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

Meeting minutes prepared by Duane Millar Barlow, approved on April 22, 2025

ATTENDEES

Members present: Ken Signorello (Chair), Shannon Jackson (Vice Chair), Duane Millar Barlow (Clerk), Morgan Kirk, Bino Cummings, Steve Dowd, Betsy Dunn, April Peterson
Absent: Paul Davis
Staff Present: Kent Johnson, Zach Lenning, Harlan Smith
Public present: Mike Spaeder (Trail Caretaker), David Skopin

1. CALL TO ORDER

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

2. AGENDA ADDITIONS/CHANGES

In order to accommodate Harlan Smith and Zach Lenning, there was a motion to move Agenda Item **6.j. Update on Trail Mapping** to **6.a.**

Motion: Move Agenda item **6.j. Update on Trail Mapping** to **6.a.** and approve the agenda. Motioned by Betsy, Seconded by Shannon (8-0)

3. APPROVE AGENDA

Approved unanimously as part of the previous motion.

4. PUBLIC TO BE HEARD

Two members of the public and one staff member addressed the Committee:

David Skopin introduced himself and explained he was invited by a Committee member to attend the meeting to determine if there might be a fit for him on the Committee. He inquired about the Committee's role in development reviews, specifically asking if they provide information substantial enough to hold up in court if needed. The Chair explained that their recommendations are recorded in the minutes and included in staff reports prepared by Kent for the Planning Commission and Development Review Board (DRB). Mr. Skopin expressed interest in conservation and climate change issues, noting it's a "big umbrella" of preparing for what's to come. Committee members encouraged him to apply for the upcoming vacancy.

Mike Spaeder, Trail Caretaker, asked if there was anything he should be aware of regarding the trails, noting that spring is an "interesting time" as trails will soon become muddy. Committee members informed him about Eagle Scout projects planned for boardwalk and bridge construction on a new trail, coordinated during the recent Community Day. They also mentioned that an open position on the Committee would be available soon, and Mr. Spaeder was encouraged to reapply. Mr. Spaeder commented that the Committee's recent change to earlier meeting times was beneficial, noting it was "a good move" as it prevents late-night meetings.

Harlan Smith, the new Park Maintenance Superintendent and Trail Coordinator, requested feedback on the Saxon Hill Forest Management Plan at the next meeting. He provided a brief overview, noting the plan is five years old (halfway through its 10-year cycle), and that six stands are either full or overstocked for timber. Eight stands were marked for action out of a total of 18 stands, and there are small invasive issues that need to be addressed. Mr. Smith indicated the plan would eventually need approval from both the Selectboard and School Department, as it includes part of their property. He also mentioned that Matthew Town Forest would be next for a management plan after this one is completed.

5. APPROVAL OF MINUTES

a. **Approve minutes from January 14, 2025 and February 11, 2025 meetings**

January 14, 2025 Minutes

The Committee reviewed the January 14, 2025 meeting minutes. Two errors were identified:

Under "Public to be Heard," in the section regarding a motion to change the agenda, there was a missing second with only "Seconded by" followed by "8-Z" noted in the minutes. The Chair suggested reviewing the recording to identify who seconded the motion.

Betsy pointed out that "Matthew Forest" was incorrectly spelled as "M-A-T-W" and should be corrected to "M-A-T-H-I-E-U" (Mathieu Town Forest).

Motion: Betsy moved to approve the January 14, 2025 minutes with the noted corrections. April seconded the motion. The motion passed unanimously (8-0).

February 11, 2025 Minutes
The Committee reviewed the February 11, 2025 meeting minutes. No changes were suggested.

Betsy moved to accept the February 11, 2025 minutes as documented. Shannon seconded the motion. The motion passed unanimously (8-0).

6. BUSINESS ITEMS

Zach Lenning's Resignation

Before the trail mapping update, it was announced that Zach Lenning had submitted his resignation to Harlan Smith the previous week. Zach explained that his other part-time job had offered him a full-time position, which he had accepted. He expressed regret about leaving, stating "I did not expect the expensive health care through the Open Health Care system. I knew it would be expensive; I just didn't know it would be that expensive." Zach noted it was "hard to say no to a full-time job" and apologized because he "wanted this to work out."

Zach mentioned that the following week would be his last with the town. The Committee members expressed disappointment about his departure, with Ken acknowledging that Zach had "done a tremendous amount of work to leave us in a good spot to move forward."

Harlan Smith indicated he would be posting the Trails Coordinator position again and was working to potentially make it a full-time position, stating "I believe it's warranted with the amount of [work]." The Committee offered their support in this effort, with a member suggesting they could provide a resolution if needed to help advocate for making the position full-time.

The Committee thanked Zach for his service and contributions to the trail system improvements.

a. **Update on Trail Mapping** (was "j" on the original agenda)

Harlan Smith introduced the update, mentioning that Zach Lenning had been the lead on this project. Kent displayed the latest hiking map for Indian Brook on screen.

Zach explained this was the newest version of the Indian Brook hiking map, which was more recent than the version shared at Community Day the previous week. Zach reported they were working with the GIS coordinator to add these features but emphasized this wasn't the final version yet. Harlan explained they decided to create a series of specialized maps rather than one comprehensive map:

- A hiking-specific map (the one being displayed)
- A camping-specific map for campers showing platforms and tent sites
- A water recreation map showing swimming locations, canoe launches, buoys, and other water features

This approach addresses the challenge of capturing all information on a single map. The hiking map would serve as the main map, with additional trailhead maps planned for installation at trail entrances.

Harlan added that they're planning significant improvements including better trail markings and intersection signs, crediting Zach for documenting and advancing these initiatives.

Zach highlighted a key improvement on the map: clearer marking of the dog on-leash area, which is now cross-hatched to better indicate the picnic area, parking lots, and trails leading to the dog waste stations. They also simplified the map for easier comprehension by first-time visitors.

Committee members provided several suggestions:

- Retain the "no shooting" boundary marking as it informs hikers where they can safely walk
- Include total trail lengths at trailheads to help users decide if they can manage the distance
- Add elevation information for key points or difficult sections
- Consider including trail difficulty ratings similar to AllTrails
- Possibly create a separate hunting map with season information

When asked about accessibility, Harlan confirmed they are discussing options to make swimming areas handicap accessible in the future.

Harlan said the Indian Brook mapping project would serve as a model for all town properties. He said that Saxon Hill would be their next target area after completing the Indian Brook maps.

Shannon asked about a connecting trail between Indian Brook and Colchester, and Zach confirmed he had walked that section and would include it on the map, indicating where users can connect to public land managed by the Winooski Valley Park District.

The Committee expressed appreciation for the improved maps and the planned trail system enhancements.

b. **Establish a regular presence at DRB and Planning Commission Meetings**

Ken Signorello explained that he had occasionally attended Planning Commission and Development Review Board (DRB) meetings and noticed that while Kent faithfully includes the Committee's recommendations in staff reports, these recommendations often don't receive sufficient attention or advocacy during the meetings.

Ken proposed that the Committee establish a regular presence at both DRB and Planning Commission meetings, with at least one Committee member attending each meeting to speak up for their recommendations. He noted that having a human voice advocating for the Committee's recommendations could potentially make a difference in how they're considered.

Kent confirmed that both the Planning Commission and DRB currently meet once a month, though sometimes additional DRB meetings are scheduled when there are numerous applications.

Ken explained he would create a schedule of all upcoming meetings for Committee members to sign up for voluntarily. He clarified that members who attend would participate as members of the public, authorized to speak on behalf of the Conservation and Trails Committee during relevant public hearings. When questioned about participation during deliberations, it was noted that DRB deliberations often happen in closed sessions.

Committee members discussed the logistics of attending these meetings:

- The meetings could also be attended remotely if needed
- Members could check meeting agendas beforehand to determine if their attendance was necessary
- Kent would add any additional meetings to the schedule if they were scheduled

Motion: Betsy moved to establish a schedule for Committee members to attend DRB and Planning Commission meetings. The motion was seconded by Ken and passed unanimously (8-0).

Ken indicated he would set up a schedule for members to sign up for specific meetings.

c. **Advise DRB on Development Applications**

Site Plan - 572 Kimo Drive

Kent outlined key considerations regarding the application:

- The regulations require a 50-foot buffer along the property, outside the 60-foot right-of-way
- Typically in these developments, the buffer has been cleared and used for stormwater detention areas, with new landscaping planted afterward
- The applicant has requested a waiver to construct access driveways, stormwater infiltration basins, water and sewer services, and conduct grading within the 50-foot buffer

The Committee discussed examples of buffers in the area, comparing properties on Corporate Drive where waivers had been granted (resulting in minimal buffers with just a few trees) versus properties along Alan Martin Drive with intact natural buffers. Members used screen sharing to view these examples, noting the significant difference in appearance and environmental benefit.

After extensive discussion, the Committee formulated three recommendations:

1. Do not grant the waivers for disturbances in the 50-foot buffers for things like stormwater retention. Those should be in the building envelope. 50-foot buffers should only allow utilities and access (e.g., a driveway).
2. Keep the 50-foot buffer natural, as stated in the regulations. Clearing and replanting 50-foot buffers is not equivalent to keeping it natural.
3. Add walkable access to the multi-use path to and from the properties for people who work in the building, so they can more easily commute or go for a walk during the day.

Committee members emphasized that the development is in an Industrial Resource Preservation (IRP) area, which is supposed to be "in harmony with nature," and that natural buffers serve important functions for wildlife connectivity, privacy, light blocking, and noise prevention.

Motion: Ken moved to approve the three recommendations. Betsy seconded the motion. The motion passed unanimously (8-0).

The Committee also suggested that whoever attends the DRB meeting should bring photos of both good and poor buffer examples to illustrate their position.

Site Plan - 637 Kimo Drive

Kent Johnson presented the site plan for 637 Kimo Drive, located on lots 13 and 14 (combined), on the right side of the road when viewed on the map. He revealed that according to the sign plans included in the application materials, this would be an Amazon distribution center, approximately 100,000 square feet in size (comparable to a Walmart).

Key considerations for this application included:

- Connectivity from the path is not an issue as the property is on the correct side of the road for the planned shared use path
- The northern part of the site consists mostly of wetlands which the applicant is not disturbing
- Like the previous application, the applicant has requested a waiver to build within the 50-foot buffer area

Kent noted differences between this application and the previous one:

- The applicant provided better explanations for their waiver request
- The stormwater retention area is positioned at the natural low point of the site
- The applicant has calculated how many trees would be removed from the buffer area and proposed to offset this by retaining a significantly larger percentage of trees elsewhere on the site
- The applicant is offering to maintain a 100-foot no-build buffer along the eastern property line

The Committee examined the plans showing extensive parking areas around the building. Shannon expressed concern about the significant amount of impervious surface proposed, suggesting that some parking could be placed underneath the building to reduce environmental impact.

After discussion, the Committee formulated two recommendations:

1. Maintain the 50-foot buffer in its natural state. Move the retention ponds within the building envelope rather than use the 50-foot buffer.
2. Reduce the parking surface area by adding parking underneath the building. This can be achieved by having underground parking throughout the entire building footprint.

The Committee noted that placing parking underneath the building would have multiple benefits: reducing impervious surface, potentially reducing the size or number of retention ponds needed, providing covered parking for employees, and better protecting delivery vehicles from the elements.

Motion: Shannon moved to approve the two recommendations. Bino seconded the motion. The motion passed unanimously (8-0).

Conceptual Discussion - 21 Upper Main Street

Kent Johnson presented a conceptual plan for 21 Upper Main Street, explaining that this was still in an early stage of development. He displayed a map showing the location, which is across from Orleans Farm on Main Street heading toward Essex Junction.

The site plan showed residential units proposed for the property, which slopes down away from the road. The applicant has preserved trees along the street frontage and is proposing to position the buildings set back from the road with parking in front.

Kent explained that the property presents some regulatory challenges:

- The zoning requires a large setback from the road, which the proposed plan meets
- However, the property is also in the Business Design Control District, which typically requires buildings to face the street with sidewalks, creating a more street-oriented design

- These competing requirements are why the applicant is seeking a conceptual discussion before proceeding further

The Committee noted that the slope of the land might make the proposed configuration more practical, with homes looking out over the area behind the property.

Shannon raised a question about the five-year plan that included a scoping study for a multi-use path along Main Street from the Fun Center down to the Essex Junction area. He asked whether that path was planned for this side of the street, noting that if so, the Committee should recommend establishing an easement for it.

Kent confirmed that the existing trail in the Essex Junction portion is on the same side of the street as this property. The Committee examined maps showing where the current sidewalk terminates near the tennis courts, recognizing the value of eventually connecting these pedestrian routes.

After discussion, the Committee formulated one recommendation:

1. Consider a trail easement along the road in order to facilitate a future sidewalk along Upper Main that connects to the Essex Junction walking path system.

Motion: Duane moved to approve the recommendation. Bino seconded the motion. The motion passed unanimously (8-0).

d. Approve New Top CTC Staff priority

Ken noted that Kent Johnson had completed the previous priority assigned to him, which was to submit the Tree City status application for the town. The Committee needed to determine Kent's next priority project.

Ken mentioned that two projects were currently in progress that could be considered:

1. The tree nursery memorandum of understanding (MOU)
2. The Riverside property, which required Act 250 research

Steve provided an update on the tree nursery project, explaining that he had already given Kent the document they had worked on and would be meeting with him the following day to ensure there were no objections to its content. He mentioned that the document had undergone legal review, with the resulting comments now being forwarded to the school for their approval. Steve indicated that what was needed at this point was a clean copy of the agreement that could be signed and submitted to the Select Board.

Steve emphasized that all the details about funding were already defined in the document, so there was nothing additional to figure out regarding financial requirements for the spring.

Motion: Betsy moved to make completing the tree nursery project Kent's top priority for the month. Shannon seconded the motion. The motion to make the tree nursery project Kent's top priority was approved unanimously (8-0)

e. Debrief on Community Day at Town Meeting

It was noted that the Boy Scouts were present at the event, with two scouts working on their Eagle badges planning to work on the boardwalk and bridges on a new trail. Ken commented that "the soup was good" at the event.

f. Update on and Approval of Marketing Plan for Conservation Fund Survey

This item was deferred since Paul was out with a family issue.

g. Update on Tree Nursery Project

No significant discussion as it was late in the meeting and the committee was moving quickly through these in order to get to **l. Farewell to Shannon Jackson**

h. Arbor Day Celebration Planning

No significant discussion as it was late in the meeting and the committee was moving quickly through these in order to get to **l. Farewell to Shannon Jackson**

i. Update on Commission Proposal

Ken noted that the Committee's proposal to become a Commission had been sent to legal review, but indicated there was no update available at this time.

j. Update on Keystone Trail Project

No significant discussion as it was late in the meeting and the committee was moving quickly through these in order to get to **l. Farewell to Shannon Jackson**

k. Review and adjust CTC Work Plan

No significant discussion as it was late in the meeting and the committee was moving quickly through these in order to get to **l. Farewell to Shannon Jackson**

l. Farewell to Shannon Jackson

Ken announced that Shannon Jackson had been elected to the Select Board and congratulated him. He explained that, per town policy, Select Board members cannot serve on committees or commissions, so Shannon would be resigning from the Conservation and Trails Committee.

Shannon expressed his appreciation and excitement about his new role, stating, "I'll be your best advocate on the Select Board." He mentioned that the issues the Committee had worked on had really made an impact, and he was looking forward to continuing to progress their work as a Select Board member.

Shannon mentioned that his Select Board term would start in April, and he was preparing by meeting with staff the following day and attending a workshop for new Select Board members the following weekend.

The Committee noted they would need to select a new Vice Chair to replace Shannon. Shannon reassured the Committee that they "can't get rid of me" and confirmed he would still participate in special events like activities at Indian Brook.

Ken expressed appreciation for Shannon's service and mentioned he hoped he would bring some of the structure from the Committee to the Select Board. Shannon acknowledged Ken as "a great mentor" and expressed appreciation for his guidance.

7. EXECUTIVE SESSION

Due to limited time, no executive session was had in this meeting.

8. READING FILE

a. 2025 Rural Roadside Ash Tree Removal Grants
b. Association of Vermont Conservation Commission Tiny Grants
c. Association of Vermont Conservation Commission Annual Report
d. Busy beavers play outsize role in cleaning up waterways
e. Community Tree Fund - Vermont Urban & Community Forestry Program
f. Flooding long past, many Vermont municipalities are still swimming in red ink
g. Kingdom Trails Landowner Advisory Committee - Thank a local landowner for Vermont's ability to recreate

7. ADJOURN

Motion: Bino moved to adjourn the meeting. Betsy seconded the motion. The motion passed unanimously (8-0)

The meeting was adjourned at 8:04pm.

NEXT STEPS

1. Create a schedule for Committee members to attend Development Review Board and Planning Commission meetings (Ken)
2. Committee members to review the Saxon Hill Forest Management Plan for discussion at next meeting (All members)
3. Correct January 14, 2025 minutes:
    a. Add the name of who seconded the motion under "Public to be Heard"
    b. Fix spelling of "Mathieu Town Forest"
4. Forward recommendations to the DRB regarding:
    a. 572 Kimo Drive (3 recommendations)
    b. 637 Kimo Drive (2 recommendations)
    c. 21 Upper Main Street (1 recommendation)
5. Kent to focus on completing the Tree Nursery project:
    a. Finalize clean copy of the agreement
    b. Secure necessary signatures
    c. Submit to Select Board
6. Post and advertise the Trails Coordinator position following Zach's departure (Harlan)
7. Consider advocating for making the Trails Coordinator position full-time (Harlan, with potential Committee support)
8. Committee members to review the CTC Work Plan individually
9. Select a new Vice Chair at a future meeting to replace Shannon

Meeting recording: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tvUVZq3Qd10