

TOWN OF ESSEX
DRAFT PLANNING COMMISSION MINUTES
DECEMBER 12, 2024

**Note: This meeting was held on Zoom and at 81 Main St Conference Room, Essex, VT.
This is a pre-draft document and will be updated prior to the meeting.**

PLANNING COMMISSION (PC) PRESENT IN ROOM: Dustin Bruso, Chair; Josh Knox, Vice-Chair; Georgia Lavigne, Clerk; Paula Duke; Stephanie Bixby; Paula Duke; and Trefor Johnson (arrived 5-minutes after meeting started).

PC ATTENDING VIRTUALLY: None.

PC ABSENT: Johnathan Schumacher.

OTHERS PRESENT IN ROOM: Katherine Sonnick, Community Development Director; Kent Johnson, Planner; Colin Frisbie; Nick Bouton; Mike Venuti; Laren ???; Sally Fleury; Nick Martin; and Community Television.

OTHERS VIRTUALLY: Kristy Stark; and John Tucci, Sharon Zukowski, Dawn-Hill Fleury.

AGENDA ITEM 1: CALL TO ORDER: Chairman Bruso called the meeting to order at 6:38 p.m. and swore in the public.

AGENDA ITEM 2: AGENDA ADDITIONS/ CHANGES: None.

AGENDA ITEM 3: APPROVE AGENDA: Vice-Chair Knox Moved and Commissioner Lavigne Seconded a Motion to approve the agenda as warned. The Motion passed 7-0.

AGENDA ITEM 4: PUBLIC TO BE HEARD: None.

AGENDA ITEM 5: Continued from September 12, 2024: Sketch Plan – Sterling Homes is proposing a 28-lot subdivision (26 lots with single-family homes, 1 condominium lot with 8 living units and 15.44 acres open/common land) located at 53 Center Rd, Parcel ID 2-087-001-000, in the Medium Density Residential (R2) District.

The Planning Commission focused on discussing the proposed housing development, including its design, potential challenges, and approval process. The Commission considered various aspects of the project, such as the number of units, road access, emergency routes, and compliance with dimensional requirements for PUDs.

Kent Johnson noted that the applicant provided two different designs, one with 34 units and the other with 32. The main difference was the number of building lots, with the preferred design having two more but some lots being insufficient in size. The staff report highlighted key points for consideration as follows:

- The applicant to work on securing secondary emergency access through Saybrook for the development.
- The applicant to work with VTrans on traffic impact analysis and potential intersection improvements at Route 15 during preliminary review.

- The applicant to further develop PUD design rationale and justification for reduced dimensional requirements in preliminary plans.

Kent Johnson also discussed the challenges of connecting with multiple condo associations and the need for a secondary emergency access area. He suggested that an approval at the sketch level might encourage Saybrook's attention.

Colin Frisbee discussed the need for a secondary access for a development of this size, referencing previous developments without such access. The possibility of using an existing trail for emergency access was discussed, with the potential for a water loop and easement.

Colin Frisbee discussed the need for housing in the town and the potential of the location for walkable access to Essex experience. He addressed three main concerns: slopes, affordability, and emergency access. Essex reported that the slopes issue had been resolved by adjusting the plans to fully comply with the less than 20% slope requirement. He also discussed the affordability issue, stating that increasing the number of units could lower costs. Regarding emergency access, he mentioned that they had met with the fire department, public works, planning, and zoning to devise a plan that would be acceptable to all parties, including widening Saybrook Road from Center Road to the entrance of the neighborhood. He also mentioned that they had continued discussions with Saybrook and other potential connections. He concluded by stating that they had made several adjustments to the plans, including adjusting the trails and adding another piece of trail access. He requested a 26-foot-wide road, but were open to discussions about side yard setbacks and impervious surface. Katherine Sonnick noted that Aaron Martin was open to supporting the 26 foot wide road.

Chair Bruson opened the public hearing. Mike Venuti, President of Phase 4 at Saybrook, expressed support for widening Saybrook Road and the need for an emergency exit only for emergency vehicles. He also refuted claims of Saybrook not being cooperative.

Kristy Tucci expressed concerns about the safety of the Saybrook road intersection due to high traffic and visibility issues, particularly during summer months. She suggested the need for a traffic light to address these issues.

Dawn Hill-Fleury asked about the possibility of approving a site without a second exit, to which chair Bruso clarified that it could be approved as a sketch plan, but a waiver would need to be granted in the future. He also mentioned that the State would determine the appropriate design for the Route 15 intersections.

The PC then discussed the two proposed designs for the housing project, with a preference for the 32-unit design due to compliance with setbacks and minimum lot areas. The possibility of a secondary access was seen as a positive development.

The PC discussed the dimensional requirements for the PUD design. Colin Frisbee explains that the PUD allows for flexibility in lot sizes, building arrangements, and setbacks to accommodate

features like open space, trails, and varied home designs. The development clusters housing on 40% of the land, avoids wetlands and steep slopes, maintains trails for recreation and fire access, and aims to provide diverse housing options like single-floor units. Colin Frisbee justified the PUD approach as recommended by staff to enable smaller lots and setbacks aligned with state law while preserving green space and off-street parking. The discussion focuses on rationalizing the PUD design choices to meet the town's goals and objectives.

The PC discussed the recommendation for an 8-foot wide shared-use path versus 5-foot sidewalks on both sides of the street. Colin Frisbee, argued for the shared-use path as it creates a more comfortable, walkable neighborhood with less impervious surface. Dustin Bruso suggested leaving it as a recommendation to be debated during the preliminary review based on good neighborhood design principles. They agreed to move forward with approving one of the sketch plans.

The PC discussed the need to approve one of the two sketch plans. They considered the new state laws and their impact on zoning, with Stephanie Bixby suggesting that the state's regulations would trump their own. They also discussed the potential for smaller lots and reduced setbacks, which could increase the number of units. Dustin Bruso proposed approving the 34-unit design, with the understanding that it could be reduced if necessary. The Planning Commission supported this decision. The PC agreed that they would add a line item approval, stating that the Planning Commission supports the project going forward as a 34-unit subdivision.

Vice-Chair Knox Moved and Commissioner Duke Seconded a Motion to Close the Public Hearing. The Motion passed 7-0.

Commissioner Duke Moved and Chairman Bruso Seconded the Saybrook application, including a Friendly Amendment that a 34-unit design will be added to the staff report. The Motion passed 7-0.

AGENDA ITEM 6: PRELIMINARY PLAN ALLEN BROOK DEVELOPMENT 75 THOMPSON DRIVE, ESSEX, VT. The application was withdrawn.

OTHER BUSINESS:

Dustin Bruso suggested that the Planning Commission would hold an organizational meeting during their first January meeting to elect officers. Katherine Sonnick mentioned that Stantec would be attending the meeting to discuss the Upper Main Street project.

AGENDA ITEM 9: APPROVAL OF MINUTES 11/14/2024: The minutes were approved as written.

The meeting adjourned at 7:32 p.m.

PLANNING COMMISSION

By:

Dustin R. Bruso, Chair