Essex Conservation and Trails Committee (CTC)
Regular Meeting Minutes
81 Main St. Essex Jct., VT 05452
February 11, 2025

Meeting minutes prepared by Duane Millar Barlow, approved on March 11, 2025

ATTENDEES

Members present: Ken Signorello (Chair), Shannon Jackson (Vice Chair), Duane Millar Barlow (Clerk), Morgan Kirk, Bino Cummings, Paul Davis, Steve Dowd, Betsy Dunn (remote), April Peterson (remote)
Staff: Kent Johnson
Public: Zach Lenning (Town Trail Coordinator), Harlan Smith (Town Parks Superintendent), Patty Davis (remote), Gina Halpin Barrett (remote)

1. CALL TO ORDER

The Conservation and Trails Committee meeting was called to order by Chair Ken Signorello at 6:02 PM on Tuesday, February 11th, 2025.

2. AGENDA ADDITIONS/CHANGES

The Chair opened the discussion on agenda changes by explaining that due to a recent meeting law petition, they learned the committee has more flexibility in making agenda changes than previously thought. While action items requiring votes should not be added for the benefit of public notice, it is in fact legal to do so. It is just recommended not to by the Secretary of State.

Several changes were proposed:

1. Harlan requested to add a report about the solar array RFP for the Unsworth property
2. A request was made to add member comments, which was incorporated under "Reading File and Announcements"
3. The Chair proposed setting a firm 8:00 PM time for the executive session, noting the extensive agenda. This would mean pausing wherever they were in the agenda at 8:00 PM to conduct the executive session, after which they would return to public session for any necessary decisions.

Motion: Amend the agenda to include comments in the Reading Section and have an 8:00 PM Executive Session cutoff Moved by Shannon, seconded by Steve (9-0)

3. APPROVAL OF MINUTES

a. Approve minutes from January 14, 2025 meeting

The committee attempted to review the minutes from the January 14, 2025 meeting but encountered technical difficulties. Multiple members reported being unable to access the file, receiving error messages when trying to open it. Due to these access problems and the inability for members to properly review the content, the committee decided to defer the minutes approval to the next month's meeting.

Next Steps:

- Add January 14, 2025 minutes review to next month's agenda,
- Resolve technical issues with file access/conversion from Google Doc to PDF

4. BUSINESS ITEMS

a. Advise DRB on Development Applications

1. Final Subdivision - 132 Thompson Drive

The committee reviewed the final subdivision application for 132 Thompson Drive, which proposes a 5-lot subdivision with 4 lots to be developed. Kent Johnson presented updates on several waivers being requested by the applicant, primarily for cost-saving reasons. These included waiving requirements for street tree planting (which would have required 136 trees), allowing steeper grades at the Route 117 intersection, and modifications to the 50-foot landscaping buffer requirements.

The proposed development includes a new public road connecting from Route 117 through what's called the Cho property, eventually intended to connect to Thompson Drive, though this connection is not guaranteed in the current application. The road would include an 8-foot wide paved shared use path separated from the roadway.

Two members of the public voiced significant concerns. Gina Halpin Barrett expressed strong opposition to waiving the 50-foot buffer requirement in the RPD zone, citing past experiences where buffer waivers on Corporate Drive led to reduced quality of life for neighboring residents. Patty Davis raised concerns about erosion given the steep grade (approximately 8%) of the proposed road, drawing comparisons to issues on Lower Sandhill Road and emphasizing the need for proper erosion control measures.

Committee members discussed the importance of maintaining trees for erosion control, wildlife corridors, and aesthetic purposes. There were also discussions about the development's proximity to popular mountain bike trails and the potential need for additional parking access.

The development area spans both Industrial and Agricultural Residential zoning districts, with different requirements for each zone. The portion in the RPD (Resource Preservation District) has specific buffer requirements that the developer is seeking to waive.

Committee recommendations for the DRB:

1. Minimize impact on existing trails.
2. Do not grant the waiver for the 50 foot buffer.
3. If waivers are granted, there should be some offsetting benefits to the town (e.g. easements for the trails behind Prairie Field and Forestdale)
4. Accept the waiver for the turn-around so long as a timeline for extending the road to Thompson Drive is given.
5. Add a parking area for access to the trails for trail users at the cul-de-sac.

Motion: Committee recommendations to the DRB regarding 132 Thompson Drive subdivision application Moved by Bino, seconded by Morgan (9-0)

2. Boundary Line Adjustment - 247 and 251 River Road

Kent Johnson presented a boundary line adjustment application for 247 and 251 River Road. The adjustment is intended to correct frontage requirements along the road and address some property line matters. After brief discussion, the committee had no specific comments or concerns regarding this boundary line adjustment.

3. Final Minor Subdivision - 9 Colonel Page Road

The Committee reviewed the final minor subdivision application for 9 Colonel Page Road, located near the intersection of Brigham Hill and Old Stage Road. The property, approximately 60 acres in size, includes an existing house at the corner of Colonel Page and Old Stage Road. The proposal includes creating two new lots adjacent to the existing house, with a larger undeveloped area (Lot 4) to the north that currently has no development plans.

The development team has demonstrated good practices by preserving existing trees and positioning new houses away from the road to maintain scenic views, as the property falls within the Scenic Resource Protection Overlay District. The application materials address these scenic impact considerations.

A key discussion point centered around habitat connectivity between forest blocks and wetland areas. The proposal includes a 20-foot wide agricultural easement that connects to a 60-foot wide future right-of-way, potentially linking wetland areas through the property to forest blocks across the street. While the town plan documents ACT 171 and forest block requirements, specific regulations for habitat connectivity have not yet been established.

It was noted that in a previous development at 60 Colonel Page Road, the applicant voluntarily maintained a 100-foot wide buffer area to support habitat connectivity. This precedent suggests the current applicant might be receptive to similar recommendations for wildlife corridor preservation.

Committee recommendations for the DRB:

Reiterate previous CTC 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

New recommendations:

1. Any right of way being proposed, design it such that it can be used as a wildlife corridor (narrow, not paved, trees, etc)
2. Do not infringe on the existing forest that is along Alder Brook, and consider involving an arborist for Lot 4

Motion: Approve recommendations for 9 Colonel Page Road Moved by Betsy, seconded by Paul (9-0)

4. Site Plan - 572 Kimo Drive - Skipped

5. Site Plan - 637 Kimo Drive - Skipped

The committee decided to skip review of the site plan for 572 Kimo Drive. A motion was made and approved to skip both 572 and 637 Kimo Drive site plans during this meeting.

Motion: Skip review of Kimo Drive Site Plans (572 and 637) Moved by Shannon, seconded by Morgan (9-0)

5. PUBLIC TO BE HEARD

This was originally intended to be earlier in the meeting.

During the Public to be Heard portion of the meeting, two members of the public spoke. First, Harlan Smith raised questions about a proposed pollinator garden at Indian Brook Reservoir's parking lot triangle. He sought clarification on the rationale, purpose, and plan for this project. Betsy explained that while the location seemed good for a pollinator garden, no significant action would be taken until at least May, pending site evaluation. The first steps would include cleaning the area and testing soil pH to determine if corrections are needed. The project would be led by Mike Kieran from the nonprofit "Be the Change."

Harlan expressed concerns about introducing bees to a heavily populated recreational area but was assured that the bees typically don't bother people. The committee noted that the site was chosen partly for its visibility and educational value. The area had previously been forested with Trillium but was cleared for the power line and visibility. Alternative suggestions were discussed, including potentially creating a green space with swings if the pollinator garden proves unfeasible.

The second speaker was Zach Lenning, the new Trail Coordinator, who introduced himself to the committee. He shared his background in golf course management, conservation work with the USDA, teaching at a Native American college in Montana, and trail crew experience. Zach described his current focus on learning the trail systems, verifying map accuracy, and updating signage in the parks during his first two weeks on the job.

Harlan then updated the committee about the Unsworth property Solar Panel application. The town is planning to move forward on creating a RFP. There is trail potential through that property that could bring people from the Upper Main Street project to Indian Brook.

6. BUSINESS ITEMS CONTINUED

b. Approve Conservation Fund Survey and Execution Plan

Paul Davis presented an update on the revised version of the Conservation Fund Survey. He shared the updated survey introduction and noted that some questions had been removed from the previous version. During the discussion, Shannon suggested minor edits to the introduction text. Betsy recommended reversing the order of preferences in the survey grid to improve its clarity and usability.

The committee discussed the execution plan for the survey, which included plans to distribute it during Community Day. Paul and Bino volunteered to handle the survey administration, while Betsy, April, and Steve agreed to set up a table at 4:30. Betsy took on the responsibility to confirm with Tammy that they are expecting a table from the Conservation and Trails Committee at the event.

Motion: Approve Conservation Reserve Fund Survey with proposed changes Moved by Bino, seconded by April (9-0)

Next Steps:

- Implement suggested edits to the survey introduction,
- Reverse the order of preferences in the survey grid,
- Set up table at Community Day at 4:30,
- Prepare survey materials for distribution at Community Day

c. Update on CTC presence at Community Day

The committee discussed plans for their presence at Community Day. Paul Davis and Bino Cummings will be responsible for managing the survey component of their booth. Betsy Dunn, April Peterson, and Steve Dowd volunteered to set up the table at 4:30. Betsy was assigned to confirm with Tammy that they are expecting a table from the Conservation and Trails Committee (CTC).

Next Steps:

- Paul Davis and Bino Cummings to prepare and manage survey at Community Day,
- Betsy Dunn, April Peterson, and Steve Dowd to set up table at 4:30,
- Betsy Dunn to confirm table reservation with Tammy

d. Approve revised Tree Nursery Project MOU

The committee discussed the revised Tree Nursery Project Memorandum of Understanding (MOU). Chair Ken Signorello reported that the revised MOU had been sent to Legal for review. The committee needed to ratify the document during this meeting.

Motion: Ratify the Tree Nursery MOU Moved by Duane Millar Barlow, seconded by Morgan Kirk (9-0)

Next Steps:

- Await legal review of the Tree Nursery MOU,
- Proceed with implementation once legal review is complete

e. Arbor Day celebration planning

The Arbor Day celebration planning was briefly discussed during the meeting. Chair Ken Signorello reported that he has not yet received a response from Horseford regarding the celebration plans. No further details or discussions took place regarding this agenda item.

Next Steps:

- Ken to follow up with Horseford,
- Develop and finalize Arbor Day celebration details once response is received

f. Update on Commission proposal

No update was provided during the meeting regarding the Commission proposal agenda item. The item was listed but not discussed.

g. Update on Arbor Day Foundation Tree City application

The Arbor Day Foundation Tree City application update was brief, with the notes simply indicating that it has been completed. No additional discussion or details were provided during the meeting about this agenda item.

h. Update on Keystone Trail project

Kent Johnson provided a brief update on the Keystone Trail project. A public event has been scheduled for February 20th from 6:00 PM to 7:30 PM at Essex Middle School. Kent will send out an email with more details about the event. Additionally, Kent will provide information to Betsy for Soup Day.

Next Steps:

- Kent to send email about February 20th public event,
- Kent to provide information to Betsy for Soup Day

i. Update on Trail Mapping

Duane provided an update on the trail mapping project. Zach Lenning, the new Trail Coordinator who was present at the meeting, discussed the ongoing work to verify map accuracy. He noted that symbology is specifically needed for the Indian Brook area. There is currently an internal discussion taking place regarding what information can be published on the maps.

Ken recommended that Zach remain vigilant for any potential trail connectivity opportunities during the mapping process. Harlan Smith added that one of recreation's goals is to produce accurate trailhead maps for public use.

j. Review and adjust CTC Work Plan

The agenda item "Review and adjust CTC Work Plan" was deferred during the meeting and not discussed.

7. READING FILE & ANNOUNCEMENTS

During the Reading File & Announcements section, two significant items were discussed. First, Shannon announced his candidacy for Selectboard and informed the committee that if elected, the next meeting would be his last with the Conservation and Trails Committee.

The second item involved a detailed discussion about the Unsworth Property, presented by Harlan Smith. The property consists of 167 acres, and the town has been approached by a solar company interested in developing approximately 30 acres for a solar farm. The project had been on hold but is now moving forward with plans to issue an RFP (Request for Proposal). The deed includes specific provisions about recreation benefits, and the proposed development would incorporate trail development through the property, potentially connecting to the new Town Center.

During the discussion, committee members expressed enthusiasm for the project and raised several points of consideration. There was interest in the possibility of residents buying into the solar project, particularly for those without suitable solar access at their homes. The potential for the solar installation to provide power to Indian Brook as it continues to develop was also noted. Additionally, there was a suggestion about possibly incorporating a dog park into the property development, as Essex currently lacks such a facility.

The project is moving forward to the next stage, with plans to present it to the select board at their next meeting.

8. EXECUTIVE SESSION

a. Discuss negotiating or securing of real estate purchase or lease option

The committee moved into executive session to discuss matters related to real estate purchase negotiations. The session was initiated near the end of the regular meeting.

Motion: Enter executive session to discuss real estate purchase Moved by Ken, seconded by Shannon (9-0)

9. ADJOURN

The meeting concluded with a motion to adjourn during the executive session.

Motion: Motion to adjourn the meeting Moved by Betsy, seconded by Steve (9-0)

Next Meeting: March 11th, 2025 6:00p

Meeting recording: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SyjmUSWKArE