Essex Conservation and Trails Committee (CTC)
Regular Meeting Minutes
81 Main St. Essex Jct., VT 05452
April 22, 2025

Meeting minutes prepared by Duane Millar Barlow, approved on May 13, 2025

ATTENDEES

Members present: Ken Signorello (Chair), Duane Millar Barlow (Clerk), Paul Davis, April Peterson, Steve Dowd, Betsy Dunn, Morgan Kirk, Bino Cummings
Staff Present: Kent Johnson (Town Planner), Harlan Smith (Parks Maintenance Superintendent)

1. CALL TO ORDER

The Conservation and Trails Committee meeting was called to order by Chair Ken Signorello at 6:02 PM on Tuesday, April 22nd, 2025.

2. AGENDA ADDITIONS/CHANGES

Two items were added to the agenda:

1. Discussion of enrollment in the Association of Vermont Conservation Commissions was added as item 6.g.1.
2. Planning for the spring work day/cleanup at Indian Brook Park - Paul Davis brought this up, mentioning he had been considering Matthew Town Forest instead but determined Indian Brook would be better since there was already an established list of projects there.

3. APPROVE AGENDA

Motion: The amended agenda with these two additions was moved by Duane, seconded by Steve, and passed unanimously (8-0).

4. PUBLIC TO BE HEARD

No members of the public wished to speak.

5. APPROVAL OF MINUTES

a. Approve minutes from 3/11/25 meeting

No specific corrections or changes were suggested.

Motion: Betsy Dunn moved to accept the minutes as submitted, which was seconded by Bino. The motion passed unanimously (8-0).

6. BUSINESS ITEMS

a. Elect new Vice Chairperson

Following Shannon Jackson's departure from the committee (resulting from him being elected to the Selectboard), the committee needed to elect a new Vice Chairperson. Duane nominated April Peterson, who initially hesitated but accepted after some encouragement. Morgan then nominated Steve, but Steve declined the nomination citing his hearing difficulty. Kent mentioned that the new Vice Chair would need to be ready to run meetings in the Chair's absence, and April confirmed she would accept the responsibility, noting she had Robert's Rules of Order on her bedside table though she hadn't read it yet.

Action item: Ken to send April a "cheat sheet" or "crib notes" and to loop her in on all emails and committee business.

Motion: The committee voted unanimously (8-0) to elect April as the new Vice Chair.

b. Advise DRB on Development Applications

Kent reported that there were no development applications requiring review at this time, stating that many projects were "in a holding pattern." When asked about the next Development Review Board (DRB) meeting, Kent informed the committee it would be on May 1st at the high school. Ken (the Chair) reminded everyone about the Google spreadsheet he created for committee members to sign up to attend DRB and Planning Commission meetings, emphasizing the importance of having at least one representative at each meeting.

Ken mentioned that the upcoming May 1st DRB meeting would be significant, with applications including a large warehouse potentially to be inhabited by Amazon at Kimo Drive, and another application for a project on Main Street. No specific recommendations or actions were required from the committee at this time regarding development applications.

c. Arbor Day celebration finalization

Horsford Nursery agreed to donate a red oak tree, which will be planted at Sand Hill Park. Harlan confirmed that the Dig Safe process had been completed and the site was cleared for digging. **The committee established the following key details**:

1. Tree pickup: April 29th at 2:30pm (Ken and Steve will pick up the tree from Horsford)
2. Tree planting: April 29th at 4:00pm at Sand Hill Park
3. Official celebration: May 2nd at 10:00am at Sand Hill Park (committee members should arrive by 9:30am)

Ken will contact Full Circle Garden for mulch, and Harlan will provide compost and a watering bag for the site. Steve was working on getting a school class to attend the celebration.

The committee noted the significance of this year's event since Essex is now part of Tree USA (one of 10 communities). They discussed having photos taken and reaching out to a local reporter named Ella to cover the event.

Motion: Approve all the above arrangements motioned by Ken, seconded by Betsy, and passed unanimously (8-0).

Action item: Ken volunteered to notify Tammy (town staff) about the Arbor Day event details, and CC April as the new Vice Chair.

d. Advise on Parks and Recreation project list

Harlan Smith (Parks Maintenance Superintendent) presented a document listing potential Conservation and Trails Committee projects. His key points included:

1. The need for a trail structure classification system similar to road classifications (Class 3, 4, etc.), with categories ranging from ADA-compliant trails to more rustic paths.
2. The importance of officially designating town trails, as most trails are currently listed as "proposed" rather than official town trails that are maintained by the town.
3. A request from the Essex Inn about collaborating on trail identification to support tourism, as they're creating in-house brochures for guests that will promote the town's trails.
4. The continuation of invasive species management work, particularly at Indian Brook.

Harlan emphasized that while these projects are substantial and won't be completed quickly, he wanted the committee to start focusing on them and incorporating them into their work plan. He requested having specific committee members dedicated to each initiative that he could check in with regularly. The committee agreed that Duane, Betsy, and Morgan would work on the trail mapping project with Harlan.

e. Update on and approval of marketing plan for Conservation Fund Survey

This agenda item was skipped.

f. Update on Riverside Park

Ken presented an email update from Nick Warner (from the Winooski Valley Park District) about the Riverside Park project. The key points discussed were:

1. The Vermont River Conservancy has been hired to compile a baseline document for the site, which will be completed in July 2025 and is covered by a grant.
2. The email noted that the Vermont River Conservancy is not interested in being the landowner of the property.
3. There was discussion about an unresolved appraisal issue. The committee had previously submitted an application to use conservation funds to purchase the property (estimated at $25,000), but they were unsure of the status of this application.
4. There was confusion about how the various pieces fit together: the town's potential purchase of the property using conservation funds, the Winooski Valley Park District's interest in the property, and the feasibility study being conducted about establishing a boat launch at the site.

Action item: Kent agreed to investigate the status of the conservation fund application and the appraisal issue for the Riverside Park project.

The committee concluded that they would wait for Kent's update at the next meeting, the completion of the feasibility study in July, and then provide recommendations to the Select Board accordingly.

g. Update on Tree Nursery project

Steve Dowd provided an update on the tree nursery project. Key points:

1. The project is currently awaiting approval from the school board. Steve explained that while he's been working with an instructor and the director of the Center for Technology (CT), the director doesn't have the authority to approve the project himself. The land allocation requires school board approval, which is currently in process.

2. A new consideration that emerged was water supply. The nursery will need metered water for the drip irrigation system, which will require some funding. Steve reported that the CT director indicated this should not be at their expense, but Greg Duggan (Essex Town Manager) had previously mentioned that funding would not be an issue for the project.
3. The location of the nursery may need to be reconsidered. Steve explained that the CT builds houses as part of their program (approximately one every two years) and they will eventually need to clear their current apple orchard for house construction. They're working to find a spot for the tree nursery that won't conflict with future building plans.
4. Regarding the timeline, Steve emphasized that he's trying to move the paperwork along quickly but diplomatically. Once approved, they already have some funding allocated - Public Works has budgeted $4,410 for the project, though Steve estimated they could do the whole thing for about $2,000.

The committee thanked Steve for his persistence and offered support if needed with the school board. Harlan also offered to help Steve with the project.

g. 1. Enrollment in the Association of Vermont Conservation Commissions

Steve explained that the committee couldn't apply for the "tiny trees grant" unless they were members of the Association of Vermont Conservation Commissions.

He noted that he had visited the Association's website but couldn't find the exact membership cost, though he estimated it to be nominal (around $50).

Ken provided additional context about the Association, explaining that it's a group primarily made up of official conservation commissions created by state statute, though he believed they would accept Essex's committee. Benefits include access to grant programs, a listserv for questions and feedback, and networking opportunities. Ken mentioned that they also work through the Mountain Land Trust.

Motion: Steve moved that the committee apply for membership, and Bino seconded the motion. The committee voted unanimously (8-0) to approve Steve to prepare the application to join the Association.

Action item: Steve will bring the application to join the Association of Vermont Conservation Commissions to the next meeting to give to Kent.

g. 2. Indian Brook Cleanup

Paul Davis led the discussion, explaining that he had initially considered Matthew Town Forest for the cleanup but determined Indian Brook made more sense since there was already an established list of projects there.

After some discussion about dates, the committee settled on:

- Cleanup Date: Saturday, June 7th, 2025 from 12:00-2:00pm
- Rain Date: Sunday, June 8th, 2025
- Committee members to arrive at 11:30am to set up

Paul was put in charge of coordinating with Parks and Recreation for access to needed supplies, and Kent offered to provide copies of the cleanup flyers he already had from previous years. Ken agreed to work with Tammy to ensure the event would be promoted on social media and the town website about a week before the event.

Motion: The motion to hold the cleanup on these dates was made by Ken, seconded by Duane, and passed unanimously (8-0).

Action item: Ken to work with Tammy to ensure the Indian Brook Cleanup event will be promoted on social media and the town website a week before the event.

Action item: Kent will make the Indian Brook Cleanup Flyer, 5 11x17 Laminated

h. Update on Commission proposal

Ken asked Kent if there was any news on the committee's previously submitted commission proposal. Kent reported that nothing had come to him to take action on. Ken clarified that the proposal had been submitted to the Select Board, who then sent it to staff to be reviewed by legal.

Ken explained that he had included this agenda item specifically to get an update on the status, and requested that Kent find out what was happening with the proposal before the next meeting. Ken emphasized that this was important because "we have options and we need to know whether or not we need to execute those options."

Action item: Kent will investigate the status of the proposal to change the committee to a commission and provide an update at the next meeting.

i. Update on Keystone Trail project

Kent provided an update on the Keystone Trail project:

1. A scenario planning workshop was recently held to assess the two biggest unknown challenges for the trail project:
    - The town's capacity to maintain trails (ranging from high to low capacity)

    - The clarity/uncertainty around property ownership and trail access (ranging from clear understanding to significant confusion)
2. Kent explained that these two factors created four potential scenarios that the consultant is documenting in a follow-up report. This approach helps identify which elements appear across all scenarios (indicating priorities) and helps develop targeted action plans.
3. Kent noted that many existing trails are not well-designed - they're often in random locations, not following proper topography (going straight up cliffs instead of with the natural contours). A trail designer is assessing how trails should be realigned for better placement.
4. The discussion highlighted the need to decide what type of trails they're creating (asphalt, cross-country ski, etc.) as the design specifications would differ.
5. Kent mentioned that some existing trails might need to be eliminated as redundant or problematic, with Harlan adding that abandoned trails would need restoration work including planting trees and grass to reclaim those areas.

j. Update on Trail Mapping

Duane provided an update on the trail mapping project, highlighting several challenges:

1. Duane reported that Shannon (the town's GIS coordinator) had indicated that official town maps should be created by town staff, not committee volunteers.
2. Duane presented previous work on mapping trails which demonstrated that many trails in the town, including those in Saxon Hill, Matthew Town Forest, and even Indian Brook, cross over private property at some point. This creates difficulties in establishing official town trails.
3. Duane suggested using a map with an "opaque overlay" for ambiguous property sections, so people could see where trails cross private property while still showing the continuity of trail networks.
4. The committee discussed the need for three different maps:
    - A public-facing map showing only official trails on town property
    - A working map showing disconnected trail segments on town property (highlighting gaps)
    - A comprehensive map showing both official and unofficial trails (for internal planning)
5. The committee established a working group of Duane, Harlan, Betsy, and Morgan to move forward with creating these maps, with the goal of producing a draft public map for the next meeting.
6. The discussion highlighted the need for future easements to connect trail segments, but the immediate priority was creating the official map of town-owned trails.

Harlan requested that a committee member work on producing trail maps, despite there having been hesitance from town staff in the past.

Action item: Duane will work with Harlan, Betsy, and Morgan to produce a draft of the first of the above three maps, a public map (which will exclude all of the dead-end trails and unofficial trails).

k. Reports on DRB and Planning Commission meeting attendance

Several committee members shared their experiences attending recent Development Review Board (DRB) and Planning Commission meetings:

1. **Betsy's DRB Report**: Betsy reported attending a DRB meeting where they discussed a development on Colonel Page Road. She noted that the developer was implementing several recommendations from the committee, including:
    - Creating a buffer for wildlife connectivity
    - Ensuring the development maintains the character of the area
    - Preserving tree cover
    - Designing rights-of-way to serve as wildlife corridors (not paved)
    - Minimizing infringement on existing forest
2. **Issues with Public Comment**: Betsy raised a concern that when she tried to speak at the DRB meeting, she wasn't allowed to. This led to a discussion about proper protocol at these meetings. Ken explained that DRB meetings follow a structured format: the board hears from the applicant, asks questions, has internal discussion, and then holds a public hearing where citizens can speak. Betsy may have tried to speak before the public hearing was opened or after it was closed.
3. **Duane's Planning Commission Experience**: Duane reported a positive experience at a Planning Commission meeting where a commission member recognized him as a representative from the Conservation and Trails Committee and invited his input. The Planning Commission is forming a working group to update zoning for the RPD-I district, and they were receptive to the committee's recommendations about not waiving the 50-foot buffer requirement. Duane was invited to join the working group and accepted, pending committee approval.
4. **Ken's DRB Meeting Report**: Ken attended a heavily attended DRB meeting discussing the Amazon warehouse application and another project on Main Street. He lobbied for the committee's recommendations about maintaining 50-foot buffers and questioned why stormwater infrastructure was being placed in buffers.
5. **Issue with Public Works Statement**: Ken reported that at a previous meeting, a developer claimed the Public Works Department doesn't want trees in town rights-of-way. Ken investigated this and spoke with Aaron (Public Works Director) who denied making such a statement and actually supports trees except where they might interfere with utilities.
6. **Future Meeting Planning**: The committee discussed the importance of introducing themselves as committee representatives at the beginning of

meetings and signing up for future meetings. The next DRB meeting on May 1st at the high school would include the Amazon warehouse application and was expected to draw large public attendance, with April and Steve volunteering to attend.

Motion: The committee voted unanimously (8-0) to have Ken contact Aaron to correct this misinformation regarding whether Public Works supports having trees in town ROWs, especially regarding the Kimo Drive development, as trees could help with slope stabilization.

l. Reminder about vacancies and FY 25 member expirations

Ken noted there is currently one committee vacancy with applications being accepted now. Three members have terms expiring - Ken (Chair), Betsy, and Duane. Duane has already interviewed for reappointment, Betsy plans to reapply, and Ken is considering applying to the Planning Commission instead to help advance town plan action items. This led to a brief discussion about who might take on the Chair role if Ken doesn't continue, with acknowledgment that having former committee members on the Select Board and Planning Commission would benefit their initiatives through stronger representation.

m. Debrief on Community Day at Town Meeting

The discussion was very brief. Betsy mentioned that they need better signage for future events - specifically "a big sign of some sort" or a banner to identify the Conservation and Trails Committee at public events. She also suggested getting a canopy tent for these events.

Ken encouraged Betsy to research options and come to the next meeting with a specific proposal and cost estimate that they could vote on and then forward to Kent to include in the budget. The committee agreed this would be useful not just for Town Meeting but for all their public events.

Action item: Betsy will bring a budget proposal for signage and a canopy for the committee to be used at future events to the next meeting.

n. Review and adjust CTC Work Plan

The Chair (Ken) briefly mentioned that committee members should "look over the work plan, think about things we've talked about and add things to it at the bottom. New ideas, adjust your priorities, adjust your assignments." However, the committee did not engage in any detailed discussion or make any formal adjustments to the plan during this meeting.

7. READING FILE

Ken briefly mentioned three items included in the Reading File without detailed discussion:

1. **Letter from Resident to CTC**: This was mentioned but its contents were not discussed during the meeting.
2. **CCRPC Draft Future Land Use Map**: Ken noted that the Chittenden County Regional Planning Commission's draft future land use map was included in the reading file and recommended committee members review it, describing it as "quite interesting."
3. **Standard Specifications for Construction**: Ken highlighted this document, mentioning that it contained two sections about trees which helped him learn that the DRB can require trees in developments and that the Public Works Director has final approval authority on placement "for obvious reasons." He noted this was particularly relevant to Betsy's work on landscaping specifications, as this document could potentially be revised based on their working group's recommendations.

The committee did not engage in substantive discussion about any of these reading file items during the meeting, with Ken simply alerting members to their availability for individual review.

8. ADJOURN

Motion: Adjourn Motioned by Paul, seconded by Morgan, passed unanimously (8-0)

Meeting recording: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xV4tEkwcPeI

Next Meeting: May 13, 2025 at 6p