TOWN OF ESSEX
PLANNING COMMISSION
DRAFT MINUTES
SEPTEMBER 25, 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 and Kent Johnson, Planner.

OTHERS PRESENT IN ROOM: Anne Miller; Lorna Swerhone; Joe Percy; Dianne Percy; Brad Johnson; Wendy James; Bryan Currier; Ken Signorello; Irene Wrenner; Lisa Goodrich; Patty Davis; David Goodrich; Al Senecal; Andrew Seaver, Regina Longo, and Duane Millar Barlow.

OTHERS VIRTUALLY: Lois Whitmore; Natalee Braun; David Skopin; Rachael; Jeanne; Johnny Mendez; and Cheryl Van Epps.

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 Duke Moved Commissioner Carroll Seconded a Motion to approve the agenda. The Motion passed 7-0.

AGENDA ITEM 4: PUBLIC TO BE HEARD:

Joe Percy asked the Planning Commission for the criteria being used to assess the proposed correctional facility. Commissioner Knox replied that the PC was using state statutes as well as what was in accordance with the Town Plan and its goals. Chairman Knox spoke briefly on state requirements regarding approved amendments to the regulations, citing 24 V.S.A., Section 4441(c). Knox confirmed that if the state needed more information, the town would be required to provide whatever criteria is required for the application.

Regina Longo, requested that the Planning Commission deny the request to change the regulations to add a prison citing safety, home values and economic issues.

Diane Percy, stated the state was flip-flopping with what they are proposing, noting that they now feel that site 2 (River Road) is a more ideal location. Percy stated that they did not meet the criteria, and no new report has been submitted. She asked the PC to deny the request.

Andrew Seaver stated that he has a friend that works at the So. Burlington facility who reported to him that employees do not transport prisoners. Seaver stated they already have staffing issues, and he is frustrated as the state keeps going down a rabbit hole. He noted that it has been over 1 year, and the state is no closer to any decisions.

Lisa Goodrich expressed concern about the state's comments regarding its vision for improvements for inmates, including activities and skills, however there is no funding and no transportation. She had questions regarding inmate genders and security levels. She stated that a prison is not "a positive" for the size of Essex, there is no benefit economically and no guarantees. She asked the PC to ask themselves if they wanted to be a major investor to a secondary "fanciful" new direction not supported by research. She felt the risks were capital, quality of life, character of town and property values.

Wendy James requested that the PC does its homework. She reported the number of calls at the South Burlington facility about the cost of those calls. She felt the state would need "to pony up" with these expenses. She noted that Essex Rescue's funding is currently not doing well, and the Town needs to make sure it has enough money for its current calls. She stated that 'Suzanne's Place' on Susie Wilson Road is also heavy burden.

Patty Davis, 9 Hillside Circle, Essex, VT, stated that impact fees are needed for road repairs, schools, parks and recreation, etc. She stated that the state needs to have a honest, positive discussion on the issues. She questioned how the future would be navigated if it can't be done presently.

Rachael Lizotte agrees with all comments previously stated. She noted that the Town Plan lists the statement to make Essex a designation for walking, biking, etc., and Site 2 currently has no bus route or sidewalks in this area. She felt revenue could be earned in other ways rather than allowing a prison to come to the community.

Lorna Swerhone, Essex resident, advised the PC to deny the State's request. She felt that people found out about this proposal through the media, news or T.V. She was frustrated about the state changing its mind and is now finding Site 2 preferable. She noted it the location is a moving target, and the state broke the public's trust.

Irene Wrenner said because of the date it was difficult to speak on September 11th. Wrenner made the following points:

- People must do better by people. She spoke on the conditions of the existing facility in South Burlington.
- She noted that these meetings are held in a small room, yet the sound system does not work so that people can hear the conversations. She felt the Selectboard needed to revisit the set-up and change it so that everyone can hear the conversations.
- She understands frustrations heard from the public on which location is best, but she noted that Site 1 has slopes, is not in the sewer core and is not a good site for the prison.

Brad Johnson stated that he opposes zoning change to accommodate a prison. He noted that there is already a staffing shortage in the existing prison and staff would not be able to transport prisoners in cases of emergencies.

<u>AGENDA ITEM 5: MINUTES, September 11, 2025</u>: Chair Knox noted several changes, including changing “infinitive” to “definitive” on line 54, “DRB” change to “PC”, “Section 441(c)” change to “4441(c) on line 76. Commissioner Bruso moved to approve the minutes with changes. Motion was seconded by vice chair Lavigne. Motion passed 7-0.

<u>AGENDA ITEM 6:</u> <u>BUSINESS ITEMS</u>:

- **<u>Discuss and possibly provide feedback to Selectboard on draft Handbook for Board, Committee & Commission Members and their Staff Representatives</u>.**

  The PC reviewed a draft Handbook for Board, Committee, and Commission members. Commissioner Bruso suggested requiringan official town email addresses to board mebers for better communication and record-keeping. Irene Wrenner suggested adding sample scripts for meeting procedures and de-escalation techniques for chairs.

- **<u>Zoning Roundtable Discussion</u>**
  <u>• 48 Upper Main Street zoning change proposal</u>

  Al Senecal and Bryan Currier spoke on Senecal’s request to change the zoning designation for his land located on northern side of Route 15, abutting the Circ Highway. Currier described the location of the existing sewer core area and how the development known as “Streamside” was able to be connect to the City of Essex Junction’s sewer lines. Currier spoke about MXD-PUD Zoning District, noting that it can be tricky as there are subzones within the district. He noted one subzone is the B1 (Retail-Business), which allows for congregate housing and multiunit dwellings which could be 12 units per ½ acre or 25 units per acre. Currier described the existing sewer core and noted how an extension of the sewer core would need to be approved by the Selectboard. Currier informed the DRB that the Town invested in a water tank for a pressurized line down Route 15 through Lang Farm to bring water on Route 15. As such, Currier believes that it makes sense that the time is now to consider the zone change to the west corner. Currier noted the interim Act 250 exemptions on transit routes in an urban area; however, the parcel being discussed was greater than 10-acres so it would not be eligible for the exemption. Al Senecal reported that his residence is on the land, and he stated that wells have been an issue in this area. Currier reported that Governor Scott’s priority was housing, and the zoning change will assist in meeting the housing goals.

  Chairman Knox asked if Williston accepted Tier 1B. Katherine Sonnick replied yes, however the Essex Selectboard did not adopt the State’s Tier proposal regarding housing, however they could change their mind. Chairman Knox suggested first looking at how this proposal fits into the Town Plan and then they could talk to the Selectboard. Commissioner Schumacher is in favor of the request for a zoning change. Commissioner Carroll noted that the Selectboard was meeting with Chairs of

Boards/Commission/Committees. The PC decided that chair Knox could provide the Selectboard with details of the Senecal proposal to get their temperature on a zoning change and a sewer core change ahead of the PC spending too much time on the project.

Lois Whitmore was curious about the total housing for the entire town. She did not hear what type of housing would be proposed; and how this would fit into the Town Plan. Chairman Knox stated that this is the first time the Commission is hearing about this request and need to talk amongst themselves before determining next steps.

Anne Miller believes she understands the discussion regarding the sewer core but asked if it was reasonable to make changes without knowing the overall housing plan.

Ken Signorello stated it was great to entertain the request but there is an AG Overlay District change recommended in the town plan, which was approved by town residents that should take priority for discussion.

Duane Millar Barlow asked about the impact of the Scenic Overlay District on the parcel under discussion.

The Planning Commission discussed the need to balance town plan implementation with individual landowner requests, emphasizing the importance of respecting both community-wide decisions and individual property rights. They agreed to create a running list of issues and priorities to better track and address ongoing concerns, particularly regarding slope and buffer regulations. The Commission also considered adjusting the timing of their October 23 meeting to ensure adequate discussion time, given the complexity of some topics.

At 8:30 p.m., Commissioner Bruso Moved and Commissioner Duke Seconded a Motion to Adjourn. The Motion passed unanimously.

PLANNING COMMISSION

By: ________________________________

Joshua Knox, Chair