Essex Conservation and Trails Committee (CTC)
Regular Meeting Minutes
81 Main St. Essex Jct., VT 05452
June 10, 2025

Meeting minutes prepared by Duane Millar Barlow, approved on July 8, 2025

ATTENDEES

Members present: Ken Signorello (Chair), April Peterson (Vice Chair), Duane Millar Barlow (Clerk), Paul Davis, Steve Dowd, Betsy Dunn, Morgan Kirk (arrived after agenda was approved)
Staff Present: Kent Johnson (Town Planner), Chuck Vile (Town Tree Warden)

1. CALL TO ORDER

The Conservation and Trails Committee meeting was called to order by Chair Ken Signorello at 6:02 PM on Tuesday, June 10th, 2025.

2. AGENDA ADDITIONS/CHANGES

Duane requested that agenda item i (Reports on DRB and Planning Commission attendance) be moved earlier in the meeting, ultimately swapping positions with item c (Update on Trail Mapping) since there weren't many updates on trail mapping.

Chair Ken Signorello added a new action item to be labeled as 6.a.1: "Review a letter submitted to the Planning Commission for changes to the zoning in the RPD-I."

Paul Davis confirmed that spring cleanup discussion was not needed and verified it wasn't on the agenda.

3. APPROVE AGENDA

Motion: To approve the amended agenda with the swap of items c and i, and the addition of item 6.a.1. Moved by: Duane Millar Barlow, Seconded by: Betsy Dunn, carried 6-0.

4. PUBLIC TO BE HEARD

There were no comments from the public.

5. APPROVAL OF MINUTES

a. **Approve minutes from May 13, 2025 meeting**

There were three corrections requested for the minutes from May 13:

1. The plaque for the tree at Sand Hill Park will be done by Betsy Dunn, not Steve Dowd.
2. Harlan Smith's name was in several places spelled incorrectly as "Harland Smith"
3. The next meeting was written June 19th, 2025, but it should be June 10th.

Motion: To approve the May 13th meeting minutes with the above changes. Moved by: Betsy Dunn, Seconded by: April Peterson, carried 7-0.

6. BUSINESS ITEMS

a.

1. Review a letter submitted to the Planning Commission for changes to the zoning in the RPD-I

The committee discussed a letter from a landowner in the RPD-I that requested new uses be allowed in the RPD-I. The discussion centered on preserving the intended character of the RPD-I zone, which was designed to be less intensive than a standard industrial zone and to exist in harmony with nature. Concerns were raised that the proposed changes would effectively transform the RPD-I zone into a regular industrial area, leading to increased traffic, particularly from heavy trucking, as well as noise and visual pollution that would negatively impact nearby residential areas and recreational activities.

The committee reviewed the list of proposed additional uses and identified several that they believed would be detrimental. However, they were open to the possibility of adding certain uses that could complement the area, such as a convenience store or restaurant, which would serve people working or recreating nearby without creating significant negative impacts.

The committee offered the following guidance to the Planning Commission while they consider this request:

The Planning Commission should avoid adding permitted uses that could increase problematic externalities such as traffic, noise, pollution, nighttime light pollution. Since it will be impossible to undo such a change, it's important that the Planning Commission exercise a great deal of caution when deciding which new uses to add. Also consider *adding new permitted uses that are complementary with recreation in the area (e.g. restaurants, convenience stores, etc). Things the CTC recommends* ***not*** *be added to the RPD-I: Contractor's Yard, Machinery Repair (Major/Minor), Neighborhood Shopping Center, Parking Facility, Recycling Establishment, Trucking Terminal, Extraction of Earth Resources, Junkyard, Public Facilities. The RPD-I is intentionally different from a purely industrial area, so the Planning Commission should keep that in mind.*

Motion: Submit the above guidance to the Planning Commission. Motioned by Betsy, seconded by Bino. Carried 7-0

2. Advise DRB on Development Applications

Kent Johnson (Town Planner) reported that due to the July 4th holiday, the Development Review Board (DRB) meeting would be scheduled later in July, allowing the committee to address any applications at their next meeting.

Kent proposed organizing a pre-processing meeting with Paul Davis, April Peterson, and Steve Dowd to review applications in detail outside of the regular committee meeting. This approach would allow for more in-depth discussion beforehand, with condensed presentations during the regular meeting. The group discussed scheduling this pre-processing meeting for Monday, July 7th (the day before the next CTC meeting).

Kent committed to sending the materials to the subcommittee ahead of time for review. He noted there were only two applications to review. While specific dates and times needed to be confirmed, the goal was to complete most of the review work outside the regular meeting for efficiency.

Regarding recent applications, Kent reported that the Tanglewood development application had gone through the last DRB meeting, and the Saxon Hill application was still ongoing.

b. Review and adjust CTC Work Plan

Chair Ken Signorello presented the committee's work plan for review and status updates, noting it was overdue for submission. Initially, Betsy Dunn moved to postpone the review until the next meeting, but after Kent Johnson clarified he only needed status updates for reporting purposes, the committee proceeded with the review.

The committee reviewed each work plan item and updated statuses.

Kent Johnson indicated he would use the updated plan for any reporting needs, and the committee agreed to revisit the work plan at the July organizational meeting for more comprehensive updates and new member assignments.

c. Reports on DRB and Planning Commission attendance

Duane Millar Barlow presented preliminary recommendations from a Planning Commission working group regarding changes to the RPDI 50-foot buffer requirements. Duane serves on this working group along with Georgia Lavigne and Paula Duke. The presentation, scheduled for the Planning Commission meeting on Thursday, June 12, addressed the failure of current 50-foot buffers to serve their intended purposes.

Six Recommendations Presented:

1. **Increase buffer width from 50 to 75 feet** - Compromise to address wind throw and edge effects
2. **Eliminate waiver authority** - Make all buffers non-waivable; use variance process for hardship cases
3. **Require active reforestation** - Shift from "preserve what exists" to ensuring functional buffers with native, salt-tolerant species
4. **Prohibit parking areas and stormwater infrastructure in buffers** - Only allow driveways
5. **Add buffer purposes beyond visual screening** - Include noise attenuation, air quality protection, wildlife corridors, erosion control, and preserving natural aesthetics
6. **Establish maintenance enforcement mechanisms** - Allow town to perform maintenance if property owners don't, with cost recovery through municipal liens

The presentation included photos demonstrating effective buffers (Thompson Drive), ineffective buffers (corporate landscaping), and non-existent buffers throughout the RPD-I.

Discussion included concerns about defining "reforestation," establishing visibility metrics, reassessment every three years, and referencing concepts like pocket forests and feathered edges. Chuck Vile (Tree Warden) provided input on species selection and salt tolerance issues.

Motion: That the Conservation and Trails Committee endorse the six recommendations for RPD-I buffer changes as presented. Moved by: Ken Signorello. Seconded by: April Peterson. Carried 7-0

d. Update on and approval of marketing plan for Conservation Fund survey

Paul Davis provided an update on the Conservation Fund survey progress. The survey had received 106 responses as of the meeting date, representing an uptick from previous numbers. Paul reported reaching out to the town contact that day about promoting the survey again on Facebook to increase participation.

Paul indicated he was aiming for a July 1st deadline to close the survey. Committee members were encouraged to reach out to friends and family who live in Essex to share the survey link to boost response numbers beyond the current 106. Ken Signorello offered to have his wife help promote the survey.

When asked about reporting, Paul clarified that since the survey would close around July 1st and the next meeting would be the second Tuesday of July, there wouldn't be time to prepare a full memo but he could provide raw data and results from the survey for the committee to review. Ken confirmed that raw data would be sufficient rather than a formal report at that stage.

Paul confirmed that paper survey responses had already been included in the 106 total responses when Ken inquired about their status.

Action Item: Paul Davis will provide raw survey data/results at the July 8th meeting.

e. Update on Riverside Park

Ken Signorello shared a letter from Nick Warner regarding progress on the Riverside Park project. The letter indicated that things were moving forward, with a site walk scheduled for Monday, June 16th. The meeting location would be at the bottom (presumably of the park site), though no specific time was mentioned in the letter.

Ken referenced his previous meeting's comment about Greg Duggan (Town Manager) working on an appraisal for the property and inquired about its status, though no update was available on that front.

Ken emphasized that the committee is keen to see the application for using conservation funds move forward regardless of the outcome of the boat launch feasibility study.

Several committee members expressed interest in attending the site walk, including Paul Davis and Bino Cummings, though availability depended on learning the meeting time. Ken indicated he would contact the organizers to determine the time and would send that information to the entire committee so anyone interested could attend.

Action Item: Ken Signorello will contact organizers to determine the time for the June 16th site walk and share this information with all committee members.

f. Update on Tree Nursery Project

Steve Dowd provided a comprehensive update on efforts to advance the tree nursery project. He reported meeting with Greg (Town Manager), the Assistant Town Manager, and Kent Johnson to address questions about tree quantities and planting responsibilities.

Key Developments:

- The Town Manager prefers that Parks & Recreation maintenance not be involved with planting trees
- CTC would plant 6 trees per year themselves
- Initial plan to buy and plant 30 trees was scaled back to purchasing 6-10 trees annually rather than maintaining a large stockpile
- Chittenden County Natural Resources Conservation District has a tree sale with 3-4 foot trees available for pickup, which aligns well with the nursery timeline

Water Infrastructure Progress:

- Agreement reached to install water service at the nursery site
- Brian Shupe coordinated with Cliff from Colchester School District
- Plan includes: Forestry Mechanical will dig the trench and add stone; school district HVAC students will run the water line; water will be metered to track exact usage for billing
- CTC may share water installation costs with Colchester Technical Center since they also need water access at the site

Next Steps:

- Target fall 2025 for site setup
- Purchase trees and plant in spring 2026
- Steve needs to rewrite the MOU based on revised tree numbers and water plan details
- Still awaiting school board approval for the project

Committee members briefly discussed the educational opportunities this project would provide for students, involving potentially three different school programs. Ken also raised the question of future tree planting locations as the town is running out of suitable spaces.

g. Update on Commission proposal

Ken Signorello briefly inquired if there were any updates on the commission proposal. The response was that there was nothing new to report on this item.

h. Update on Keystone Trail Project

The committee briefly discussed the Keystone Trail Project status. While there was no new engagement to report, it was noted that there is an upcoming meeting.

Kent Johnson explained that there is an advisory group that meets every other month, with the next meeting scheduled for the following week.

i. Update on Trail Mapping

Duane Millar Barlow indicated there were no updates to report on trail mapping at this time.

j. Handbook for Boards, Committees and Commission Members

Ken Signorello introduced the committee handbook that was attached to the meeting packet, noting it was quite lengthy. Given the time constraints and the fact that committee members would need to sign the handbook, Ken recommended postponing detailed discussion until the next meeting to allow members time to read it thoroughly.

Ken emphasized that the Select Board had held the handbook for committee review, which he appreciated, and they seemed keen to move it forward. He recommended that committee members review the document with particular attention to:

- Whether it is too restrictive for a volunteer organization
- If it creates too many hurdles or hoops that might be off-putting for volunteers
- While acknowledging it does good things like explaining open meeting law requirements

Ken expressed specific concern about the committee's ability to hold special meetings, noting they cannot post meeting notices themselves and must go through staff. He suggested there should be a backup plan if staff (specifically Kent) were unavailable, possibly elevating to the Town Manager if necessary.

Committee members were encouraged to send individual comments directly to Ken, who would compile them for submission to the Select Board. Ken clarified that the committee cannot amend the handbook directly but can recommend changes, point out problems, explain why they're problematic, and suggest solutions for the Select Board's consideration.

Action Item: All committee members read the handbook and send comments to Ken Signorello for compilation and submission to the Select Board.

7. READING FILE

a. State Abandons Wildlife Crossing Project, Citing Cost_Seven Days Vermont

Very briefly mentioned.

b. Trail tensions escaltes_Chittenden landowner held in contempt in legal battle with Mountain Top Resort - VTDigger

Very briefly mentioned.

c. Lawmakers consider a salty solution to improving waterway and wildlife welfare - VTDigger

Very briefly mentioned.

8. ADJOURN

Adjourn meeting at 8:13pm Motioned by Betsy, seconded by Morgan, carried 7-0.

Meeting recording: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J4XAirxm1g0

Next meeting: July 8th, 2025 at 6p