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For Immediate Release:

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Portsmouth Seeks Out Vernal Pools with the Goal of Protecting These Unique Habitats

Portsmouth, NH – The City of Portsmouth has embarked on a project to inventory and map vernal pools with the hopes of providing regulatory protection to these outstanding biologically diverse habitats. Once potential locations of the ephemeral pools have been determined, the Conservation Commission, in close coordination with the Planning Board and Planning Office, will propose specific vernal pool protection language for the City zoning ordinance that is currently being revised.

Vernal pools are seasonally flooded areas that are critical breeding grounds for a host of distinctive animal species, such as wood frogs, spotted salamanders, and fairy shrimp. Currently, there is no regulatory protection afforded to these areas in Portsmouth that would prevent damage from encroaching development. The City believes that vernal pools are too valuable of a community resource to leave unprotected.

Steve Miller, Portsmouth's Conservation Commission Chair, reports that many people in the City are very supportive of vernal pool protection, but what the Commission needs is a good idea where the pools are located to protect them. "The inventory and associated mapping project will be very helpful to the Commission as we are asked to review development proposals," says Miller. "We need to know where the vernal pools are that need protecting."

Portsmouth's Environmental Planner, Peter Britz, describes the importance of the project, "While wetlands are specifically addressed in current zoning, vernal pools are not. Most of us recognize the ecological value of these areas and want to afford them at least the same protection given to year-round wetlands." Britz notes that vernal pools are somewhat of a rarity in the urbanized port city. "I think over time, many vernal pools were lost because their location was unknown. Since the water in them comes and goes, they are easy to overlook."

The current project will correct that problem and provide a very good estimate of the number and location of vernal pools in Portsmouth. A consultant hired by the New Hampshire Estuaries Project through its Community Technical Assistance Program will examine aerial photos and detailed topographic maps to identify likely vernal pools. The consultant will ground truth suspected vernal pools when possible to confirm that remotely detected features truly represent functioning pools. The data will be compiled into an inventory report, including a detailed map and recommended zoning language that will protect the fragile areas from human activity. The Community Technical Assistance Program, which is partially funded by the New Hampshire Charitable Foundation – Piscataqua Region, provides consulting assistance to help seacoast communities implement natural resource protection projects.

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