

Essex Conservation and Trails Committee (CTC)
Regular Meeting Minutes
81 Main St. Essex Jct., VT 05452
November 12, 2024

Draft Minutes Submitted by Clerk Duane Millar Barlow, November 18, 2024

ATTENDEES

Present: Ken Signorello (Chair), Shannon Jackson (Vice Chair), Duane Millar Barlow (Clerk), Paul Davis, Steve Dowd , Betsy Dunn, Morgan Kirk

Absent: Bino Cummings, April Peterson

Partners: Chuck Vile (Essex Town Tree Warden), Brandon Benedict (Chittenden County Forester), Adriane Martin (Director of Essex Parks and Recreation)

Public remote: Annie Dunne Watson. Moshe Braner, Dan Koeneman

CALL TO ORDER

The meeting was called to order at 6:00 PM.

AGENDA ADDITIONS/CHANGES

No changes were made to the agenda.

PUBLIC TO BE HEARD

No members of the public addressed the committee at this time.

APPROVAL OF MINUTES

The minutes from the previous meeting were approved unanimously.

BUSINESS ITEMS

Advise on Planning Commission Development Applications

Colonel Page subdivision

The committee reviewed a minor subdivision proposal for Colonel Page Road. Key points discussed:

1. The proposal includes creating two new lots with houses, plus a master plan for potential future development.
2. The property is in the Scenic Resource Protection Overlay District.
3. There's an opportunity to maintain a wildlife corridor through the property.

The committee made **five recommendations**:

1. Include an easement for a multi-use path along Colonel Page Road.
2. Include an easement for a multi-use path along Alder Brook, connecting to future trails.
3. Create a buffer along Alder Brook to maintain wildlife connectivity.
4. Ensure the development maintains the rural character of the area.
5. Appreciate and encourage the preservation of existing tree cover.

These recommendations were approved unanimously by the committee to be sent to the Planning Commission.

Pinewood project

The committee discussed the Pinewood project, which has been ongoing for four years. Key points:

1. The project is going to the Planning Commission again, with staff recommending denial for the third time.
2. Over half of the proposed development area is on steep slopes, with about 40% impacting slopes over 20%.
3. Regulations prohibit development on such steep slopes.
4. The applicant has not provided a compelling waiver request that offsets the impact.

The committee voted to strongly concur with the staff recommendation of denial based on the steep slopes issue.

Indian Brook Forest Management Plan Execution

The agenda was adjusted to discuss the Indian Brook Forest Management Plan update. Chuck Vile presented the following information:

1. Indian Brook is a 501-acre property purchased by Essex Junction Water Department in 1955.

2. In 1986, the town of Essex purchased the land for \$500,000 plus \$250,000 for dam repairs.
3. Historical aerial photos from 1937 show the land was mostly pasture before the reservoir was built.
4. In the past, Rice Lumber Company owned timber rights on the west side of the property.
5. Bill Hall, a former County Forester, ensured the logging was done according to best silvicultural principles.
6. The trail system on the west side was created by the logging operation.
7. In the early 2000s, a timber stand improvement operation was conducted using horse logging.

The presentation included historical context and past forest management activities on the property. The discussion continued with more details about the Indian Brook Forest Management Plan execution:

1. The forest management plan includes evaluating different components such as soils, tree species, age, condition, density, wildlife, and invasive species.
2. The property consists of 60 acres of reservoir, 420 acres of forest, and 21 acres of wetland.
3. About 80% of the forest land is proposed to be managed as a working forest, with 20% left as a reserve.

The management priorities include:

- Diversity of ages and size classes
- Resiliency to disturbances
- Connectivity with surrounding forest areas
- Wildlife habitat
- Timber production
- Recreation

The planned harvesting operations will:

- Mimic natural disturbance patterns
- Use group selection and individual tree selection methods
- Cover approximately 198 acres across several stands
- Aim for 20-year re-entry cycles
- Maintain specific conditions in the deer yard area

The execution timeline was discussed:

- Marking of trees to begin next summer
- Harvesting operations to start in the winter of 2025-2026
- Allow for 2-3 harvest seasons due to soil sensitivity and preference to harvest when the ground is frozen

The committee discussed the potential revenue from timber sales and its relation to the cost of improving McGee Road for access. While initial estimates suggested the revenue would cover or exceed road improvement costs, updated assessments indicate the road work may be more extensive and expensive than originally thought.

The discussion concluded with questions about budgeting and decision-making processes involving multiple entities, as the project spans both public works and forestry concerns.

1. The number of trees to be removed was estimated at about 100-125 truckloads of roundwood from approximately 211 acres, with about 40 acres having most trees removed in small group cuts.
2. Natural regeneration is expected, so replanting is not necessary, though it remains an option if desired.
3. Legacy trees and snags will be left for ecological purposes.
4. Tree selection for harvesting will balance economic and ecological considerations.

The impact on trails and potential for new trails was addressed:

1. Some trails will need to be temporarily closed during winter harvesting operations.
2. Efforts will be made to minimize equipment crossing existing trails.
3. New skid trails could potentially be used for recreation in the future.
4. The committee expressed interest in assisting with trail connections after the harvest.

Post-harvest restoration plans include:

1. Following Acceptable Management Practices for erosion and sedimentation control.
2. Repairing any damage to recreational trails.
3. Monitoring and potentially controlling invasive species in harvested areas.

The log landing area is expected to be about half an acre in size, located off McGee Road. There are no current plans to create additional parking areas from the log landing site.

The discussion concluded with questions from residents living near the project area, addressing concerns about road improvements, construction timelines, and potential disruptions to local traffic during the operation.

Advise on VT Urban Community Forest Program Tree Planting Grant Application

Steve provided an update on the tree nursery project and related grant application:

- The project timeline doesn't align well with the grant deadline.
- The grant amount (\$5,000) is insufficient for the full project costs.
- The committee decided to postpone the grant application and focus on presenting the project to the select board first.
- Ken requested to review the grant details to explore possibilities.

Advise on Applying for Vermont Department of Forests, Parks and Recreation (FPR) 2025 Recreation Trails Program Grant

The committee decided not to pursue this grant at this time due to lack of staff capacity. They may revisit it in the future, especially if a trail coordinator is hired.

Approve Advisory to Reinstate Trail Caretakers Program

Duane learned about how Burlington Wildways & Intervale execute their Trail Caretakers Program when attending a presentation by Duncan Murdoch from Intervale at the Sowing Seeds convention.

- They use an app called Survey 123 that integrates with ArcGIS for trail maintenance reporting.
- Duncan offered for his team to help the Town of Essex reproduce the same approach they've taken.
- Duane will make a more formal recommendation once he has a clearer idea of how it works.
- There is a prerequisite that we have maps for the trails we want to manage this way.
- Duane will continue on the Trail Inventory and present a recommendation in the next meeting.
- Betsy will reach out to previously interested volunteers once the program is ready.

Authorize participation in Vermont Climate Action Plan Attachment

Betsy volunteered to attend an upcoming Vermont Climate Action Plan meeting. The committee discussed potential topics of interest, including:

- Infrastructure hardening against climate change impacts
- Wildlife underpasses on highways
- Culvert improvements to prevent road washouts

Betsy will report back at the next meeting.

Authorize member to conduct Conservation Fund Survey

The committee discussed the need to conduct a survey related to the Conservation Reserve Fund, as required by policy every five years. **Paul** volunteered to work on the survey, and was advised to review the existing policy for guidance on survey requirements.

Approve New Committee Charter Draft

The committee reviewed and discussed a new draft charter for the Conservation & Trails Committee. Key points:

- The new charter is a complete rewrite, expanding from half a page to 2.5 pages.
- It aims to give the committee more autonomy and responsibilities, including the ability to apply for grants directly.
- The charter outlines new powers and duties for the committee.
- Some concerns were raised about the extent of changes and the need for staff and legal review.

The committee voted to approve the draft charter. Ken will prepare an introductory memo summarizing key changes and rationale for the Select Board. The earliest it might be on the Select Board agenda is likely early 2025.

Action on EMS Project Proposal

This item is on hold until a new EMS supervisor is appointed.

UPDATES AND REPORTS

Tree Nursery at EHS

Steve provided an update on the tree nursery project at Essex High School:

- The project is moving forward after discussions with various stakeholders.
- There's a need to finalize and sign off on plans before proceeding with the CTE (Career and Technical Education) program.
- The project aims to address broader tree-related issues in Essex.

The committee is working on getting the project details finalized and approved to move forward with implementation.

Riverside Boat Access

Ken gave an update on the Riverside boat access project:

- A site visit was conducted with the Winooski Valley Park District.
- Kent created a helpful sketch of a proposed alternative route with a better slope.
- The Winooski Valley Park District is excited about the project and may work with the Vermont Housing Conservation Board on a feasibility study.
- There's potential for the town to buy the property and donate it to become a Winooski Valley Park District park.
- The neighboring property with a small shed was noted as potentially interesting for the project as well, and Ken will look into finding out how to contact the property owners.

Mathieu Forest Trail Relocation

- Tina Heath approved plans for a boardwalk, bridge, and a larger bridge than initially planned.
- Connections were made with Scout leaders for their help to build the boardwalk and bridges in the spring.
- The trail has been blazed by Duane and Betsy. There was some confusion about whether this was fully approved. The Selectboard wasn't aware that Adriane had said people can begin using the trail once the trail is blazed. This was interpreted by Betsy and Duane as indicating that trail blazing was approved and was the next step.
- Funding for the boardwalk and bridge will come from the recreation interruption fund in FY25.

Budget Recommendations for Parks and Rec

- A suggestion was made to include funding for trail maintenance annually.
- A proposal was made to recommend budgeting for six benches along town trails at scenic overlooks or points of interest.
- The committee voted to recommend that Adrian budget for establishing six benches along town trails.

Inventory/Mapping

Duane provided a brief update on trail mapping efforts, which is a top priority for him:

- A map and spreadsheet have been prepared.
- Duane will be working with Shannon and Bino on the next steps.

Tree City Application

Kent will handle the Tree City application, with assistance from Shannon. The application is done online and is relatively straightforward. They will need to gather information on the current fiscal year budget, including both spent and projected amounts.

Zoning Regulations

The committee briefly discussed upcoming zoning regulation revisions:

- Various topics are being addressed, including housing and ACT 171.
- The timeline for revisions is estimated to be around next summer.
- Betsy is working on reviewing the regulations.
- There was mention of creating an agricultural overlay district, similar to the scenic overlay, to identify top-quality agricultural locations in the town.

Pollinator Garden at Indian Brook

Betsy gave a brief update that the pollinator garden project at Indian Brook is set for spring implementation.

Arbor Day Preparation

The committee discussed options for the next Arbor Day event:

- Previous events have been held at Essex Middle School, Founders School, and the elementary school.
- The Greening Day grant program is strictly for schools.
- Options discussed included rotating through the three schools again, finding an alternative site that qualifies as a school, or choosing a non-school location like a park or the Essex Free Library.
- The committee leaned towards continuing with schools to ensure student participation and educational value.

Google Drive Management

Ken volunteered to become the authorized person to manage the committee's Google Drive, with Kent's assistance in the transition.

READING FILE AND COMMITTEE MEMBER COMMENTS

The committee briefly discussed items in the reading file:

- Members expressed interest in a wildlife crossing overpass project featured in the materials.
- An upcoming author talk by Ethan Tapper on December 5th was noted.
- Tapper's book "How to Love a Forest" is available on Spotify as an audiobook.

ADJOURN

The meeting was adjourned at 8:30p after a motion and vote (7-0).

MOTIONS

- Minutes Moved by Betsy Seconded by Shannon (7-0)
- 9 Colonel Page Road Moved by Shannon Seconded by Betsy (7-0)
- Pinewood Moved by Shannon Seconded by Morgan (7-0)
- Adjust the agenda, move 6a up to 5b Moved by Ken Seconded by Steve (7-0)
- New Charter to propose to the Selectboard Moved by Steve, Betsy Seconded (7-0)
- Ask for budgeting for 6 benches Moved by Betsy Seconded by Ken (7-0)

NEXT STEPS

- Kent will document the changes to the Charter
- Duane send any links regarding Trail Inventory
- Duane will gather more information about Survey 123 app integration from Intervale, so it can be presented in the next regular meeting
- Betsy will contact previously interested trail caretaker volunteers to give them an update
- Ken will submit five approved recommendations for the Colonel Page subdivision to the Planning Commission
- Ken to prepare introductory memo summarizing key changes for Select Board
- Continue trail mapping effort (Duane working with Shannon and Bino)
- Plan next Arbor Day event location (deciding between schools)
- Ken to take over Google Drive management with Kent's assistance
- Betsy to attend and report back on Vermont Climate Action Plan meeting
- Paul to work on Conservation Reserve Fund survey
- Betsy to continue reviewing zoning regulations
- Committee to monitor progress on Riverside boat access project with Winooski Valley Park District

Video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ug7ra9I-5MM>

Next Meeting: December 10th, 2024 6:00pm