Essex Conservation and Trails Committee (CTC)
Regular Meeting Minutes
81 Main St. Essex Jct., VT 05452
July 8, 2025

Meeting minutes prepared by Duane Millar Barlow, approved on August 12, 2025

ATTENDEES

Members present: Ken Signorello (Chair), Bino Cummings (Vice Chair), Duane Millar Barlow (Clerk), Paul Davis, Steve Dowd, Sarah Salantino, Morgan Kirk, April Peterson
Members absent: Erin DeVries
Staff Present: Kent Johnson (Town Planner), Chuck Vile (Town Tree Warden), Harlan Smith

1. CALL TO ORDER

The Conservation and Trails Committee meeting was called to order by Acting Chair Kent Johnson at 6:32 PM on Tuesday, July 8th, 2025.

2. ELECTION OF OFFICERS

Kent Johnson, Town Planner, explained that this was the organizational meeting and that the slate was cleared for chair, vice chair, and clerk positions. He indicated that the committee needed to decide amongst themselves how to select these positions and suggested starting with the chair position first.

Election of Chair

Motion: Nomination of Ken Signorello for Chair, nominated by Steve Dowd.

Ken asked if anyone else wanted to be chairperson before accepting the nomination. No other nominations were put forward. Members expressed appreciation for Ken's past service as chair. Unanimous approval (8-0)

Election of Vice Chair

April Peterson, the previous vice chair, noted that she would need to resign in the coming months from the committee due to overseas work commitments. For this reason she resigned from the Vice Chairmanship.

Duane Millar Barlow - nominated by Ken Signorello

Bino Cummings - nominated by Morgan Kirk

Duane Millar Barlow stated he would accept if elected, noting his primary understanding was that the role involved filling in when the chair is absent. He expressed willingness to learn more about Robert's Rules of Order.

Bino Cummings accepted the nomination, stating he would support the chairperson and fill in as necessary. He noted he would likely have more time available for the committee due to changes in other commitments.

Bino Cummings was elected Vice Chair 7-1 (with Bino voting for Duane)

Result: Bino Cummings elected Vice Chair

Election of Clerk

Ken noted the tradition of nominating one of the newest members for clerk. He initially nominated Sarah Salatino, who declined due to elder care responsibilities and desire to learn more about the committee first.

Discussion ensued about nominating Erin De Vries (absent), but it was noted the clerk needed to take minutes for the current meeting.

Motion: Nomination of Duane Millar Barlow to continue as Clerk. Nominated by Ken Signorello. Vote was unanimous (8-0)

Result: Duane Millar Barlow elected Clerk

3. APPROVE AGENDA

Motion: To approve the agenda with the addition of member introductions at the beginning and the addition of item B.2 regarding the conversation about requested zoning changes to the RPDI. Moved by Steve Dowd, seconded by Paul Davis, carried (8-0).

4. INTRODUCTION OF MEMBERS

Chair Ken Signorello facilitated introductions of all committee members and staff for the benefit of new member Sarah Salatino.

Steve Dowd - Has served on the committee for 3-4 years. Lives on Indian Brook Road, which was part of his impetus for joining as he helped Indian Brook become a park. Has taught and coached for 40-50 years.

Paul Davis - Just finished his first year on the committee. Lives in the Chapin Road area. Primary focus has been on the Conservation Reserve Fund survey. Also participates in Indian Brook cleanups and potentially Matthew Town Forest cleanup. Has lived in Essex for three years.

Duane Millar Barlow - Lives in Tanglewood. Finishing his first year on the committee. Working on trail mapping and worked on relocating a trail in Matthew Town Forest due to an easement dispute over private property.

Sarah Salatino - Newly appointed for a three-year term. Owner and head grower of Full Circle Gardens, a native plant nursery on Brigham Hill Road. Brings expertise in native and invasive plant species. Property backs up to Indian Brook. Interested in preserving Indian Brook and other conservation areas.

Ken Signorello - Has been committee chair for 2 years. Neighbor of Sarah Salatino. Runs organized meetings using Robert's Rules of Order to keep things on track.

April Peterson - Current/outgoing Vice Chair. Lives in Fort Ethan Allen. Works help desk for Vermont Board. Working on Tree City status maintenance and looking into grants with Steve.

Bino Cummings - Lives on Greenfield Road near the Winooski River. On committee for two years. Initially worked on getting property for small boat access to the Winooski but had to step back due to property ownership conflict. Currently in assisting roles but expects to have more bandwidth going forward. Noted for digging holes for tree plantings.

Morgan Kirk - Certified veterinary technician at Burlington Emergency. On committee for two years. Recently moved to a house off Greenbriar Drive and discovered trail connections. Has focused on Indian Brook projects and Matthew Town Forest. Interested in trail mapping around the area.

Erin De Vries (absent) - Ken noted that she works for the Vermont River Conservancy.

Staff Representatives:

Kent Johnson - Town Planner and current staff support for the committee. Helps with projects and initiatives. Noted that the town will be hiring a trails coordinator who will become the new staff support.

Harlan Smith - Assistant Director of Parks, Trails, and Open Spaces for the Recreation Department. Will supervise the new trails coordinator position that is currently being interviewed for.

Chuck Vile - Town Tree Warden (just reappointed). Present as a technical advisor. Has been on and off the committee for several years.

5. PUBLIC TO BE HEARD

Chair Ken Signorello opened the floor for public comment on items not on the agenda.

Lorraine Zaloom brought to the committee's attention a notice in the town news about $200,000 available for trees along river banks, specifically being offered to farmers in Essex. She expressed concern about upland areas across Route 128 that flood frequently and lack tree coverage. She asked if the committee was aware of this opportunity and whether they knew any farmers who might want to participate, noting the trees appear to be free.

Ken confirmed they were aware of the program and had sent information to committee members. Steve Dowd reported he had been looking into it with April Peterson to see if the town could apply, though he noted the applications aren't set up for municipalities. They are trying to modify the application to make it work. Applications are due August 22nd. Ken suggested they might need to simply advertise it if they cannot apply directly.

Cheryl VanEps raised concerns about invasive pampas grass growing where cattails used to be, noting the disappearance of red-winged blackbirds in these areas. She expressed interest in being involved in any mitigation efforts.

Sarah Salatino, drawing on her expertise as a native plant nursery owner, identified it as an extremely invasive species. She shared that groups have previously worked to cut the seed heads before they scatter, including work done with school groups at Ethan Allen Homestead. She noted it's taking over prime cattail habitat, citing the area near Hannaford as an example. While complete eradication may not be possible, continuously cutting seed heads before maturity is the best approach. Ken suggested this could be addressed under the invasive species item in the committee's work plan.

6. APPROVAL OF MINUTES

a. Approve minutes from June 10, 2025 meeting

Chair Ken Signorello noted that there was an issue with the June meeting minutes - an item that was added to the agenda and discussed in depth at the last meeting did not make it into the minutes. The minutes were missing Section 6.A.1, which covered the committee's review of a letter submitted to the Planning Commission requesting changes to the zoning in the Resource Preservation District Industrial (RPD-I) zone.

Clerk Duane Millar Barlow acknowledged he had completely forgotten to include this portion of the meeting in the minutes, despite the committee having had a lengthy conversation about it and making specific recommendations for the Planning Commission. He had already added the missing section to the draft minutes in the live

Google document. Ken shared the screen to display the amended minutes for all members and the public to see.

Motion: To approve the minutes as amended with the addition of Section 6.A.1. Moved by Steve Dowd, seconded by Sarah Salatino, carried (8-0).

Ken noted that going forward, recommendations to other boards should not rely solely on being captured in minutes, and they would discuss a separate process for communicating with the Planning Commission given their meetings occur just two days after CTC meetings.

7. BUSINESS ITEMs

a. Advise DRB on Development Applications

Kent Johnson presented development applications for committee review and recommendations.

15 Leo Drive Subdivision Application

Kent explained this project involves extending Leo Drive (currently 500 feet) by an additional 1,500 feet for a total of approximately 2,000 feet, creating a new road with subdivided lots in the Industrial zoning district. The project includes a shared use path and street trees, with a required 50-foot buffer between the industrial zone and residential uses on Saxon Hill Road. Individual sites would undergo site plan review later.

Key Issues Identified:

- Street trees are spaced 75-100 feet apart (exceeding the required 50-foot spacing)
- Trees are placed approximately 20 feet outside the town right-of-way instead of within it or no more than 5 feet out
- Water line placement conflicts with ideal tree location
- No trail easement proposed despite town plan showing proposed trail alignment in the 50-foot buffer
- Road would be a dead-end exceeding 900 feet with only emergency/pedestrian connection to Saxon Hill Road

Public Comments:

- Lorraine Zaloom questioned why there was no suggestion to connect the road through to Saxon Hill Road, noting this appears to be another "hammerhead" development over 900 feet with only one outlet. She expressed concern that this would drive more traffic onto Route 15, which she stated is already over the recommended 18,300 vehicles per day. She emphasized that the lack of connectivity would harm the town's ability to meet carbon reduction goals, as hammerhead developments increase congestion, wait times, and vehicle exhaust. Lorraine asked if there had been any discussion about burying electric lines, citing the town plan's emphasis on resiliency, especially given extraordinary rain events.

Lorraine shared her personal experience living on Route 15 with no setback, describing how she "continues to reap even more and more pollution" while other neighborhoods don't want cars driving through.

She argued that the town is not "equally sharing the burden of traffic" as required in the town plan.

- Betsy Dunn suggested 30-foot tree spacing

Committee Recommendations:

Motion: Relocate the water line so that the trees can be moved into the town right-of-way. Moved by Duane, seconded by Morgan, carried (8-0).

Motion: Add a third tree per property to reduce street tree spacing. Moved by Ken, seconded by Steve, carried (8-0).

Motion: Bury the power lines/utilities. Moved by Bino, seconded by Sarah, carried (8-0).

Motion: Connect Leo Drive to Saxon Hill Road to reduce travel distances for traffic heading east on Route 15 and to reduce the carbon footprint. Moved by Morgan, seconded by Sarah, carried (7-1). Paul Davis voted against, citing concerns about industrial traffic on dirt roads and disturbing the Saxon Hill area.

Motion: 20 foot easement for a trail in the 50-foot buffer placed in anticipation of future trail development. Moved by Sarah, seconded by Paul, carried (8-0).

68 Pinecrest Conceptual Site Plan

Kent presented a conceptual discussion for property near the funeral home. Two options are being considered: nine new housing units or duplexes with funeral home conversion. The main concern is the impact on steep slopes (over 20% grade shown in red on plans). No landscaping or detailed grading plans were provided at this conceptual stage.

Key Issues:

- Unclear how development will navigate steep terrain
- Potential stormwater management concerns
- 5.5 acres of town-owned forested land to the north is currently landlocked

Motion: Include slope and stormwater management plans; incorporate an easement to the 5.5 acres of town land to the north. Moved by Bino, seconded by Morgan, carried (8-0).

b.

1. Decide future communication method for DRB and Planning Commission

Chair Ken Signorello introduced the need to change how the committee communicates its recommendations to the Development Review Board (DRB), Planning Commission, and Select Board.

Ken explained that currently, Kent Johnson extracts recommendations from meeting minutes and includes them in staff reports. However, Ken identified problems with this approach after reviewing the staff report for the Scannell project, which contained two sections referring to CTC recommendations - one was "very inaccurate" and the second was "better."

Ken proposed that going forward, the committee would:

- Write their own memos based on the minutes
- Submit recommendations directly rather than depending on staff to extract them
- Have the clerk take recommendations from minutes and put them in a formal memo format
- Transmit memos to the staff representative and relevant boards

Kent Johnson indicated this would be helpful and suggested following Public Works' approach:

- Provide memos in PDF format for sharing with applicants
- Also provide Word documents for easy cut-and-paste into staff reports
- Submit documents at least one week before meetings for inclusion in agenda packets
- Documents needed by 9 AM Friday before the following week's meeting

Kent noted that brief comments (like those from fire, police, parks & rec) work fine as emails, while longer, more extensive comments warrant formal memos.

Discussion:

- Steve Dowd expressed concern about adding burden to the clerk position, especially as his schedule would become busier
- Committee members suggested different people could be tasked with compiling documents, not always the clerk

- Ken emphasized this change would ensure accurate representation of committee recommendations
- Members agreed this would be especially important when the new trails coordinator becomes staff liaison

Motion: Summarize our recommendations to other boards and committees in memo format and submit them in a timely fashion. Moved by Bino, seconded by April, carried (8-0).

The committee agreed to try this new approach and evaluate its effectiveness over time.

2. Decide future communication method for DRB and Planning Commission

Chair Ken Signorello explained that this item was added to the agenda because the committee's extensive discussion from the last meeting about requested zoning changes to the Resource Preservation District Industrial (RPD-I) zone was not included in the minutes and therefore was not communicated to the Planning Commission.

The committee had reviewed a letter at the June meeting requesting that most uses allowed in the Industrial zone also be allowed in the RPD-I zone. The RPD-I currently has fewer allowed uses than the standard Industrial zone, primarily affecting the Saxon Hill area.

Committee Position (from amended June minutes):

The committee reaffirmed their previous recommendations:

1. Avoid adding permitted uses that could increase problematic externalities (traffic, noise, light pollution)
2. Exercise caution since zoning changes cannot be undone
3. Consider complementary uses for recreation (restaurants, convenience stores)
4. Do NOT add: contractor yard, machine repair, neighborhood shopping center, parking facilities, recycling establishment, trucking terminal, additional extraction of earth resources, junkyard, or public facilities
5. Remember the RPD-I is intentionally different from purely industrial areas

Since the Planning Commission would be discussing this item at their Thursday meeting (two days away), the committee needed to ensure their recommendations were properly communicated.

Ken indicated that Duane would create a memo from the amended minutes that could be hand-delivered to the Planning Commission meeting on Thursday. Both Ken and Morgan

Kirk confirmed they would attend the Planning Commission meeting to ensure the committee's position was properly represented.

c. Advise on Committee/Commission Handbook

Chair Ken Signorello asked if anyone had reviewed the handbook and had changes or suggestions to propose. He indicated he would bring recommendations to the next Select Board meeting.

Ken identified two specific areas needing revision:

1. **Agenda Preparation**: The current handbook states that staff will put together the agenda. Ken proposed changing this to indicate it should be done "jointly with the chair" or similar language to make the process more collaborative and straightforward.
2. **Hybrid Meeting Continuity**: Ken identified a problematic section stating that if a meeting is hybrid and staff cannot attend, the meeting will be cancelled if no substitute can be found. He noted this had happened to the committee once before. Ken proposed:
    - Requiring staff to develop a fail-safe method to ensure someone can run hybrid meetings
    - If that's not possible, create an account that committee members could use to run meetings themselves if necessary
    - Ensure all meetings can proceed as scheduled

Ken asked members to review the handbook and provide any additional suggestions. He would compile recommendations and present them to the Select Board at their next meeting.

No formal motion was made on this item as it was an advisory discussion for Ken to take to the Select Board.

d. Reports on DRB and Planning Commission Meeting attendance

Duane gave some updates about the presentation with Georgia Lavigne and Paula Duke to the Planning Commission. The presentation was well-received by the Planning Commission, and the working group members are currently working on actual language for proposed changes to regulations for Thursday's meeting.

Ken gave some general updates about recent DRB meetings, which have been well-attended due to the current application before the DRB.

e. Review and adjust CTC Work Plan

Chair Ken Signorello shared the committee's work plan on screen, explaining that items above the gray line are actively being worked on, while items below are for reference. Each project has an assigned point person and team members.

At 8:55 PM, Ken noted the late hour and the depth of review needed for the work plan.

Action Items:

All members to review the work plan before next meeting
Need to submit updated plan to Select Board (Town Manager requesting this)
Sarah Salatino specifically asked to find something she wants to work on and add if necessary

f. Update on Trail Mapping

Duane mentioned that there has been no progress on trail mapping this month.

g. Update on Conservation Fund Survey

This item received minimal discussion as the committee was running through updates rapidly near the end of the meeting. The Conservation Fund Survey was noted earlier in the work plan review as being Paul Davis's primary focus project during his first year on the committee.

h. Update on Riverside Park

The committee had submitted an application for the Conservation Fund to be used to purchase Riverside Park. No response has been received to date.

No new developments; waiting to hear back on the application.

i. Update on Tree Nursery Project

Steve Dowd provided an update on the Tree Nursery Project.

No progress to report. The project is on hold because school is not in session, which ended right at a critical point. There are a few outstanding issues:

- Still need information on water costs
- Do not have necessary agreements in place
- Need to figure out water infrastructure plans

- CTE (Career and Technical Education) still needs to ask the school board for permission to do this project

Ken asked what specifically they were waiting for, noting that water costs shouldn't be too high. Steve clarified that while the water piece needs to be figured out by early fall, the main holdup is that CTE hasn't obtained school board permission, which would be part of their end of the agreement.

Project is close to completion ("just about over the finish line") but cannot move forward until school resumes and permissions are obtained. Steve expressed frustration that he "can't get things to move very quickly" but confirmed they are "not giving up" on the project.

Next Steps: Continue pushing for progress once school resumes in the fall.

j. Update on Commission Proposal

No movement or activity on this item.

k. Update on Keystone Trail Project

No significant updates at this time. The project team is finalizing their proposals based on public feedback received and their investigation. Will be ready for a public meeting in the near future (August or September timeframe).

7. READING FILE

a. a. Indian Brook Cleanup Photos

Very briefly mentioned.

b. Court favors Wheeler Park project in appeal

Very briefly mentioned.

c. Waterbury Dam slated for repairs to better protect against future floods

Very briefly mentioned

7. PROPOSED EXECUTIVE SESSION

a. Potential Executive Session to discuss Real Estate Transaction: 1 V.S.A. § 313(a)(2))

The committee then voted unanimously to enter into executive session, and the committee adjourned the meeting from executive session.

8. ADJOURN

Adjourned from executive session.

Meeting recording: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xv117-AB21Y

Next meeting: August 12th, 2025 at 6p