room involving Dylan & Adriana from NPV, Mike Ivino, Stephanie, Sean Weaver (Bldg. Dept.), Carole, Skip and Mike via Teams which she initially thought might be a BESS workshop. Skip and Mike Harkavy clarified that it was really a non-quorum working session on how to write zoning for battery storage systems, including different scales from large systems to private commercial ones.

### **Town Liaison**

Bill reported that little was currently visible on Winston Farm from his vantage point, though rumors continued. Skip then connected that back to a presentation from Citizens’ ~~Reviewer~~ of for Beautiful Saugerties on open space given at the town board. He called the presentation excellent and said its conclusions overlapped substantially with CAC concerns. Both Stephen

and Mike cautioned that the CAC should not sign onto any language implying a denial of a project; they were willing to support the parts about preserving forested land, not a blanket “do not grant” conclusion. Skip agreed.

### **Tree Ordinance**

Nicole Roskos spoke on the proposed ordinance and said she had incorporated prior feedback from the CAC and the Tree Committee. Two main issues were whether ordinary homeowners would have to file for permission every time they cut a tree, and what size threshold should trigger protection. The diameter threshold had been moved back to 18 inches DBH (Diameter at Breast Height) rather than 12 inches. She also added that tree ordinances justified mainly on aesthetics tend to be more vulnerable, while those grounded in ecosystem services such as carbon sequestration, habitat, shading, and erosion control tend to survive challenge more easily. She said municipalities do have authority under New York law to adopt such protections. Nicole and Mary then focused on the acreage issue. Mary argued that a quarter acre of actual woods is not small, and that requiring a permit only for cutting more than a quarter acre of wooded area would already exclude most ordinary homeowners. The real target, she said, was clear-cutting. She wanted the ordinance’s language to say that plainly, not just refer vaguely to “excessive and indiscriminate” cutting. Several members said the quarter-acre exemption language was difficult to parse. Was the ordinance talking about the size of the whole parcel, or the size of the wooded area being cut on any parcel? Nicole said it meant the latter, but admitted the draft was not saying that clearly enough. Mary also raised the special case of heritage and specimen trees, confirming that even if such a tree is under 18 inches, it would still require protection.

Mary suggested the idea of a minimal reporting statement even for cutting smaller trees under the main permit threshold; not a full permit, just a simple written or online statement that no tree over 18 inches, no heritage tree, and no specimen tree would be cut. Some members were skeptical that ordinary people would tolerate even a simple filing requirement just to cut small trees or saplings. A rough vote or show of hands followed, and the sentiment moved against adding that reporting requirement. Skip recommended a more cautious strategy overall: Nicole should revise the draft to reflect the discussion, circulate it again, and perhaps get informal feedback from people like Leanne and Mike Ivino before making a formal presentation to the Town Board. Nicole agreed to revise and resend. Bill added that enforcement is a serious burden on the building department, and any tree law will run into that same institutional weakness.

### **Additional Announcements**

Mary McNamara introduced the topic of PFAS contamination connected to the Saugerties landfill. She said roughly 62 homes in Woodstock and Saugerties, in the Sawkill and Plattekill watersheds, are affected by landfill leachate and that the issue has been dragging on for nearly six years with many residents dissatisfied with the mitigation offered by the state. She stated that even if the state technically controls the remediation process, the CAC and town should not stand back entirely when intermunicipal residents are living with tainted water. She also discussed a

new New York State Department of Health reimbursement program, to be administered through county health departments, that would provide up to \$10,000 for testing and mitigation of private wells. The problem, she said, is that the grant as currently structured excludes homeowners who are already in contact with the state about their contaminated wells, which means some of the people most directly affected may not qualify.

Skip said that even when contaminated leachate is pumped out, it is currently being taken to the Glasgow wastewater plant and discharged without serious PFAS filtration into the Hudson River. He said the whole matter likely deserved its own workshop because it involves complicated science, multiple agencies, and public communication failures. Bill volunteered to help draft a letter.

Kathleen announced that a second Saugerties Earth Day Week event would run from April 18 to April 26 and said she had been asked to publicize the CAC's work, especially what the Climate Smart Communities effort has done since 2019.

Leslie raised a new opportunity: a free Cornell/Hudson River Estuary Program technical assistance program to help municipalities understand, map, and prioritize forests. She pointed out that the eventual outputs would include maps, descriptions of ecologically valuable parcels, and policy recommendations, and she suggested that because Winston Farm remains an issue, such a program could be valuable.

Kevin Freeman also briefly noted a KingstonCitizens.org "Ulster Toward Zero Waste" online event on April 12.

### **Adjournment**

The motion carried at 7:50 p.m.

*Prepared by: Kevin Freeman, Secretary*