

The Proposed Putnam Valley Wildlife Habitat and Biodiversity Protection District

Prepared by the Putnam Valley Commission for the Conservation of
the Environment (PVCCE)

Notice of Public Informational Meeting

A public informational meeting on the proposal for a Putnam Valley Wildlife Habitat and Biodiversity Protection (WHBP) District will be held at 7:30-9:30 PM on Thursday, 2 November 2006 in the Performing Arts Center of the Putnam Valley High School. At that meeting, PVCCE will host experts from *Hudsonia* who will answer questions regarding the proposed WHBP District.

The Biodiversity of Putnam Valley and Past Efforts to Study It

The purpose of the proposed Putnam Valley Wildlife Habitat and Biodiversity Protection (WHBP) District is to protect what all town residents cherish, the large natural landscapes that harbor rich and varied plant and animal life. The various forms of life found in Putnam Valley represent the town's biodiversity - the many species of plants and animals that predate the arrival of the first settlers and that persist to this day, as well as other species introduced through human intervention and through ecological succession. Undisturbed land in town harbors many different habitats, the specific environments where species live. These habitats include upland deciduous forests, upland coniferous forests, intermittent streams, perennial streams, and hardwood swamps.

Our knowledge of Putnam Valley's biodiversity has grown considerably over the last seven years. Beginning in 1999 and continuing to the present, Putnam Valley has partnered with the towns of Cortlandt, New Castle, and Yorktown to learn more about the biological resources of the region. These four towns commissioned a study by Dr. Michael Klemens of the Metropolitan Conservation Alliance (MCA) who conducted a four-year study, using remote sensing methods and site visits to conduct a census of reptiles,

amphibians, and breeding birds. This culminated in 2004 with the publication of a volume titled "Croton-to-Highlands Biodiversity Plan: Balancing Development and the Environment in the Hudson River Estuary Catchment." A hardcopy of this report is available at the Putnam Valley Library. You can also download this report at http://www.wcs.org/media/file/CHBP_lo-res.pdf.

This report describes a large area roughly in the shape of an inverted U that defines a mostly undeveloped landscape in Putnam Valley where biodiversity is most abundant. This is a classic biotic corridor, a large unfragmented expanse where plant life is undisturbed and through which wildlife is free to move. This is shown in a map that appears on page 17 of the MCA report. This area was used by PVCCE as a starting point for delineating the boundaries of the WHBP District.

Why Protect Biodiversity?

Our awareness of the importance of protecting biodiversity has increased greatly in recent years. Such agencies as the NYS Biodiversity Research Institute of the NYS Museum, the NYS Department of Environmental Conservation, the US Environmental Protection Agency, and the US Department of the Interior have promoted the idea of biodiversity protection. The conditions that sustain plant and animal life are the very conditions that sustain human life. For human well being, if for no other reason, we should wish to maintain our natural surroundings to the greatest extent possible.

- The 170 parcels of land within the proposed district contain some of the most diverse types of vegetation and wildlife found anywhere in the northeastern U.S. There are larger tracts than this 12,600+ acres in the region, but few have the range of habitats found in Putnam Valley. Fragmenting the landscape would create barriers for some wildlife between their feeding and breeding territories. This could be fatal to local populations of those species and cause localized ecosystem dislocations.
- The lands form a significant part of the watershed for Lake Oscawana. Large disturbances in that watershed will impact the run-off into and the water quality of the lake.

- Preserving natural habitats helps maintain the underlying aquifers, thus increasing the quality of available drinking water for a significant part of the town.
- Increased development increases the incidence of nuisance species, such as white-tailed deer, as well as health-hazardous species, such as the deer tick.

There are other compelling reasons for protecting biodiversity. One reason is aesthetic, the sense of beauty that we all treasure. Another reason is the mission of stewardship of the Earth, for which many of us feel a responsibility. This sense of stewardship is underscored by both religious and secular values, and represents a unifying force in a society often at odds over other matters.

The WHBP District, Its Boundaries, and the Planning Process

PVCCE believes in the need to create a balance between development, which is desirable and inevitable, and protection of our natural resources in a way that benefits all townspeople while respecting the rights of landowners. In an attempt to balance biodiversity protection with landowners' rights, PVCCE is proposing the creation of an overlay district, the WHBP District. In drawing the boundaries for this district, PVCCE made an overt attempt to include only large undeveloped parcels of unfragmented habitat. The boundaries of the WHBP District conform largely to those delineated by the MCA study, with some additions and some exclusions. The additions consist of adjacent parcels to those on the MCA map where habitat is of-a-kind with habitat in the MCA study site. The exclusions consist of smaller, already-developed parcels within the MCA study site. They were excluded from the WHBP District because any changes to them would have minimal impact on the entire area covered by these regulations.

- For any parcel within the WHBP District, any site development plan submitted to the Putnam Valley Planning Board will be required to contain a biodiversity assessment/habitat survey conducted by a professional field biologist from an approved list of such biologists kept by the town. This survey will be submitted at the beginning of the planning process, and will span all the various breeding seasons for reptiles, amphibians, and birds.

- The survey will take note of critical habitats and will look at the landscape on a larger scale than that of the single site being proposed for development. This point is important in that many forms of wildlife may have a range that extends beyond the boundaries of an individual parcel.
- Avoidance of critical habitats in favor of developing less sensitive parts of the parcel is a goal of the biodiversity assessment survey.
- The cost of the biodiversity assessment/habitat survey will be borne by those submitting the site plan. There will be no cost to the town's taxpayers. This arrangement is analogous to how the town defrays the costs for the services of the town wetlands consultant. The landowner will make an escrow payment to the town; the town will then compensate the consulting biologist, thus establishing a clear line of accountability.

These steps will ensure that the biotic corridor delineated in the MCA study remains intact by coordination of development plans for contiguous parcels. This approach will also ensure that landowners can build, consistent with protection of the more environmentally sensitive parts of the site. The Town of Cortlandt and other towns already use biodiversity assessment as part of the planning process, to good effect.

Putting This Proposal in Its Proper Context

Putnam Valley's past partnering with other towns to protect biodiversity predates the current Town Supervisor and Town Board, and, in fact, spans the administrations of three different Town Supervisors and many different Town Boards. Thus, there is a long-standing consensus that biodiversity protection is a goal that Putnam Valley should pursue. The proposal for a WHBP District is a culmination of this consensus, stands apart from other town issues, and should be judged on its own merits.

PVCCE is an advisory body to the Putnam Valley Town Board. PVCCE has neither decision-making nor enforcement authority. PVCCE is charged with recommending measures for environmental protection. PVCCE holds a regular monthly meeting and also a monthly work session. Notices for these meetings and work sessions are scrolled on Channel 20 and are posted on the town website (www.putnamvalley.com). These meetings are open to any interested observers.