

Essex Conservation and Trails Committee (CTC)
Regular Meeting Minutes
81 Main St. Essex Jct., VT 05452
December 10, 2024

Minutes Submitted by Clerk Duane Millar Barlow, approved on January 14th, 2025

ATTENDEES

Members present: Ken Signorello (Chair), Shannon Jackson (Vice Chair), Duane Millar Barlow (Clerk), Bino Cummings, Paul Davis, April Peterson, Steve Dowd, Betsy Dunn (remote)

Members absent: Morgan Kirk

Staff: Kent Johnson

Public: None

CALL TO ORDER

The meeting was called to order by Chair Ken Signorello at 6:02pm.

AGENDA ADDITIONS/CHANGES

The committee discussed a proposed change to the agenda order. The change involved moving Business Item A (Advise on Development Application Reviews) to be placed between Items C and D. The rationale was to hear updates about work on commission status before discussing staff recommendations.

Motion: Move agenda business item A between C and D. Moved by Shannon, seconded by Steve (8-0)

PUBLIC TO BE HEARD

There were no members of the public present to be heard at this meeting.

APPROVAL OF MINUTES

a. Approve minutes from 11/12/24 meeting

The committee reviewed the minutes from the November meeting and identified several needed corrections, including:

- Changing "Select Board" to "Selectboard" throughout
- Clarifying the section about the new charter to indicate approval of sending a memo to the Selectboard
- Adding an 'e' to Adriane's name where missing
- Correcting "Kent" to "Ken" in the Next Steps section
- Including motions within the context of each agenda item rather than just listing them separately at the end
- Adding line numbers

Given the number of changes needed, rather than approving the minutes with amendments, the committee decided to table approval until the next meeting to allow time for the corrections to be made.

Motion: Table the motion to approve the meeting minutes from November until the next meeting. Moved by Ken, seconded by April (8-0)

BUSINESS ITEMS

a. Advise on Development Application Reviews

Kent provided brief updates on applications coming before the Planning Commission this week but no Development Application Reviews were required of the committee this month.

b. Potential Action on Seeking Conservation Commission Status

The committee discussed two potential paths for becoming a Conservation Commission: 1) Moving forward with the memo of charter changes with the Selectboard, which includes staff comments and feedback, or 2) Using a state statute process which would require putting the question on the ballot to be voted upon. The committee decided to continue with the current path of bringing the memo and proposed changes to the Selectboard meeting on Monday, December 16th, while completing the ongoing conversation with staff about roles and responsibilities.

While staff expressed some questions about how the conversion to a commission would accomplish all stated goals, they were not fundamentally opposed to the concept. The committee expressed a desire to pursue the path of least resistance by continuing conversations with the Selectboard about establishing the commission. They view this approach as more constructive than immediately pursuing a ballot initiative. The members believe that if

the Selectboard is not receptive, they can always explore the alternative of gathering signatures for a ballot question in the future.

The committee emphasized wanting to maintain their trail-related responsibilities, which would be covered under the recreation provisions of the state statute.

c. Discussion and potential action about Conservation and Trails Committee fiscal year 2025 work plan and staff support

The committee discussed challenges with staff support time and workload management. Kent Johnson explained he has been spending 15-20 hours per month on Conservation & Trails Committee work, which is significantly more than is expected as a proportion of all of his responsibilities. To address this, the committee agreed to implement a new approach where they will:

1. Focus on one priority task per month that requires staff support
2. Specify clear deliverables for each task
3. Document requests in writing with specific requirements
4. Use a standardized form to outline project details and needs
5. Allow staff to focus on completing one task before moving to others

The goal is to make more efficient use of limited staff time while still advancing committee priorities. The committee acknowledged that while they can work on multiple initiatives simultaneously, staff support should be focused on one key deliverable each month to ensure completion. This new approach will help track progress and manage expectations for both the committee and staff.

There was also discussion of using a Gantt chart to organize the various committee initiatives but no decision was made about this.

Motion: Limit committee requests to one commitment from staff per month, including a specific deliverable. Moved by Paul, seconded by Shannon (8-0)

d. Approve Trail Stewardship Proposal

The committee discussed a draft Trail Stewardship Program proposal that would involve collaboration with Duncan Murdoch and the Burlington Wildways team (The Intervale Center and Burlington Parks, Recreation and Waterfront). The program would use ArcGIS and a Survey123 mobile app to allow trail caretakers to document issues with geo-located photos that feed into an ArcGIS dashboard. Burlington Wildways offered to help set up the system for free. The proposed 6-month timeline includes:

- First 2 months: Setup with Duncan Murdoch and Burlington Wildways team
- Volunteer outreach and recruitment

- Trail steward training (potentially using existing videos/materials)
- Initial launch at Mathieu Town Forest and Indian Brook
- Evaluation after 5-6 months
- Expand to the rest of the Town-managed trails (this requires a Town Trail Inventory to have been completed)

After discussion, **it was decided that the proposal be put on hold until the new Trail Coordinator is hired**, as this could be a good first project for that position.

e. Approve Arbor Day Foundation Tree City Application

The committee discussed the status of the Tree City USA application, which is due in February. April Peterson provided updates on gathering required documentation, including proof of Arbor Day observation from Essex Middle School news, volunteer hours totaling 82.5 hours valued at approximately \$2,000, volunteer expenses of \$700, contracted services of \$1,294, and staff time valued at \$1,765. Chuck Vile's volunteer time of 4 hours per week was valued at \$6,240. The committee is still waiting on Public Works documentation for tree maintenance expenses, though \$4,100 has been allocated in the upcoming budget for tree removal. A proclamation from the Selectboard designating Arbor Day 2025 is still needed. The committee plans to have all documentation compiled by the January meeting for final review before submission in February.

Motion: Motion that Kent focus on the Tree City USA project this month. Deliverable is a draft application. Moved by Ken, seconded by Bino (8-0)

UPDATES AND REPORTS

a. Riverside Land Project

The Winooski Valley Park District has submitted an application to the Vermont Housing Conservation Board for a feasibility study regarding the Riverside property. In investigating adjacent properties, it was discovered that the neighboring landowners also own a small landlocked parcel that connects to the Saxon Hill Forest. This parcel is valued at only \$4,000 on the grand list due to its landlocked status. The Park District has requested informal contact be made with these property owners, who reside in South Carolina, to inform them about the activities planned for the neighboring land. This could potentially lead to discussions about additional trail connectivity opportunities.

Ken mentioned that the letter of intent to sell the property needs to be signed by the seller (Essex Green Association) as well as the town. Bino agreed to get the letter of intent signed by the HOA.

b. Tree Nursery Project

The Tree Nursery Project grant application is currently being tabled and will be added to the grant chart for potential future years' funding. The committee has completed the MOU and provided detailed answers to all questions. The next step is to arrange a meeting between town staff and Essex Westford School District (EWSD) staff, which has not yet occurred. Kent offered to facilitate and set up this meeting once the committee is ready to move forward. Kent is currently working on packaging the information into a proposal format and has some questions marked in yellow that need additional input. Steve offered to review the marked items and provide answers where possible.

c. Trail Inventory/Mapping

The committee reviewed progress on the trail inventory mapping project. Duane presented a map showing the trails in Essex with an opaque white overlay over non-town-owned property, with traced trails from various sources including Strava heat maps. The map revealed many trails crossing private property without confirmed easements. He also presented a corresponding spreadsheet that tracks trail details including confirmed easements, accessibility, and areas needing investigation. Key discussion points included:

- The need to add other public land owners to the map, including state land, Winooski Valley Park District properties, and school properties
- The value of being able to identify trails on public vs private land to help prioritize where easements may be needed
- Potential to align this work with upcoming Act 171 forest block and habitat connector planning

It was decided that this work would be valuable input for the incoming Trail Coordinator to take on, and has become bigger than it makes sense for just the CTC to handle. **It was agreed to pause this project until the Trail Coordinator is hired.**

d. Conservation Fund Survey

The Conservation Fund Survey, which is required every 5 years under the committee's current mission, is overdue since the last one was done in 2016 before the Conservation Reserve Fund was established in 2018. Paul and Bino are working on drafting a new survey that will align more closely with the Conservation Fund Policy. The goal is to have a rough draft ready for review at the January meeting and a final draft for approval at the February meeting, with the intention of having printed copies available for Town Meeting Day. To expedite the process, it was suggested to have two additional committee members review and edit the draft before the January meeting to incorporate more input upfront.

The goal is to have a printed copy ready before Town Meeting Day.

e. Zoning Regulations re: Landscaping

Betsy provided a brief update on zoning regulations related to landscaping. She noted that she has gathered some additional items recently that she plans to add to her previous findings. **She intends to have recommendations ready to present to the Planning Commission in January.** The update referenced a relevant Supreme Court decision regarding South Burlington's regulations, where the Court upheld that towns can impose stricter zoning regulations protecting forest blocks and wildlife corridors without it being considered a "taking" from landowners, as long as no development application was already in process.

f. Vermont Climate Action Plan

Betsy provided an update on attending a presentation about the Thermal Energy Network, which the town is considering for municipal buildings. The system involves drilling 300-500 feet down to utilize the constant ~50 degree temperature for heating and cooling buildings. If the town created an LLC for this project, any development in town could potentially join the network and receive tax benefits and rebates, even if not directly connected to the system.

g. Decide Staff Action Item

Motion: Kent to focus on the Tree City USA project this month, deliverable is draft application. Moved by Ken, seconded by Bino (8-0)

Kent mentioned that if he has extra time he will move on to helping with the Tree Nursery.

READING FILE

EXECUTIVE SESSION

a. An executive session is anticipated to discuss the evaluation of a public employee pursuant to 1 V.S.A. § 313(a)(3)

The committee entered into a brief executive session at the end of the meeting to discuss the evaluation of a public employee, as permitted under Vermont state law. No details of the closed session discussion are available.

ADJOURN

Motion: Adjourn at 8:12 Moved by Shannon, seconded by Betsy (8-0)

MOTIONS

- Move approve the agenda moving Business item A between C and D. Motioned by Shannon, seconded by Steve (8-0)
- Move to tabling the motion to approve the meeting minutes from November to the next meeting. Motioned by Ken, seconded by April (8-0)
- Motion to limit ourselves to one commitment from Staff per month, including a specific deliverable. Moved by Paul, Seconded by Shannon (8-0)
- Motion to amend the agenda to add G at the end of the UPDATES AND REPORTS section to pick what staff will work on
- Motion that Kent focus on the Tree City USA project this month, deliverable is draft application. Moved by Ken, Seconded by Bino (8-0)
- Motion to adjourn at 8:12 Shannon, Betsy (8-0)

NEXT STEPS

- Duane to make requested changes to meeting minutes from November
- Committee members to attend the Selectboard meeting on Monday, December 16 where the CTC proposal to become a Commission will be discussed if possible
- Ken will make the proclamation for April 2025 being Arbor Day
- Steve will send April documentation for \$4k public works spending on tree maintenance
- Shannon and April will meet regarding last pieces for Tree City USA application
- Bino will get the property sale letter of intent signed by Essex Green Association
- Duane: Add WVPD and State land to the trail inventory map
- Steve to review Kent's yellow marked questions about the Tree Nursery and provide answers

Video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3m2KVGVS90I>

Next Meeting: January 14th, 2024 6:00pm