Essex Conservation and Trails Committee (CTC)
Regular Meeting Minutes
81 Main St. Essex Jct., VT 05452
May 13, 2025

Meeting minutes prepared by Duane Millar Barlow, approved on June 10, 2025

ATTENDEES

Members present: Ken Signorello (Chair), Duane Millar Barlow (Clerk, arrived 20 minutes late), Paul Davis, April Peterson, Steve Dowd, Betsy Dunn (remote), Morgan Kirk (remote)
Members absent: 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 13th, 2025.

2. AGENDA ADDITIONS/CHANGES

Two items were added to the agenda:

1. Add Association of Conservation Commissions as the first item in the agenda.

3. APPROVE AGENDA

Motion: The amended agenda with these two additions was moved by Ken, seconded by April, and passed unanimously (6-0).

4. PUBLIC TO BE HEARD

No members of the public wished to speak.

5. APPROVAL OF MINUTES

a. Approve minutes from 2025-04-24 meeting

No specific corrections or changes were suggested.

Motion: Betsy Dunn moved to accept the minutes as submitted, which was seconded by Morgan. The motion passed unanimously (6-0).

6. BUSINESS ITEMS

a. Association of Conservation Commissions

The committee discussed applying for membership to the Association of Conservation Commissions. Betsy reported that she had completed the application with all the necessary information she could gather. She suggested that Ken Signorello (Chair) could serve as the contact person for the application.

The membership fee was confirmed to be $50, which Ken had previously anticipated needing for this purpose.

Motion: Steve moved to approve the application and apply for membership to the Association of Conservation Commissions, and Paul seconded the motion. The motion passed unanimously (6-0).

b. Advise DRB on development applications

Current Applications

Kent reported that while there were no current applications requiring immediate comment, there would be two or three applications coming up for July that would be substantial to review at the June meeting. He suggested that 1-2 committee members meet with him before the next meeting to get familiar with the details in advance. **April, Steve, Paul volunteered to help preview these upcoming applications.**

Buffer Zone Discussion

Chuck provided a detailed assessment of his review of the landscape plan and the 50-foot buffer requirements. He expressed serious concerns about the health and viability of the existing trees in the buffer zone, explaining that he had previously managed this land during sand extraction operations approximately 25 years ago and had provided technical input for its reclamation. Based on his experience, Chuck stated he could not in good conscience support preserving the current 50-foot buffer as it stands, primarily due to concerns about road salt contamination.

"I cannot in good conscience support leaving the 50-foot buffer there," Chuck stated, explaining that salt from both the road and the proposed parking lot would adversely affect the soil and foliage of the existing pine trees, which he described as being particularly vulnerable to environmental stresses.

Kent shared visualizations provided by the developer showing how the proposed plantings would appear after approximately 10-15 years of growth. These renderings depicted a formalized streetscape along the path with more random plantings behind to create density. Kent explained that the applicant's waiver request specifically concerned placing storm water retention areas within the buffer zone, which is one of three permitted waiver uses within buffer areas.

The committee examined the proposed landscape plan in detail. Chuck described it as "very attractive" and "probably better than any landscape plan that now exists in the park." He outlined his recommendations for salt-tolerant species suitable for the sandy soil conditions, including thornless honey locust, sweet gum, sycamore, red oak, white spruce, Colorado blue spruce, white pine, Scots or Austrian pine, sugar maple, Kentucky coffee tree, and northern catalpa. He also mentioned shrubs such as ink holly and another variety that would grow to about five feet in height.

During public comment, Cheryl Vaneps, an Essex resident from Pinewood Manor, shared her experience with trees struggling in sandy soil without fertilization, noting how species like blue spruce often thin out and lose their lower branches in such conditions. She asked for details about the species selection and maintenance plans.

The committee then deliberated on whether to maintain their original recommendation to preserve the existing buffer or to revise it based on the new information. Morgan Kirk suggested a compromise of thinning the current buffer rather than clearing it completely, allowing for a transition period while new plantings established themselves. Paul observed that the committee seemed to be trying to accommodate the developer's constraints rather than addressing more fundamental issues with the project design.

Morgan wondered if the real problem was the parking lot being positioned too close to the road, while others expressed concern about whether the proposed plantings would provide sufficient screening during the decade it would take them to reach maturity. Some members raised concerns about light pollution from the parking lot.

Motion: After extensive discussion, April moved to revise the recommendation to "advise developers to work with the tree warden to develop a reforestation plan for the 50-foot buffer that includes salt-tolerant species and will achieve sufficient density for noise and visual screening." This language specifically emphasized "reforestation" rather than "landscaping" to maintain the natural character of the area. The motion was seconded by Betsy Dunn.

The final vote was 6-1 in favor of the revised recommendation, with Paul voting against it. He explained his opposition by expressing concern that supporting any buffer plan might imply the committee found the overall project acceptable when he believed it was fundamentally too large for the site and could not exist "in harmony with nature" regardless of the buffer treatment.

Duane confirmed he would present this revised recommendation, as well as the committee's overall concerns that the project is not compatible with the RPD-I regulations at the May 29th DRB meeting.

c. Arbor Day Celebration report

The Arbor Day Celebration report was presented briefly with a photograph of the event showing participants gathered around a newly planted tree.

Tree Planting Details

- The tree was purchased from Horsford Nursery and was valued at $680 retail
- Bino was specifically acknowledged for digging the 4-foot hole for the tree himself, which committee members noted required significant work
- Compost for the planting was provided by Parks and Recreation
- Sarah Talentino provided the mulch for the tree
- The committee confirmed they mentioned the Tree City USA award during the event, which helped fulfill requirements for that designation
- Betsy volunteered to create a plaque acknowledging Horsford's donation of the tree to place near the planting

Action item: Betsy volunteered to create a plaque acknowledging Horsford's donation of the tree to place near the planting.

d. Review and advise on Saxon Hill Forest Management Plan

The committee reviewed an existing forest management plan for Saxon Hill that had never been officially approved through the proper channels.

The plan was written 5 years ago but never formally approved. It was written for a 10-year timeframe, so it's currently halfway through its intended implementation period. Ken emphasized the importance of getting this plan approved to ensure a smoother transition to the next management plan when this one expires.

The plan addresses management of forest on sandy soils (which committee members noted was relevant to their earlier discussion about species selection for the buffer zone). It includes strategies for dealing with invasive species, which Harlan Smith described as "very treatable and manageable" since they are not widespread throughout the forest. The committee noted that without management, invasive species would likely spread further

Motion: A motion was made by Betsy and seconded by April to approve the Saxon Hill Forest Management Plan, passed unanimously (7-0)

e. Review/Advise on the Tree Farm Forest Management Plan

The committee reviewed the Tree Farm Forest Management Plan, which was displayed on screen showing a map with various forest stands identified. This plan was created by Ethan Tapper in 2017 and is valid until 2027, making it currently about halfway through its implementation period.

Ken Signorello identified a potential issue with the plan: a parcel of land on the other side of Old Colchester Road appeared to be part of the property but wasn't included in the forest management plan. To verify this, the committee examined the parcel viewer map, which led to a discussion about property boundaries and ownership.

"I believe that is part of the 99.1 acres," Harlan stated regarding the parcel in question, while Ken noted that it might be part of the 46.1 acres instead. The committee members acknowledged some complexity in the ownership structure, with one member pointing out a shared ownership arrangement between the Town of Essex and the City of Essex Junction that complicated clear boundary definitions.

After examining the maps, the committee concluded that the small section of forest across Old Colchester Road was indeed part of the parcel and should be included in the forest management plan.

The committee also discussed the current state of the forest compared to the plan's description. Steve noted that the Center for Technology Essex (CTE) forestry program has been actively working in the area for many years: "CTE forestry has been working with that stuff, the description of some of these areas is no longer current." This suggested the plan might need updating beyond just adding the missing parcel.

Motion: Following the discussion, a motion was made to recommend that the Tree Farm Forest Management Plan be amended to include the stand on the other side of Old Colchester Road and any other necessary updates, then be returned to the committee for approval. The motion passed unanimously with a 7-0 vote.

f. Identify Future Forest Management Plan needs

The committee turned their attention to identifying areas in town that required forest management plans but didn't currently have them. This discussion quickly identified three specific properties in need of management plans:

1. Mathieu Town Forest
2. The 50-acre parcel at the end of West Sleepy Hollow Road
3. Forestdale

After identifying these areas, the committee discussed who would be responsible for developing these plans and how they might be funded. Ken Signorello asked, "Whose domain would this come under? Park?" Harlan Smith, who has been with the town for less than six months, explained that responsibility for forest management plans seemed to fall under a forestry department, though he noted there was some ambiguity in the organizational structure.

Harlan shared that he was already working with the state forester and Chuck to develop these plans. Harlan also related a telling conversation with the state forester regarding Mathieu Town Forest: "When I asked them to start one for Mathieu Town Forest, which I've already initiated, the response was, 'You haven't started any of the other ones. I would hate to put the time in to write a forest management plan that you're not going to do anything with.'" The committee acknowledged this fact as well as pointed out that progress on the Indian Brook Forest Plan is underway, and slated to be started in 2025.

Motion: The committee made a motion to advise Harlan to look into getting forest management plans for the three identified properties. The motion passed unanimously with a 7-0 vote.

g. Update on Trail Mapping

Duane presented an update on trail mapping efforts, explaining that he, Morgan, Harlon, and Betsy had met a few weeks ago to discuss this project. He shared his screen to display a map of the town of Essex that he had developed with different layers showing various trail systems.

The first map displayed showed all town trails that don't extend onto ambiguous property where easements are unknown. This map featured a white overlay on all non-town property (with some exceptions, such as the Essex School District property). Duane explained that this conservative map showed only trails that could be published without risk of leading people onto private property. However, as committee members pointed out, this resulted in a "broken trail system" with many disconnected segments.

Next, Duane displayed a second map showing trails marked in red—these represented actively used trails that would be eliminated from official maps due to uncertain property rights or easements. Many of these trails were in areas like Saxon Hill, Mathieu Town Forest, Forestdale, and Foster Park. This map highlighted the significant number of trails currently being used that couldn't be officially recognized without confirming easements.

Ken asked what his logic was for categorizing the trails, as some red trails were on public land: "The logic I applied was, can you access this trail without going over private property?" This led to a discussion about trails that might be on public land but required crossing private property to reach them, which he had marked in red.

Harlon mentioned that Shannon, the town's GIS staff, believed she had mapped all existing easements in the town's system. This created an opportunity to cross-reference Duane’s trail mapping with Shannon's easement data to potentially identify more trails that could be officially recognized.

Action: Duane agreed to incorporate this new source of easement data from the town map with the trail maps he has and bring it to the next meeting.

h. Status of Adopt-a-Tree Program

The committee reviewed the status of the Adopt-a-Tree program. Ken Signorello explained that the program was designed to allow residents to have a tree planted in a town right-of-way (or just inside the right-of-way on people's property) for a small fee, with recipients committing to care for the tree.

When Ken asked about the program's current status, he said "nothing's happened." Ken noted that there's a webpage indicating the town has this active program, and he needed to determine if it was still functioning and who was responsible for it. He suggested the program needed someone from the committee to serve as the point person rather than burdening town staff with this responsibility.

Betsy volunteered to be the contact person for the Adopt-a-Tree program. Steve also offered to be involved, though he emphasized the connection to the tree nursery project: "I've already made my statement that we need trees. When I can produce trees, I'm in."

The committee concluded that the program should remain active, and Ken committed to meeting with Steve and Betsy to resolve the details and get the program functioning again. No formal vote was taken.

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

This agenda item consisted of a brief update on the status of the Conservation Fund Survey marketing plan. The discussion noted several logistical challenges currently affecting the survey distribution.

Paul explained that he had been unable to publish the survey on the town's Facebook page due to procedural requirements. The town administration needed to convert or import the survey into their official survey platform before it could be distributed through official channels.

Despite this challenge, Paul expressed confidence that the Facebook distribution would ultimately be the primary method for collecting responses: "I think that Facebook is going to be the primary source of respondents."

j. Update on Riverside Park

The update on Riverside Park was brief, focusing primarily on the status of the conservation fund application that had been submitted for the project. Kent reported that he had received feedback on the application, which had been pending for approximately six months.

Kent explained that town administration had established a sequential approach to addressing several related initiatives: "What I heard back is first the tree nursery initiative will be addressed, then the committee versus commission and charter issues." This indicated that the Riverside Park conservation fund application was part of a sequence of initiatives being addressed in order fashion rather than simultaneously.

Additionally, Kent reported that "Greg is going to look into the appraisal question that came up for that," referring to a specific question about property appraisal that had emerged during the application process. He noted that Greg Duggan would be reconnecting with the same person he had previously consulted regarding the appraisal issue.

Ken Signorello expressed some frustration about the lengthy timeline noting, "Keep in mind that the conservation fund application is six months ago." The discussion was brief, and the committee simply acknowledged the update without taking any formal action.

k. Update on Tree Nursery Project

Steve provided an update on the tree nursery proposal. He reported that he had updated the tree nursery proposal again, specifically addressing the water issue. The proposal now states that the town will assist in metering the water and will pay for the water costs.

Steve explained that he had given the final document to the director from CTE (Center for Technology Essex) and had been persistently reminding him about it. The director will need to bring the proposal to the school board since they must approve the use of the property.

Regarding location, Steve stated they had decided on a specific site and the director would work with the forestry program to stake out the area. He mentioned that a new document and map showing the location had been created.

Steve reported that the HVAC program at CTE would run a water line directly to the area, and that Brian had informed him of this fact.

The current goal is to have all paperwork and agreements in place before the end of the school year. He acknowledged this was a revised timeline, saying "We've revised our goal, but we would like to have all of the paperwork and all the agreement in place before they walk away."

No formal action was taken on this item as it was an update only.

l. Update on Commission proposal

The update on the Commission proposal was brief. When Ken Signorello reached this agenda item, he stated, "the commission proposal is going to be worked on." as was mentioned earlier in the meeting.

No additional details were provided about the Commission proposal, and no discussion or action took place regarding this agenda item.

m. Update on Keystone Trail project

Ken Signorello asked Kent if there was anything new to report regarding the Keystone Trail project. Kent responded that there was nothing new to report. No discussion followed, and no action was taken on this agenda item.

n. Reports on DRB and Planning Commission meeting attendance

April reported that she had attended a planning commission meeting that ended up being cancelled. During this cancelled meeting, she had spoken with developers of the Amazon warehouse who indicated that the buffer could not be preserved as it was. April noted, "They made me pretty certain that the buffer could not be preserved as it was."

Duane reported on his work with the RPD-I (Resource Preservation Development Initiative) regulations working group. He shared information about a 2014 court case that upheld the enforceability of regulations requiring development to be "in harmony with the natural surroundings" and “aesthetically feasible” and confirmed these requirements are not unconstitutionally vague. Duane stated he planned to bring this information to upcoming DRB meetings.

The committee then discussed coverage for upcoming meetings:

- May 29th DRB Meeting (6:30pm at the high school) - This meeting will address the Amazon/Scanel development. Duane will attend and share the committee’s recommendations. Betsy also indicated she would attend.
- June 5th DRB Meeting - Morgan confirmed she would attend this meeting
- June 12th Planning Commission Meeting - Duane will attend this meeting on behalf of the committee as well as part of the RPD-I 50’ buffer working group.

No formal action was taken on this agenda item.

o. Review and adjust CTC Work Plan

Ken stated that the work plan would be on the agenda for all future meetings, adding, "So, anytime you guys have a change you want to make to the work plan, bring it to the meeting. It'll be on the agenda."

No changes were made to the work plan at this meeting, and no formal action was taken.

7. READING FILE

Ken Signorello briefly mentioned the reading file, stating, "And the reading file has a couple of interesting articles. Hope you enjoyed them."
The reading file contained two articles from VTDigger:

a. Waterbury dam slated for repairs to better protect against future floods
b. Lawmakers consider a salty solution to improving waterway and wildlife welfare

8. ADJOURN

Motion: Adjourn Motioned by April, seconded by Duane, passed unanimously (7-0)

Meeting recording: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JE4bs-z1gvA

Next Meeting: June 10, 2025 at 6p