

Members Present: Hugh Clark, Barry Chase, Donna Hoyt, Bonnie Hundt, Don MacLean, Jim Miller,
Jane Shannon, Dennis Sigler

Members Absent: Terry Boyles, Barbara Gaba, Bob Roche

Others Present: Choral Eddy, Drew Hingson, Jamie Purinton, Ann Rader, Erin Robertson, Ron Steed,
Leah Wilcox

The committee convened at 7:00 p.m. and, subject to one edit, approved minutes of the 6 January 2014 meeting.

Noting that the Town Board had referred to the ZRC Supplemental Regulation H, Ridgeline/ Steep Slope Protection, the Chair reminded all that there are two tasks to be accomplished: Determine which (if any) ridgelines and steep slopes merit protection, and determine how to honor Comp Plan guidance that requirements will be mandatory for major subdivisions and encouraged/voluntary for minor subdivisions.

The Chair also reminded all that existing, sanctioned text at H1b2 stresses no lot shall be unbuildable, and H2f, g, and h provide waiver authority if project site does not coincide with mapped R/SSPOD, or is not visible from publicly accessible location, or PB site visit verifies that intent and standards are met, or if standards render lot unbuildable.

The committee proceeded to review and further refine tentative conclusions reached on 6 January to designate ridgelines and steep slopes based on a combination of minimum elevation, steep slopes, top ground visible above the slope, visibility from publicly accessible locations, and possible other factors.

Deliberation initially focused upon the utility of selecting some minimum elevation as a trigger for inclusion in a protection zone, and what minimum elevation was most appropriate. Candidate elevations included 740'—the town's mean elevation; 800'—corresponding to the town's median elevation of 804'; and 900'—which would match the elevation used in neighboring Gallatin.

Various points arose during this discussion, including Ms. Shannon's contention that the potential number of houses on a ridge top is likely to be more of a problem than the elevation on which those structures are built. She urged that photo-shop simulations be produced to show the negative effects of large numbers of structures along a ridgeline, especially when considering major versus minor subdivisions.

Ms. Hoyt summarized her study of a New Hampshire website, which noted that comprehensive ridgeline protection comprises three elements: slope and density; soil overlays; and guiding principles—all designed to protect not only view-shed, but also to protect wildlife habitat and to protect against run-off and erosion. Others noted that zoning amendments already adopted address critical habitat and storm water run-off control, albeit not overtly in the context of ridgeline protection. While acknowledging the relationships cited in the New Hampshire website, it was noted that the ZRC's task is to recommend measures to attain the Comp Plan's vision and goals to protect Ancram's important scenic views.

Mr. Hingson contended that the best way to preserve scenic terrain is by “up-zoning,” requiring that structures in protected areas be sited on parcels containing at least ten acres, rather than 3.5 acres.

Mr. Steed offered several points, including that a road snaking up a steep slope is likely to be more visible than a structure.

Other features of the discussion included Ms. Hoyt’s speculation that density within open space may need to be changed at some point; Mr. Sigler’s comment that it may be better to increase density—put all in one spot—thereby leaving more open space and more contiguous open space; and Mrs. Wilcox’s caution that visibility studies don’t necessarily consider the quality of a view—e.g. the duration of time when the view is actually seen, whether the view is to the side or front of a vehicle, and whether the view is relatively close or at a distance.

Several conclusions emerged from this discussion.

The ZRC determined more precisely the process by which it will identify the ridgelines and steep slopes that it recommends for protection. Incorporating both objective and subjective factors, the process correlates with Comp Plan guidance to determine what’s protected based on topographical prominence and scenic importance.

First, the ZRC wants to establish a minimum elevation which will serve as the initial discriminator when determining what might become the protected ridgelines and steep slopes. It is not intended that all terrain above the minimum elevation will ultimately be protected. The minimum elevation merely narrows the range of terrain that’s to be further examined. In effect, terrain above this minimum elevation may be considered topographically prominent.

Second, the ZRC wants to use Don Meltz’s visibility analyses to show whether, and to what degree, ridgelines at various places above this minimum elevation can actually be seen from publicly accessible locations, and to show whether and to what degree steep slopes can be seen from publicly accessible locations. Based on this visibility analysis, the ZRC will remove various pieces of terrain from potential designation even though that terrain lies above the minimum elevation.

Then, the ZRC (possible augmented by others), using common criteria and a ranking scale, will once again ride the roads to determine which of the ridgelines and steep slopes that remain as candidates for protection actually strike the eye, the mind, and the spirit as scenically important.

Finally, from that eyeball survey, the ZRC will compare rankings and recommend what ridgelines and steep slopes constitute Ancram’s important scenic views and thereby merit protection.

As noted above, the ZRC wants to use some minimum elevation as the initial discriminator of what might become protected ridgelines and steep slopes. Consensus was that two elevations should be considered: 800’ and 900.’ The ZRC directed the Chair to seek from Don Meltz a map that shows terrain higher than 800’ and also higher than 900’.

Representatives of the Conservation Advisory Council offered two additional maps for ZRC consideration. One is “Topography and Elevation Zones in the Town of Ancram” created by Hudsonia to accompany the Ancram Natural Resources Conservation Plan, 2014. The second map is “Steep and Shallow Soils in the Town of Ancram,” also created by Hudsonia for the conservation plan. Ms. Purinton and Ms. Robertson opined that steep and shallow soils probably coincide with the high terrain being considered for protection and might be another factor in the ultimate determination of what ridgelines and steep slopes ought to be protected. Most ZRC members thought that such a notion is worth considering.

Following up Mr. Miller's suggestion, the ZRC also asked the Chair to get from Don Meltz the difference between what's visible from 6 miles of cumulative road miles versus 4 miles of cumulative road miles.

Related to this suggestion, Mr. MacLean urged that the visibility factor ultimately used should also be cited in sub-section H2 to provide clarity and ensure applicants and the PB both operate from the same explicit standard.

In addition, the ZRC verified that, as in the current proposal, only steep slopes 3.5 acres or larger will be considered for inclusion.

The ZRC further requests that, after the committee determines which terrain to protect, Don Meltz should produce a list of affected parcels and also show those affected parcels on a map, similar to what he had produced for the October proposal.

Members agreed that, if the Chair receives the requested information, the ZRC will meet at 7:00 p.m., Monday, 20 January. If the information is not available, the Chair will notify all members and ensure a notice is posted on the town website.

The meeting adjourned at 8:36 p.m.