

# Massachusetts Coastal Training Program

## Summary of Audience Needs Assessment of Conservation Commissioners 2006

### INTRODUCTION

The Massachusetts Coastal Training Program (CTP) provides information, tools, and skills to “coastal decision makers” – people who, in the course of their day-to-day professional or volunteer lives, make decisions that affect the health of our coasts. By coordinating and planning training opportunities, workshops, and other events, CTP can help communities better manage the coastal resources so vital to their economies and way of life.

The Massachusetts CTP is coordinated by the Massachusetts Department of Conservation and Recreation’s Waquoit Bay National Estuarine Research Reserve (WBNERR), the Massachusetts Office of Coastal Zone Management (CZM), and the Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution Sea Grant Program (WHOI Sea Grant). CTP is a nationwide effort of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration’s National Estuarine Research Reserve System (NOAA/NERRS). To learn more about the CTP and how to get involved, visit the website <http://www.coastaltraining.org>.

CTP partners conducted an audience needs assessment of conservation commissioners and agents from Massachusetts coastal communities in the spring of 2006. The purpose was to evaluate the training and information needs of these key local decision makers.

### METHODOLOGY

CTP partners and other state agency personnel identified 16 of the 78 Massachusetts coastal municipalities that are diverse as to region of the coast and the issues they face. Within each municipality they identified one or more initial contact people who, when interviewed, recommended additional interviewees that would constitute a sample consisting of the professional conservation staff person (agent, administrator, etc. – where there is one), a more-experienced conservation commission member, and a relatively new member.

These individuals were contacted by telephone and asked to participate in an interview of about 20 to 30 minutes’ duration. The sample included 32 volunteer conservation commissioners and 13 associated professional staff responded. Fifteen of the 32 commissioners and 9 of the 13 agents/administrators indicated that they have professional training which is relevant to their commission activities.

The interview included questions about these topics:

- Issues facing the community and the conservation commission, especially coastal issues;
- Issues that could benefit from training or informational materials;
- Extent of collaboration of the conservation commission with other local and state government entities; possible shared training;
- Personal experience with training, including initial orientation;
- Success stories and other input.

### RESULTS

In response to the question, “In your opinion, what are the top coastal issues facing your city or town?” the most common categories of response were these three:

**Coastal development** (47% of respondents) – including Construction near banks, dunes, on barrier beaches; expansion, tear-down and rebuild

**Coastal flooding & erosion** (44%) – including protecting banks; lands subject to flowage; FEMA zones; setback requirements; emergency applications

**Water quality** (24%) – including harbors, coastal ponds & embayments; N loading; septic and sewer systems; shellfish habitat; groundwater

When asked what issues would benefit most from training or relevant informational materials, the 45 respondents provided 108 items; content analysis suggested these categories:

Understanding the Laws and Regulations  
Improving Local Regulations and Bylaws; Compliance & Enforcement Options  
Participants in the Process  
Defining and Understanding the Coastal Resources  
How to Protect the Coastal Resources  
Coastal Processes, Including Coastal Erosion, Coastal Flooding, and Flowage  
Control Measures Related to Coastal Processes, Flooding & Erosion

Stormwater and Wastewater (esp. in coastal areas)  
Water Quality Issues  
Estuaries  
Structures  
Public Access, Public Lands, and Aesthetics  
Difficult Cases  
Conservation Commission Procedures  
The Need for and Capacity to Educate the Broader Public  
Specific Training Content or Procedural Suggestions

For most of the interviewees, initial preparation for their role consisted primarily of receiving a collection of laws, by-laws, regulations, and other documents to read. Over time, a strong majority of interviewees have participated in some form of training. Their preferences regarding preferred format for assistance were split almost exactly between informational materials (59%, including print, web-based, or both) and training events (57%), while a third possibility was a less frequent choice (27%): “Technical assistance, provided with attention to not only responding to the immediate situation but also leave an increased capacity within the Commission to address similar issues in the future.”

## RECOMMENDATIONS

- An introductory training session for new conservation commissioners could find a wide audience, and not only in coastal communities. (It could also serve as a review session for sitting members.) A coastal version would be desirable, and a self-instructional version, in print and/or online, could find an audience among those unable to travel to a training event.
- A new module for coastal conservation commissions, offered as part of the conservation commissioner training curriculum offered by the Massachusetts Association of Conservation Commissions, could provide important supplemental information. CTP should explore developing such a curriculum in collaboration with MACC.
- Many conservation commission members and staff have difficulty finding time to attend training. Focused sessions on topics that have currency and urgency – sessions with the prospect of easing the burden rather than adding to it – are the most likely to find an audience. Based on interviewees statements, these topics are candidates:
  - **Coastal processes, coastal erosion, mitigation options**
  - Overview of **state laws and regulations**; how they relate to local bylaws.
  - **Local wetlands bylaws and regulations**; local by-law revisions
  - Crafting effective **orders of conditions (OOCs)**
  - **Habitat requirements** for various species of interest. What OOCs will work.
  - **Enforcement, credibility** and OOCs. When to fine, when to use “softer” approaches.
  - **Delineation** of wetlands and coastal resources
  - **Buffer zone** delineation and management
  - **Coastal flood plains** – delineation, restrictions; FEMA guidelines
  - **Estuaries** – riverfront development and river- mouth projects
  - **Inter-board coordination**
  - **Land protection**, including management of municipally-owned lands
  - **In-water structures** and activities, including docks and piers
  - **Large-scale projects such as** LNG facilities, dredging, and major harbors
  - **Difficult situations**
  - **Process Skills such as** running effective meetings, conducting site visits, working with consultants.
  - **Public education** about coastal issues, laws, and science.
- Informational materials, either in print, on-line, or both, should be considered for these three situations:
  - Support materials for training events
  - Alternatives to training events
  - Stand-alone informational piece.

The detailed report of this study is available at the Massachusetts Coastal Training Program website, [www.coastaltraining.org](http://www.coastaltraining.org), by clicking the “Training Needs” link on the home page.

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