

**TOWN OF ESSEX
PLANNING COMMISSION
DRAFT MINUTES
SEPTEMBER 11, 2025**

A video recording of the meeting is available to view on the Town's YouTube channel:
<https://www.youtube.com/@essexvt>

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

PLANNING COMMISSION ATTENDING VIRTUALLY: None.

PC ABSENT: None.

STAFF PRESENT IN ROOM: Katherine Sonnick, Community Development Director

OTHERS PRESENT IN ROOM: State Commissioner Wanda Minoli, Buildings & General Services; Commissioner Jon Murad, Dept. of Corrections; Kathy Astemborski, Dept. of Corrections; Tabrena Karish, Buildings & General Services; Joe Aja, Buildings & General Services; Cole Barney, Buildings & General Services; Issac Dayno, Dept. of Corrections; Haley Sommer, Dept. of Corrections; Wendy James; Joe Percy; Brian Cliford; Marybeth Redmond; Mark Redmond; Niels Giddens; Lorna Swerhone; Tara Miller; Crystal C; Chris Murphy; Cheryl Van Epps; Olivia Geddes; Abby Philips; Max Handelman; Ierene Paris; Elizabeth Dunbar; Keith Dunbar; Laura McNally; Matt Cohen; Kim Hardy; Ived Moesi; Andrew Seaver; Chelsea Page; Vivian Boise-Pyne; Alyssa Breda; Missie Thurston; Lisa Goodrich; Irene Wrenner; David Goodrich and Town Meeting TV.

OTHERS VIRTUALLY: Natalee Braun; Lois Whitmore; Dawn Hill-Fleury; Jeanne; Kim; phoebe; rachael; Tobe Zalinger; Trisha Melton; 18025986667; Jon Felde; Kim; phoebe; Rachel; Kim; Jeanne Piro; skelley; Kim Dawn Hill-Fleury; Trisha Melton; 1.8E+10; Jon Felde; Kristi Fogtman; J. Morris; Vicky Ross; Lois Whitmore; Sally Lincoln; Jessa; Commissioner Carroll; Lzalo; Vicky Ross; Will Raihall; kritsti; Dawn Grenn; Sam Farley; Susan Tohn; Emily V – Vermont; Miriam Berry's iPhone; Maverick; Max Nevius; Louise Goodrich; Ang; Gina Halpin Barrett; Leo M. Sally Lincoln; NOFA-VT Office; megan b; Alexis Pless; and Jean Hopkins.

AGENDA ITEM 1: CALL TO ORDER: Chair Knox called the meeting to order at 6:30 p.m.

AGENDA ITEM 2: ADDITIONS/ CHANGES: None.

AGENDA ITEM 3: APPROVE AGENDA: Commissioner Schumacher Moved
Commissioner Duke Seconded a Motion to approve the agenda. The Motion passed 7-0.

AGENDA ITEM 4: PUBLIC TO BE HEARD FOR ITEMS NOT ON THE AGENDA: None.

AGENDA ITEM 5: MINUTES, August 28, 2025: Commissioner Duke Moved and
Commissioner Lavigne Seconded a Motion to approve August 28, 2025 minutes as

written. The MOTION passed 6-0-1 (one abstention.)

AGENDA ITEM 6: Discussion on Women's Correctional Facility Zoning Change Request:

Chairman Knox stated that nothing was infinitive, and the current meeting was not acceptance of any regulation changes. Knox explained the process needed for the PC to consider a change to the zoning regulations, which included workshops (such as the current meeting) and warned public hearing(s) before sending the document to the Selectboard for its review, public hearings and its decision. If the proposed request to add a correctional facility to the draft regulations, the document would be passed up to the Selectboard. He then explained the process the Selectboard would need to take. If passed by the Selectboard, the public would need to appeal the Selectboard's decision no more than 20 days after its decision. The public would need to submit a petition which included signatures of 5% of Town voters. The issue would then be resolved by the voters by Australian ballot at an election.

Katherine Sonnick, Community Development Director, stated that state representatives were present to answer questions posed by the DRB and the public. Sonnick noted that some of the submitted questions have already been answered. She introduced State Commissioner Wanda Minoli, Buildings & General Services and Commissioner Jon Murad, Dept. of Corrections. In turn, Wanda introduced Kathy Astemborski, Dept. of Corrections; Tabrena Karish, Buildings & General Services; Joe Aja, Buildings & General Services; Cole Barney, Buildings & General Services; Issac Dayno, Dept. of Corrections; and Haley Sommer, Dept. of Corrections.

Chairman Knox stated the PC would like to know how the facility would work, noting that the proposal would need to conform to the goals of the Town Plan regarding safety, affordable housing; and land used and density. He cited VT Statute 24, Chapter 117, Section 441(c). He explained that if the request were accepted, the PC would need to submit a written report to the State.

Wanda Minoli stated that since the last meeting, the team looked at the feasibility of both sites and determined that Site 2 (River Road) is now preferred as it has more strengths, such as the entire lot is in the industrial (I1) zone, no impact to a VAST trail, less exposure to the view corridor, etc.

Tabrena Karish, noted that Site 2 is better for their programming and site development. In response to Chairman Knox's question of the metric for a program's perspective, Jon Murad, Dept. of Corrections, replied that they made good faith efforts regarding topography as Site 2 has greater outdoor space and more conducive to the programs, including better practices.

Commissioner Duke asked why the proximity to the existing facility is important. Murad replied that he was new and does not have an answer. Wanda Minoli stated that the employees, the vicinity and impacts are the major reasons.

Commissioner Bruso noted that the PC provided the State with 12 questions and suggested

the State answer each question, as follows:

Question 1: Commissioner Bruso stated he could not interpret the answer as only information was received from So. Burlington. The State replied that the State Police and South Burlington respond to emergencies, however if South Burlington is not available, other departments will respond.

Question 2: question on both sites being viable. The State replied that they are now only looking into the River Road site.

Question 3: question regarding the bus line. A brief discussion took place regarding the bus line and the potential of this line returning to an active line. Minoli stated that AOT will be a part of the overall discussions, including studies and impacts.

Question 4: Possible future conversion of building or out-of-state inmates. Commissioner Jon Murad, Dept. of Corrections pledged that there is zero change foreseeable and it is not to be anything but a women's facility.

Commissioner Carroll asked about the design of a women's facility. Tabrena Karish responded that a women's facility is softer and won't be as hard as men's, which is a majority of concrete. She noted softer colors, windows, fencing will be used to construct the women's facility.

Kathy Astemborski, Dept. of Corrections Kathy Astemborski, stated that a women's trauma is a critical pathway and natural light will also be a part of the design.

Question 5: Wanda Minoli replied that all agreements were different, however the State is committed to providing more details as they move forward, noting that this information usually comes later. She noted a Memo of Understanding would be signed and would be binding.

Question 6. The PC felt this question related to Question 3. Regarding the state's intention with the Springfield facility. Commissioner Jon Murad stated that they pledge to talk and give assurances, however they can't make promises of other parts of the state. He stated the State needs a new women's facility. He stated he would ask if the state were agreeable to not ever change the facility to a men's facility. He could not control that, but he would ask the question.

Question 7: Commissioner Williams asked if the facility would serve 150 residents. The State responded that there may be more in the existing facility, and they would plan for that number.

Question 8: Guest Traffic. Chairman Knox asked if the preliminary number of guest traffic would be a maximum of 375 trips and if any of this traffic depended on bus service. Tabrena Karish replied that the number is derived from the size of the building and number of employees.

Question 9: N/A at this time.

Question 10: How inmates would get to a work program outside of the facility. This answer is yet to be determined.

Question 11: Commissioner Duke asked how a sentence differs from a detainee. The state replied from a court sentencing.

Question 12: Question regarding release of prisoners. The state responded that the fear is misplaced and that has not been an issue at the current facility.

Question 13: The state noted that a Memorandum of Understanding would be in place.

Question 14: Chairman Knox noted that any women arrested and detained in Vermont will be transported to the state's only female correctional facility.

Question 15: There are no statistics regarding transgender inmates.

Question 16: It was noted that this question is linked to Question 1. Tabrena stated that emergent cases, such as stroke, heart attacks, would go to the hospital however a high level of medical service is on site.

The PC informed the state that they would like additional information on emergency calls and who responded, questions on why a larger building was being proposed; the dangers of walking from site 2; Clarification on the long-term use restrictions for the proposed facility; Provide additional information on how the proposed facility would impact local infrastructure, particularly on Route 117; Engage with Agency of Transportation regarding bus transportation services to the proposed facility site; and Address transportation impacts and conduct necessary studies as part of the permitting process.

The following people provided comments on the proposed women's correction facility in Essex:

Jada Beardon, of Fort Ethan Allen; Crystal (works for Howard Center); Lorraine Zaloom; Su G; Brian Clifford, 6 Tanglewood Dr; Lisa Goodrich; Tara Miller; Rachel Lizotte; Hugh ?, So. Burlington; Gina Halpin Barrett; Josh, River Road; Evan Pro; Pam Arcole; Kristen Leer, Montpelier; Maggie Pierce; Emily; Ashley Smith, Burlington; Laura Ingleton; Gina Osoff, Colchester, VT; Aspen; Wendy James; Joe Percy; Cheryl Van Epps Susan Tohn; Mark Redmond; and Marybeth Redmond.

Discussions included questions about the source of the prison population, differences between sentenced and detained individuals, and the impact of released inmates on the community; the facility's capacity for housing federal immigration detainees; data on transgender inmates and crimes involving transgender inmates in the prison; traffic, fire, and police access, as well as the potential for the facility to disrupt the community; demographics of the incarcerated women and the facility's plans to address their caregiving duties; challenges of balancing community concerns with the need for a

189 facility that meets the needs of incarcerated women; incompatibility with community
190 values and the higher cost of incarceration compared to supportive housing; concerns
191 about the zoning change's potential to allow other state facilities; impact on emergency
192 services and bus routes; feasibility of using the existing corrections zone; a waste of
193 resources that could be better used for social services; and impact on local traffic and
194 light pollution.

195
196 Chairman Knox informed the public that they went 15 minutes over the time allotted for public
197 comment and the DRB needed to bring it back to its table to determine the next steps and they
198 only had 10 minutes to do so as they needed to vacate the building to allow Community TV to
199 break down its equipment and leave the premises by the designated school imposed time.

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201 The State defended the need for a new facility due to space and programming limitations at
202 the current site, as well as the condition of the existing facility.

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204 A disruption ensued by the public due to the end of the public comment period, with the public
205 chanting "Let them speak", along with other unruly comments.

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207 **At 9:10 p.m., Commissioner Carroll Moved and Commissioner Brusco Seconded a**
208 **Motion to Adjourn. The Motion passed unanimously.**

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210
211 **PLANNING COMMISSION**

212
213 By: _____

214 Joshua Knox, Chair