

Essex Conservation and Trails Committee (CTC)

Regular Meeting Minutes

81 Main St. Essex Jct., VT 05452

October 21, 2025

Draft meeting minutes prepared by Erin De Vries, submitted on October 29, 2025

ATTENDEES:

Members present: Ken Signorello (Chair, remote), Bino Cummings (Vice Chair), Paul Davis, April Peterson, Duane Millar Barlow

Members absent: Erin De Vries, Steve Dowd, Sarah Salatino

Staff Present: Hans Nedde

Public present: Cheryl Vaness, Ann Miller, Mike Allen, Annie Dunwatson

1. CALL TO ORDER 6:00 PM

Chair Ken Signorello called the meeting to order. He announced he was attending remotely due to having COVID and designated Vice Chair Bino Cummings to take over if necessary. The agenda was accepted as published without any changes. A roll call was conducted.

2. PUBLIC TO BE HEARD

Ann Miller presented a grant opportunity from The Nature Conservancy in Vermont called the Vermont Biodiversity Protection Fund. The grant supports permanent land protection for biodiversity and climate resilience, with a deadline of November 14. Eligible applicants include municipalities seeking to acquire land or conservation easements. Ann suggested two potential projects: land in the Sandill Road area, which is a high-priority wildlife corridor, and a parcel on the Winooski River. Ken Signorello expressed strong interest, noting this could be a way to move forward on a stalled land acquisition project. Hans Nedde noted that the committee needs official approval to apply for grants. Ken acknowledged this and asked Hans to investigate the internal process for getting grant approval.

Action Items:

- Ann Miller will email the grant information and application link to Ken Signorello.
- Ken Signorello will contact Ann Miller to discuss potential projects.
- Ken Signorello will consult with the Winooski Valley Park District about the opportunity.
- Hans Nedde will investigate the internal process required for the committee to apply for a grant.

3. APPROVE MINUTES

The minutes from the September 9, 2025 meeting were presented for approval. There were no corrections or discussion.

Motions:

- Approve the minutes from the September 9, 2025 meeting. Moved by Morgan Kirk. Seconded by April Peterson. Passed (6-0).

4. BUSINESS ITEMS

a. Advise Selectboard on Handbook for Board, Committee & Commission Members and their Staff Representatives

The committee reviewed the draft "Handbook for Board, Committee & Commission Members and their Staff Representatives" to provide feedback to the Selectboard. The discussion, led by Ken Signorello, focused on several key areas. It was noted that members will likely be required to sign an acknowledgement page. The primary concern raised was the extensive and "daunting" list of responsibilities assigned to staff representatives. Specific points of concern included the necessity of staff facilitating communication with the Selectboard, and a clause stating staff "may" work with the chair on agenda items, which the committee felt should be a mandatory collaboration. Ken pointed out that an existing staff responsibility—updating the committee website—had already lapsed, indicating the current workload may be too high. The staff representative, Hans Nedde, acknowledged the workload concerns and also agreed that it would be appropriate for staff to sign the handbook, suggesting a signature line be added for them. The committee ultimately decided to formally express its concern about the volume of staff responsibilities to the Selectboard.

Action Items:

- Ken Signorello will formulate a memo to the Selectboard detailing the committee's concern regarding the extent of staff responsibilities outlined in the new handbook.

Motions:

- To submit a recommendation to the Selectboard expressing concern about the amount of responsibilities that staff representatives have. Moved by Bino Cummings. Seconded by Morgan Kirk. Passed (6-0).

Public Service Announcement: Zoom Meeting Mix-up

A participant announced a potential mix-up between two public meetings. It was clarified for the public that the current meeting is for the Conservation and Trails Committee. The Police Community Advisory Board meeting was taking place concurrently but in person at 81 Main.

This announcement was made to redirect any attendees who may have joined the wrong meeting.

b. Endorse and Submit Conservation Fund Survey Results

Paul Davis presented the memo and results of the Conservation Fund Survey. The key takeaway from the survey was that while there is general public support for the fund's purpose, and a significant number of respondents indicated a potential willingness to donate money or land, the fund has been largely inactive. This suggests a lack of public awareness. The primary recommendation is to increase public education and conduct an advertising campaign.

A member of the public, Cheryl Vanups, asked if donations to the fund are tax-deductible, noting this is a critical factor for donors. The committee was unsure but agreed that if donations are deductible, this information should be prominently advertised. The discussion highlighted a broader need for clearer public understanding of the fund's purpose and function. The committee also noted that the town's webpage for the fund requires updating.

Action Items:

- Hans Nedde will investigate whether donations to the Conservation Reserve Fund are tax-deductible.
- Hans Nedde will update the Conservation Reserve Fund webpage.

Motions:

- To submit the Conservation Fund Survey results as presented to the Selectboard. Moved by Dwayne Marbarlo. Seconded by Bino Cummings. Passed (6-0).

c. Advise on Indian Brook White Trail Reconstruction Plans

Hans Nedde from the Parks and Recreation Department presented a plan to make the Indian Brook White Trail more accessible. The project, based on an assessment by the Upper Valley Trails Alliance, involves creating crushed stone paths suitable for wheelchairs and strollers. The project is divided into phases: Phases 1 and 2, which are funded through the capital budget, will create an accessible path from the main entrance to campsites 1, 2, and 3. The department is currently applying for a Recreational Trails Program grant to fund Phase 3A, which would extend the accessible trail from the south parking lot towards campsites 4 and 5. The full application is due February 1st, with a goal to have a contractor complete all funded phases between May and August of next year.

Discussion points included the need for trail rerouting and new bridges to meet accessibility grade standards, and consideration for winter flooding and erosion. Hans confirmed these issues are being addressed. It was clarified that the planned forestry project at Indian Brook is scheduled for the winter of 2026-2027 and will not conflict with the trail construction. An unidentified committee member offered to research additional grant opportunities. A member of

the public asked about accessing project documents and was directed to the meeting agenda packet on the town website.

Action Items:

- An unidentified committee member offered to take the lead on researching additional grant opportunities and report back at the next meeting.
- Ken Signorello will forward the Vermont Biodiversity Protection Fund grant opportunity to Hans Nedde.
- Hans Nedde will discuss potential volunteer involvement with his colleagues and follow up with Dwayne Marbarlo.

Motions:

- To support the Indian Brook White Trail reconstruction project as written and to assist with future grant writing and finding. Moved by Bino Cummings. Seconded by Dwayne Marbarlo. Passed (6-0).

d. Advise on Proposed Trail Adoption

Hans Nedde presented a proposal for the committee's support in formally adopting four sets of trails into the town's trail system. This adoption would allow the trails to be assigned budgets and integrated into maintenance and capital improvement plans.

The proposed trails for adoption are:

1. **Lang Neighborhood:** To adopt and formalize one of three unofficial trails, with potential rerouting for a direct connection to a nearby bike path and capital improvements to enhance accessibility.
2. **Pinewood Park:** To adopt a short trail that is partially on town land but extends onto private property, which requires securing a new trail easement.
3. **Forestdale Natural Area:** To adopt the central loop, all connecting trails from neighborhood entrances, and an additional, highly-used "ridge loop." The plan also involves clarifying property boundaries and removing improper trail markers.
4. **Indian Brook:** To formally adopt the white, red, blue, and the new green trails.

Motions:

- To support the adoption of the trails as described in the October 3rd memo presented at the October 21st Conservation and Trails Committee meeting. Moved by April Peterson. Seconded by Bino Cummings. Passed (6-0).

e. Advise on Proposed Trail Easements

The committee discussed two potential trail easements requested by Parks and Recreation.

The first proposal was for a trail section on Mike Allen's property that would create a loop. The landowner, Mike Allen, was present and stated he did not want another easement on his property, even for financial compensation. The committee agreed not to pursue this easement.

The second proposal was to secure an easement for an existing but unofficial trail connecting Windridge Road to Pinewood Park, which would allow the town to officially maintain it. A member of the public, Cheryl Vanups, identified the landowner as Brian Marquott of Pinewood Manor, Inc. and noted that the trail area is a wetland that is very wet year-round. Hans Nedde acknowledged this and stated that water management would be incorporated into the maintenance plan. Committee members Ken Signorello and another volunteer agreed to contact the landowner to gauge interest in an easement.

Action Items:

- Hans Nedde will provide Ken Signorello with contact information for the landowner of the Pinewood Park trail property.
- Ken Signorello and another committee member will contact landowner Brian Marquott to discuss a potential trail easement between Windridge Road and Pinewood Park.

Motions:

- To investigate the securing of a trail easement between Windridge Road and Pinewood Park. Moved by Paul Davis. Seconded by April Peterson. Passed (6-0).

f. Resignation - April Peterson

April Peterson announced her resignation from the committee, effective January 2026, due to a 12-month deployment to Germany with the Vermont National Guard. She offered to transition her main responsibility, the Tree City application, to another member and will provide all necessary documentation. An **unidentified committee member** volunteered to be one of the new contacts for the application. The committee thanked Ms. Peterson for her service and wished her well.

Action Items:

- A committee member needs to take over the Tree City application from April Peterson.
- Hans Nedde will officially notify the appropriate party of April Peterson's resignation.

g. Approve Committee Member to Report to Selectboard on Nov. 17th

The committee discussed its upcoming report to the Selectboard. Ken Signorello and Bino Cummings will present on November 17th. The committee reviewed the list of topics requested by the Selectboard and formulated their responses.

Key points for the report include:

- **Stipends:** The committee is in favor of stipends as an incentive and recognition of members' time.
- **Budget Requests:** The committee will request funds for an event tent, identification items (badges, hats, t-shirts), and an advertising budget to support volunteer recruitment and a public awareness campaign for the conservation fund.
- **Status Updates:** They will ask for the status of their previously submitted mission statement update and their conservation fund application.
- **What's Working Well:** The committee praised the recent hiring of Hans Nedde and Harlon, noting a positive shift in commitment to the town's recreation resources. They also highlighted the committee's high level of engagement and the Chair's effective leadership.
- **Needs for Improvement:** The committee desires more autonomy, specifically the ability to apply for grants directly with Selectboard approval, to increase effectiveness and attract new members.

Action Items:

- Ken Signorello and Bino Cummings will report to the Selectboard on November 17th.
- Hans Nedde will notify the appropriate staff that the Chair and Vice Chair will be attending the November 17th Selectboard meeting.

h. Review and Adjust CTC Work Plan

The committee reviewed and adjusted its work plan for the upcoming year. The chair also announced that another member, Steve Dow, will be resigning at the end of November.

- **Act 171:** The committee determined there were no known outstanding obligations. Paul Davis offered to follow up with former member Betsy to confirm. The item was moved to a non-active reference section of the work plan.
- **Land Conservation Programs Marketing:** Paul Davis will lead an initiative to create easily understandable materials (e.g., a webpage, posters) to inform residents about land conservation options, including the town's farm and open land contract, the state's current use program, and the conservation reserve fund.
- **Pollinator Gardens:** Sarah will take the lead on this project. A potential site at Indian Brook has been identified.
- **Tree Nursery:** In light of Steve Dow's pending resignation, Morgan Kirk will take over this project. The chair explained that previous efforts had fallen through and the project is considered to be starting from scratch. A newly acquired 40-acre town property was suggested as a potential future site. It was agreed that this is not a high-priority item at present.
- **Recreation Trail Maps:** The committee agreed that this is being handled well by Parks and Recreation and no longer needs to be an active item on their work plan.

Ongoing items such as the Arbor Day celebration, Explore Essex, and Tree City USA will also continue.

Action Items:

- Paul Davis will follow up with Betsy regarding any loose ends on the Act 171 project.
- Morgan Kirk will speak with Steve Dowd to gather more information on the history of the tree nursery project.

5. ADJOURN

Motions:

- Motion to adjourn. Moved by April Peterson. Seconded by an unidentified committee member. Passed (unanimous voice vote).

Meeting recording:  **Conservation & Trails Committee - October 21, 2025**

Next meeting on: Next meeting scheduled for November 11, 2025 which is Veteran's Day and the Town offices are closed. November meeting will be rescheduled and posted in the very near future.