

**TOWN OF ESSEX
PLANNING COMMISSION
DRAFT MINUTES
JULY 10, 2025**

*Note: These minutes may be amended prior to the meeting.

PLANNING COMMISSION (PC) PRESENT IN ROOM: Joshua Knox, Chair; Georgia Lavigne, Vice-Chair; Jonathan Schumacher; Dustin Bruso; Trefor Williams; Ian Carroll and Paula Duke.

PLANNING COMMISSION ATTENDING VIRTUALLY:

PC ABSENT: None.

STAFF PRESENT IN ROOM: Katherine Sonnick, Community Development; Sharon Kelley, Zoning Administrator.

OTHERS PRESENT IN ROOM: Su Ughetti; Max Levy; Alison Levy; Suzy & Andrew Seaver; Regina Longo; Morgan Kyle; Al Senecal; Brian Marcotte; Brian Clifford; Irene Wrenner; Iris Banks; Edward Twojyig; Ken Signorello; Hubert Norton; Betsy Dunn; Leah Pastel; Deb Couture; Lois Whitmore; Deb Gregory; Bryan Currier; Wendy James; Robert Lalancette; Dianne Percy; Joe Percy; Duane Millar Barlow; Anne Miller; Patty Davis and Lisa Goodrich.

OTHERS VIRTUALLY: Maya Balassa (CCRPC); Natalee Braun; Cheryl VE; David Skopin; Sharon Zukowski; Ella Ruehsen; Deb Holland; Em O'Hara; Irene Wrenner; Lisa Allen; Rachel; Gina Halpin Barret; m.j.s.s.; JS; Mary Post; TD; Cole Barney; Louise Goodrich; Call in User 1; Allison.

AGENDA ITEMS 1&2: CALL TO ORDER & ELECTIONS OF OFFICERS & RULES OF PROCEDURE: Katherine Sonnick, Community Development Director called the meeting to order at 6:33 p.m. and informed attendees that this was the first meeting of the month and Election of Officers needed to take place first.

PC Member Bruso Moved and PC Member Carroll Seconded a Motion to approve the same slate of offices being Josh Knox, Chair, Georgia Lavigne, Vice-Chair and Jonathan Schumacker, Clerk. The Motion passed 7-0.

Sonnick turned the gavel back to the elected Chair.

Vice-Chair Lavigne Moved and Commissioner Duke Seconded a Motion to accept and re-adopt the Rules of Procedure. The Motion passed 7-0.

AGENDA ITEM 3: ADDITIONS/ CHANGES: None.

AGENDA ITEM 4: APPROVE AGENDA: Board Member Duke Moved and Board Member Carroll Seconded a Motion to approve the agenda as warned.
The Motion passed 7-0.

AGENDA ITEM 5: PUBLIC TO BE HEARD FOR ITEMS NOT ON THE AGENDA:

The following people provided public comments:

Ann Miller expresses concern about a building at 65 Red Pine Circle, stating it doesn't align with the town's zoning regulations and aesthetic goals.

Ken Signorello alerts the commission to inconsistencies in meeting agenda postings on the town website.

Patty Davis shares why they moved to Essex, emphasizing the town's appeal for high-value professional services, quality of life, and educated demographic, suggesting these aspects should guide future development.

David Skopin, 11 Skyline Drive, Essex, VT. Voiced his concerns about the regulations allowing waivers.

AGENDA ITEM 6. BUSINESS ITEMS: Zoning Requests; Big Zoning Changes; Housekeeping Items; Resident Requests; Tier 1B Status; Women's Correctional Facility Next Steps Timeline.

The Commission discussed various zoning regulations and potential changes, including steep slope requirements and buffer zones, while also addressing a new process for handling zoning change requests through working groups. The conversation ended with extensive discussion about a proposed women's correctional facility, including its potential impact on the town and the need for further information from state officials before making any decisions.

The Planning Commission discusses various zoning-related topics and potential changes to regulations. Staff provided an overview of the town plan's vision and action areas, including land use, economic development, transportation, and housing. They explain that zoning regulation requests should align with the town plan. The discussion covers housekeeping items, such as complying with state requirements for housing density, as well as big potential changes like regulations for steep slopes and buffer zones. The Commission also considers resident zoning requests and the possibility of adding more items to their workload. Community mentions an ongoing active transportation plan that may provide guidance for future decisions.

The Planning Commission discussed a new process for handling zoning change requests using working groups. They decided to allow public comments on agenda items for 30 minutes, despite some concerns about time constraints and the need for more research. The Commission clarifies that no decisions will be made tonight, but public input will feed into the working group process. They aim to create a more efficient system for addressing the backlog of zoning requests while still allowing for public participation and thorough consideration of issues.

The Planning Commission discussed steep slope regulations and buffer zones in Essex. Commissioner Williams reports that there is a nationwide consensus that 20% is considered a steep slope. The group is working on developing regulations, including reducing developable land on slopes between 15-20%. Public comments raise concerns about erosion, road safety, and the need for better definitions of steep slopes. There is debate about whether the 20% threshold is too restrictive. Regarding buffers, the planning group recommends increasing internal street

87 buffers from 50 to 75 feet, removing waivers except for access drives, and adding more stated
88 purposes for buffers beyond visual screening.

89 The Planning Commission discusses their recommendations for the Tier 1B designation under
90 Act 250. They explain that they focused on areas with existing infrastructure, studies showing
91 capacity for growth, and alignment with the town plan's goals for concentrated development. The
92 Commission excluded certain mixed-use districts on River Road and Colchester Road due to
93 environmental constraints, lack of connectivity to other growth areas, and absence of public
94 infrastructure. They address questions about the opt-in process timeline and rationale for
95 choosing a medium growth target. Some concerns are raised about environmental protection and
96 the need to balance new development with infrastructure maintenance.

97 The Planning Commission discusses next steps regarding the proposed women's correctional
98 facility. They express dissatisfaction with the State's answers to their questions, particularly
99 about site selection criteria, public transportation, and potential impacts on local services. The
100 Commission plans to invite State representatives for an in-person meeting in October to address
101 these concerns directly. They also want to gather input from local businesses about the potential
102 impact of the facility. Public comments raise additional concerns about the facility's impact on
103 Essex's reputation, property values, and the possibility of ICE detainees being held there.

104 The Planning Commission discussed the potential rezoning of land for a correctional facility in
105 Essex. Community members express concerns about the impact on property values, transparency
106 of the process, and the town's ability to control future changes to the facility. Some argue Essex
107 has already contributed enough by hosting other facilities. The commission clarifies the rezoning
108 process, including the possibility of a town-wide vote if petitioned. There are debates about the
109 economic impact, safety considerations, and whether Essex should take on this responsibility.
110 The commission emphasizes the need for more information from the State before making any
111 decisions.

112 The Planning Commission discussed various topics related to the proposed correctional facility
113 in Essex. Community members express concerns about its impact on property values, emergency
114 services, and the town's character. Irene supports the facility, emphasizing its potential for
115 diversity and rehabilitation. The Commission plans to hold a larger forum with state officials in
116 September or October to further discuss the issue.

117
118 The Planning Commission determined its next steps to be as follows:
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120 Schedule a larger forum meeting with the State in September/October at Essex High School to
121 discuss the women's correctional facility and get detailed answers about site selection criteria

- 122 • Planning Commission: Prepare more detailed questions for the State regarding
123 incomplete answers about the correctional facility, particularly about public safety,
124 transportation, and facility purpose.
- 125 • Economic Development Commission: Gather anonymous feedback from local businesses
126 regarding the potential impact of the women's correctional facility.

- Planning Commission: Set up regular working group meetings on the 4th Thursday of each month to review zoning requests and changes.
- Staff: Create a framework/template for residents to submit zoning change requests.
- Commissioner Lavigne & Duane Millar Barlow: Continue working on regulatory language for the RPD-I buffer recommendations and incorporate public feedback.
- Staff: Create a zoning amendment webpage to collect public comments on proposed changes.
- Planning Commission: Develop a process to evaluate and prioritize resident zoning requests while maintaining transparency and public participation.
- Commissioner Lavigne: Attend the Select Board meeting on August 4th to explain the Planning Commission's tier one B status recommendations.
- Planning Commission: Review the State's responses to questions about public records request, particularly regarding statewide fire and EMS calls data.
- Staff: Confirm availability for Active Transportation Plan presentation in September.
- Staff: Determine if July 24th meeting will be held by coordinating with Planning Commission members.
- Staff: Provide information to community members about signing up for meeting agenda notifications on the website.
- Planning Commission: Schedule discussion about industrial district uses for a future working group meeting.
- Planning Commission: Ensure correctional facilities are included in the next town plan update.

AGENDA ITEM 7: MINUTES:

Commissioner Schumacher Moved and Vice-Chair Lavigne Seconded a Motion to approve the 6/12/2025 minutes as written. The Motion passed 6-0. (Commissioner Duke left the meeting at 9:45 p.m.)

AGENDA ITEM 8: OTHER BUSINESS:

Robert Lalancette provided comment on the RPD-I zone.

Chairman Knox spoke on how the PC will move forward with projects.

The meeting adjourned at 10:00 p.m.

PLANNING COMMISSION

By:

Joshua Knox, Chair