

Essex Conservation and Trails Committee (CTC)
Regular Meeting Minutes
81 Main St. Essex Jct., VT 05452
August 12, 2025

Meeting minutes prepared by Duane Millar Barlow, approved on September 9, 2025

ATTENDEES

Members present: Ken Signorello (Chair), Bino Cummings (Vice Chair), Duane Millar Barlow (Clerk), Paul Davis, Steve Dowd, Erin De Vries, Sarah Salantino, April Peterson (arrived after the first motion)

Members absent: Morgan Kirk

Staff Present: Kent Johnson (Town Planner), Harlan Smith, Hans Nedde

Public present: Betsy Dunn, Nick Warner (Winooski Valley Parks District)

1. CALL TO ORDER

The Conservation and Trails Committee meeting was called to order by Chair Ken Signorello at 6:01 PM on Tuesday, August 12th, 2025.

2. AGENDA ADDITIONS/CHANGES

Ken offered to add 3 agenda items:

1. Introduction of new Trail Coordinator
2. Elect a New Clerk
3. Plaque to Credit Horseford Nursery for Tree Donation

Motioned by Bino, seconded by Duane. Carried unanimously 7-0 (April had not yet arrived)

4. PUBLIC TO BE HEARD

Betsy Dunn reported that she met someone from Vermont Land Trust at one of their meetings who offered to speak to the committee about land trusts. The presentation would cover how land trusts work, why landowners might want to participate, and how to approach landowners about conservation opportunities. Betsy asked for permission to invite this speaker and suggested opening the presentation to the community as well.

Ken Signorello offered to handle the invitation directly and coordinate with staff to ensure proper public announcement of the presentation.

Erin De Vries introduced herself to the committee, explaining she had previously served on the Essex Conservation and Trails Committee, took a year off, and has now returned. She disclosed that she works for Vermont River Conservancy, a land trust that has been operating for 30 years and focuses primarily on river and riparian conservation. She offered that Vermont River Conservancy could potentially co-present with Vermont Land Trust, noting that while VLT has been around for 48 years and works extensively with farmers and agricultural lands, VRC specializes in river conservation. This could provide the committee and public with a more comprehensive understanding of different land conservation approaches.

5. APPROVAL OF MINUTES

Approve minutes from July 8, 2025 meeting

The committee identified a few corrections:

1. April Peterson “resigned from vice chairmanship”, not “resigned from committee”.
2. ELECTION OF OFFICERS should be ELECTION OF OFFICERS
3. Erin De Vries does not work for the state water quality department.

Motioned by Bino, Steve, Carried 7-0-1 (Erin De Vries abstained because she wasn't present for the previous meeting).

6. BUSINESS ITEMS

a. Introduction of New Trail Coordinator

Hans Nedde was introduced as the town's new full-time Trails Coordinator, currently in his second week on the job. Hans shared that he grew up in Colchester and is familiar with the area, though he had not previously explored Essex's trail systems. His initial impressions after visiting Indian Brook and other trails were positive - he found them beautiful, well-loved by the community, and in generally good shape, though noting they need some maintenance work. He observed that users appear respectful of the trails, with good activity levels.

Hans and Harlan Smith outlined the main objectives of the Trails Coordinator position:

- **Establish a framework for Essex's trail systems**, as the town currently lacks formal structure for trail management
- **Designate and adopt official town trails** with proper mapping and documentation

- **Develop maintenance plans** for trails based on National Forest Service and state recommendations, including establishing different trail classification levels
- **Build community connections** through work with the Conservation and Trails Committee, volunteer organizations, and potentially develop a volunteer stewards program
- **Connect Essex through trails and pathways**, working to identify and develop connection pieces between existing trail segments
- **Participate in the Keystone Trail project** and other connectivity initiatives
- **Integrate with forest management plans** to incorporate trail development into forest management activities

Harlan emphasized their approach of "eating the elephant one bite at a time" - starting with identifying one trail at a time in each property (like Mathieu Town Forest), mapping it, adopting it formally, and creating a maintenance plan before moving to the next.

Kent Johnson announced that Hans will be transitioning into the role of staff liaison for the Conservation and Trails Committee over the next few months, replacing Kent who has been overwhelmed with other responsibilities. The transition period is expected to involve both attending meetings together for 2-3 meetings before Hans takes over independently.

Committee members welcomed Hans and expressed enthusiasm about having dedicated trail coordination support.

b. Update and potential action on Riverside Park (Nick Warner WVPD) (Potential Executive Session to discuss Real Estate Transaction: 1 V.S.A. § 313(a)(2))

Motion to enter executive session. Motion amended to involve Hans and Harlan Moved by April, Seconded by Steve (8-0)

Motion to exit executive session motioned by Bino, Seconded by April.

c. New Conservation and Trails Clerk

Ken Signorello opened discussion about the clerk position, noting that traditionally new members serve as clerk. Duane expressed a desire to have someone else take over the position.

Erin De Vries volunteered to become the new clerk beginning with the September meeting. She asked several clarifying questions about the role:

- **Timeline:** Minutes must be submitted within 5 days after the meeting to town staff, who then post them on the website as draft minutes

- **Process:** The committee reviews and approves minutes with any corrections at the following meeting

Ken reminded the committee that minutes don't need to be as comprehensive as they have been recently - they primarily need to include motions, votes, and note that topics were discussed without capturing all discussion details.

Duane offered to help Erin learn his approach to minute-taking.

The group decided the transition would be formalized when Duane submits his resignation as clerk via email to Ken. Erin will officially assume the clerk role at the September 9th meeting.

d. Plaque to Credit Horseford Nursery for Tree Donation

Betsy Dunn proposed purchasing commemorative plaques to recognize Horseford Nursery's donations of trees for the town's Arbor Day celebrations over the past four years. The nursery has donated trees including a red oak, hop hornbeam, and flowering crabapple.

The proposed metal plaques would be approximately the size of a Kindle e-reader with simple text such as: "This red oak was donated to the Town of Essex for Arbor Day 5/17/25 by the Horseford Nursery." The cost is \$60 per plaque, totaling \$240 for four plaques. Betsy had obtained a quote from an Etsy vendor.

Paul Davis asked whether Tree City USA funding could be applied to this purchase and suggested including plaques in future planning. Ken clarified that the committee cannot make purchases directly but can recommend that staff make the purchase.

Action Item: Betsy will send the quote and plaque details to Ken Signorello via email, who will forward the request to Kent Johnson for approval.

Motion: Approve advising staff to purchase 4 commemorative signs for \$240 total. Moved by Erin De Vries, seconded by April Peterson, carried unanimously (8-0).

e. Advise DRB on Development Application

1. 55 Thompson Drive

Kent showed the initial development plan and the committee offered two recommendations: 1) ensure there is a buffer for the existing trails so they maintain their natural state 2) do not permit building on slopes greater than 20%

Motion: Bino will send a memo to the DRB with the above recommendations. Moved by Duane, seconded by April, carried unanimously (8-0)

2. 123 Old Colchester Road

The committee offered no recommendations at this point.

3. 127 Stinson Drive

After a brief conversation that was initiated by Sarah Saltino about whether developers consider using native/northeast friendly plants for landscaping, the committee decided to make no recommendations at this point.

4. 45 River Road

Motion: Bino will send a memo to the DRB recommending they don't permit building on slopes greater than 20%. Moved by Erin, Seconded by April, carried unanimously (8-0)

f. Update and potential Action on CTC Google Drive

Kent Johnson informed the committee that the town requires primary committee documents to be stored on town servers, not third-party platforms like Google Drive. He raised two main concerns: (1) official documents must be accessible on town systems for public records requests, and (2) multiple members editing shared documents simultaneously could violate open meeting laws by creating an unofficial quorum discussion.

Kent explained that staff no longer wants to maintain the Google Drive by adding/removing user access. He emphasized that while members can keep personal copies of documents, the official versions must reside on town systems. Documents become official when they're included in agenda packets and posted publicly.

Ken Signorello shared a solution he implemented for the Economic Development Commission: creating a committee-managed Google account (essexconservation@gmail.com or similar) with individual folders for each member. Members would have edit access to their own folders but read-only access to others' folders, preventing open meeting law violations while maintaining collaborative capabilities.

The committee discussed the challenge of their existing Google Drive, which contains hundreds of documents including forest management plans, trail maps, and historical materials - many of which may not exist elsewhere. Members expressed concern about losing convenient access to this archive. Kent Johnson offered to save whatever documents the committee identifies as important but noted the challenge of sorting through outdated and duplicate materials.

The consensus was that:

- Official documents will be stored on town servers via agenda packets
- The committee can maintain its own Google Drive for working documents, but must self-manage access
- Ken Signorello will set up the new committee-managed Google account with at least three officers having administrative credentials

Action Items:

1. Members will consider what needs to be preserved from the existing Google Drive before the next meeting
2. Ken will establish the new committee-managed Google Drive structure
3. The committee will develop a concrete plan at the September meeting

g. Update on and Advice to Planning Commission

Duane Millar Barlow gave a brief update on his participation with the RPD-I 50' Buffer Working Group, and reported that this week's Planning Commission meeting was canceled.

The working group has developed draft language for the regulation changes discussed in previous meetings. While the working group has completed the draft language that can be discussed further, they have not yet received feedback from town staff, who Duane noted are very busy. Duane was uncertain about how much more he would be involved in the process going forward.

Duane also mentioned that a Planning Commission meeting has been scheduled that will include a roundtable welcoming public input on changes to regulations, though the agenda was not yet available. He encouraged committee members to watch for this opportunity to provide input.

Ken Signorello reminded the committee that he has created a Google spreadsheet listing all DRB and Planning Commission meetings through August. He reiterated the goal of having at least one Conservation and Trails Committee member attend each of these meetings to represent the committee's interests. Members were encouraged to sign up for meetings they can attend.

h. Advise on Committee/Commission Handbook

Ken Signorello reported on the proposed Committee/Commission Handbook, a 169-page document (including attachments) that was submitted to the Select Board for preliminary approval but was not approved. The Select Board sent it back to staff to ensure all committees have reviewed it and can provide input. Some committees, including the DRB, had not received it at all.

Ken identified five main concerns he raised at the Select Board meeting:

1. **Staff presence requirement:** Currently, committees cannot hold hybrid meetings without staff present because committees lack Zoom account credentials. Ken recommended either establishing a clear chain of responsibility up to the Town Manager to ensure meeting coverage, or providing committees with their own Zoom credentials.
2. **Agenda control:** The handbook states staff will be responsible for committee agendas. Ken argued the chairperson should be responsible and able to delegate to staff as desired, but staff shouldn't have sole control. Currently, the handbook allows staff to exclude public-submitted items or member-submitted items based on time constraints without consulting the chair.
3. **Signature requirement:** Committee members would be required to sign the handbook agreeing to all its contents. Ken stated he would not sign it and questioned what would happen to those who refuse.
4. **Agenda additions:** The handbook changed "should not" add last-minute agenda items to "shall not." Ken explained this contradicts Vermont Open Meeting Law and Secretary of State guidance, recommending it be changed back to "should."
5. **Overall restrictiveness:** Several provisions were made more restrictive than necessary, with "shoulds" replaced by "shalls."

Action Required: Committee members should review the handbook and submit individual comments to Kent Johnson by the end of the week. Members can have differing opinions - the goal is to gather input to create a helpful handbook with common expectations for all committees.

i. Indian Brook Cleanup Schedule

Steve Dowd reminded the committee that the annual fall cleanup typically occurs in September and needed to be scheduled since the next meeting won't be until September 9th. The committee voted to add this item to the agenda.

The committee set the fall cleanup at Indian Brook for Saturday, September 27th, with Sunday, September 28th as the rain date. Steve will take the lead on organizing the event, with support from Paul and other members.

Steve will coordinate with Kent Johnson to update the cleanup posters with the new dates. The plan is for Kent to have the posters ready by the September 9th committee meeting, when Steve will pick them up and post them around town the following day to give residents adequate notice.

The committee also noted that Community Day is September 20th, providing an opportunity to promote the cleanup event at their table and gather volunteers.

Motion: Set the Indian Brook fall cleanup for September 27th with rain date of September 28th. Moved by Bino Cummings, seconded by Paul Davis, carried unanimously (8-0).

j. Review and adjust CTC Work Plan

The members will review the work plan independently and bring work items they would like to work on to the next meeting.

k. Update on Conservation Fund Survey

The survey is complete. Paul is working on a memo to present the findings. Paul will have a memo for the next meeting.

l. Update on Tree Nursery Project

Steve Dowd provided an update on the tree nursery project, noting that with school starting again, he expects more movement on the initiative. Several programs have already bought into the infrastructure needs, including water access to the site.

The goal remains to get the necessary paperwork signed between the different parties this fall so the project can launch next spring. The committee has decided to start with 6 to 10 trees, likely purchased through the Winooski tree sale.

Sarah Salantino offered to collaborate with Steve on tree selection and purchasing. She recommended Vertera, a new native tree nursery in Hinesburg, as a potential supplier. She emphasized the value of using native, Northeast-friendly species and offered to help select appropriate trees for Essex.

Action Item: Steve and Sarah will work together on tree selection and purchasing for the nursery project, with Sarah serving as Steve's team member on this work plan item.

m. Update on Commission Proposal

No update on this week.

n. Update on Keystone Trail Project

Kent gave a brief update. He mentioned that there would be a public meeting some time in September (specific date TBD).

7. READING FILE

a. Vining of New England

Not discussed.

b. Tunbridge has the right to maintain public trails on private property

Not discussed.

c. Residents opposed to South Burlington housing development

Not discussed.

d. APHIS Declares August is Tree Check Month

Not discussed.

e. Vermont Invasives <https://vtinvasives.org/>

Not discussed.

8. ADJOURN

Motion to adjourn, moved by April, seconded by Bino, carried unanimously 8-0.

Meeting recording: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0QrZhIRY4ac>

Next meeting: September 9, 2025 at 6p