

**TOWN OF ESSEX
PLANNING COMMISSION
DRAFT MINUTES
JANUARY 8, 2026**

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; Ian Carroll; Dustin Bruso; and Paula Duke.

PLANNING COMMISSION ATTENDING VIRTUALLY: None.

PC ABSENT: Jonathan Schumacher.

STAFF PRESENT IN ROOM: Katherine Sonnick, Community Development Director and Kent Johnson, Planner.

OTHERS PRESENT IN ROOM: Bryan Currier and Al Senecal

OTHERS VIRTUALLY: Sharon Zukowski; Lois Whitmore; Gina Halpin Barrett; 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 Carroll Moved, Commissioner Bruso Seconded a Motion to approve the agenda. The Motion passed 6-0.

AGENDA ITEM 4: PUBLIC TO BE HEARD: None

AGENDA ITEM 5: BUSINESS ITEMS:

A. Discussion with Economic Development Commission and Housing Commission about Action Items in Chapter 1: The Action Plan of the Town Plan

Economic Development Commission members were unable to attend and will attend a future meeting.

Housing Commission members were unable to attend. Chair Anna Brouillette, submitted a memo of the Housing Commission updates.

Chair Knox inquired about board support for Tier 1B from boards other than Housing Commission, and if they had been asked. Katherine Sonnick was unsure, but she indicated that Essex could still opt in for Tier 1B. Katherine explained that there were different options for Tier 1B with a partial opt in versus adopting the full Tier 1B plan. Member Lavigne noted that it would be good to get the opinion of the Economic Development Commission on Tier 1B. Member Carroll inquired if Tier 1B could be presented again to the Selectboard. Sonnick clarified that it would need to be an

updated ask to Selectboard, and not the one that had been previously presented. Bruso noted the impact of adding housing along the Route 15/Center Road corridor and the increase of traffic in an area that is already congested. He feels that supporting the full Tier 1B plan could be detrimental to the infrastructure of the Town. Chair Knox reminded commissioners that Tier 1B wouldn't overrule current Town zoning regulations, but it would rather allow some projects to be exempt from Act 250.

Commissioners were asked if they had other questions for the Housing Commission that they would like to ask. Member Carroll inquired about the status of Zoning Regulation updates from the Housing Commission. Member Duke feels that the comments from Housing Commission lack specificity and would like to know what is envisioned for future housing – How many? How big? How small? Duplexes? A mix of housing? Member Bruso noted that he'd like more specific recommendations of what can be done to help the housing crisis. Duke would like to see practical guides on home design and what people want and need in Vermont. Commissioner Williams inquired about a small housing development, and if the Planning Commission would consider variances for smaller lots to allow for developments of smaller houses. Commissioner Bruso noted that PUDs allow for smaller lot sizes.

Comments were opened to the public. Lois Whitmore spoke about the Housing Commission looking at financial resources and funding for housing. She commented that financing, zoning, housing structures and building community are the items that seem to be what the Housing Commission is going to concentrate on. She doesn't believe that the Town will receive grants for housing in the future.

Sharon Zukowski commented that she likes the little community Trefor mentioned that is in South Burlington. She also brought up the idea of a cooperative PUD that could have a community center. She referenced Williston Woods as an example of a co-op.

B. Discussion of Zoning Amendment Status Matrix

Katherine Sonnick presented the matrix that is being used to track proposed zoning changes. The matrix will help to track the status of each regulation. Bruso noted that it would be nice to add the "why" for the proposed change. Chair Knox would like to have a discussion with the Economic Development Commission on the uses in the RPD-I so that the PC can have an informed discussion on proposed use changes. Bruso would like the matrix to be sorted in priority order. He also feels that some of the changes are linked. He noted that the buffer regulations impact waiver regulations.

Trefor Williams presented the work that has been done on the Steep Slope regulations. (The [proposed Steep Slope Zoning Regulation](#) presented at this meeting can be found on the Town of Essex Website.)

Member Williams noted that information has come from New York, New Jersey, and

96 Pennsylvania. He spoke about towns that require permits and could possibly be
97 something that Essex would consider. He added a section on minor steep slopes.
98 Based on research in New Jersey, he found that some towns will allow a specific
99 amount (1,000 - 2,500 square feet) of minor steep slopes that can be impacted.
100 Hardship waivers are also something to consider. Williams noted that it's hard to
101 know when to allow hardship waivers and that hardship can be a lot of different
102 things and considering unusual situations. Steep Slope Restrictions – Williams found
103 that with our restrictions if there a plot of land that someone desires to develop, if
104 there are steep slopes that a specific percentage of the land area can be
105 developed. Bruso questioned how that percentage is determined. Is it the slopes or
106 the entire parcel? Williams clarified that if the slopes are 15-20% the town would
107 require a permit, 20% slope would allow development on 25% of the land and over
108 20% slope would be prohibited. Lavigne asked if it was still anything under 1,000
109 square feet would allow impacts to minor steep slopes. Trefor confirmed that is
110 correct. Carroll like that there is a definition of a steep slope at the beginning of
111 proposed regulation. He also inquired on where the 25% developable land would be
112 – at the edge of the property? Only in the middle of the property? He feels that if the
113 regulation is in place to protect the environment, then there should be clarity waiver.
114 Bruso noted that this is not just to protect the environment, but also the community.
115 Should there be other regulations on the proximity of the steep slopes to water and
116 wetlands. Commissioner Williams noted that soil type is very important. He feels that
117 we should be asking applicants to specify the soil type of the property as the erosion
118 is largely dependent on the soil type and saturation. He noted that this information is
119 available on the town soil survey. Discussion continued on soil type and the
120 importance of this information. Member Lavigne asked if there are other
121 municipalities that require permits for steep slopes in Vermont. Trefor was unsure as
122 the information that he researched was in other states. Carroll noted that the permit
123 could be incorporated into the DRB review. For lots that would not need DRB review
124 the permit could be administratively reviewed.
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126 Bryan Currier spoke on Zoning Changes versus an Ordinance. He felt that it was a
127 heavy-handed request and cost for the average homeowner who is requesting a
128 permit. He also inquired about other municipalities requiring a permit in Vermont. Mr.
129 Currier spoke on waivers and that in the past developers have asked when they felt
130 that the intent of the regulation does not match the verbatim regulation. He feels that
131 it's a risk to develop on slopes, but that it can be mitigated properly. He also noted
132 that 1,000 square feet isn't going to make much of a difference compared to the
133 footprint of a house. Mr. Curries feels that the 15% slope regulation should be
134 removed. Currier commented that an erosion control plan should be taken into
135 account and approved by Public Works. He agreed with Commissioner Bruso that
136 waterways should be considered and where the parcel is located in relation to other
137 environmental elements.
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139 Al Senecal questioned that currently a lot can be leveled to allow for building, but
140 would this new regulation mean that if there are any slopes on the lot it would be
141 unbuildable? Commissioner Bruso commented that there are flaws in the current
142 regulation and the PC is working to fix the regulation. Mr. Senecal provided an

143 explanation of how a lot can be developed to properly mitigate erosion. He noted
144 that a strict regulation on slopes would render approximately 80% of his land as
145 useless. Bruso reminded Mr. Senecal of the minor and major slope language in the
146 proposed regulation. Member Carroll commented on seeing slopes in other towns
147 that have mitigated erosion, and how can that be done in Essex where the building
148 is done in a responsible manner. Mr. Currier commented on recent projects that
149 have had very detailed erosion control plans that have been coordinated with Public
150 Works.

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152 Sharon Zukowski is happy to hear that soils are being considered. She is strongly
153 opposed to taking out regulations on 15%. She noted that 15% could be a
154 conditional use.

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156 Cheryl Van Epps questioned regulations on driveways and would like to see
157 regulations on steep slopes on driveways. She noted that there are icy conditions
158 and that trees lining driveways, shade the icy areas and make steep slopes more
159 difficult.

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161 Kent Johnson feels that it would be beneficial to have the intention behind the
162 regulations. Also, regulations that are clear on how they are reviewed and that align
163 naturally with engineers and engineering best practices. He would like to have
164 engineering input of what they see in the community and their best practices.
165 Johnson would like to see a slopes map similar to a wetlands map. He feels that this
166 would help community members to understand where the slopes are before they
167 begin development. Johnson also volunteered to help Member Williams on the steep
168 slope regulations and inquired on Bryan Currier potentially assisting.

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170 Commissioner Bruso complimented Commissioner Williams on the work that he had
171 done. Chair Knox asked about a zoning overlay for steep slopes. Mr. Currier asked
172 about the difference between an ordinance and a regulation. Sonnick clarified that it
173 would be a regulation not an ordinance.

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175 Discussion continued on what the changes to the regulations would mean to existing
176 parcels and if they would be developable.

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178 Cheryl Van Epps requested that public comment be included in the process.
179 Potentially in a work group. She feels that slopes should be viewed from a safety
180 perspective.

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182 Member Bruso inquired on next steps for the process of developing this regulation
183 so that it's ready for public hearing. Chair Knox noted that there are items to work on
184 in this first draft. Bruso inquired if Bryan Currier would be willing to assist in changes.
185 Mr. Currier requested to work with the Public Works and submit suggested changes.
186 Otherwise, he can submit comments as a member of the public. Bruso extended an
187 invitation to Mr. Senecal and other property owners to submit suggestions as well.

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189 Lois Whitmore feels that it should be someone who does not do business with the

Town that reviews and makes recommendations and evaluations. She feels that people who stand to benefit from the decisions should not be the only ones providing input. The board noted that anyone can provide input as a member of the public.

Gina Halpin Barrett agrees with Ms. Whitmore's request and feels it's a conflict of interest to have a person involved who might benefit or make a profit from the changes.

The board would like to continue to work on the regulations for the next meeting in February. Plans were made for a work group to work on refining the regulation and presenting to the PC next meeting.

Bryan Currier reminded that these zoning changes have the opportunity to make a significant impact on housing and that he and landowners appreciate the opportunity to make these changes and support the housing crisis.

Mr. Senecal spoke to expanding the housing in Essex and what is needed to make that happen. He pointed out that a developer is a big component in building houses and the rising costs to developers. He said that it's not as easy as people believe and that developers are not doing this to get rich, but rather as a love of building. He doesn't want to see the Town discouraging development through zoning changes.

C. Discussion of proposed Planning Commission section of the 2025 Annual Report

Planning Commissioners reviewed the proposed language. Chair Knox requested if there might be a photo of the Planning Commission that could be included with the report. Commission Members had no changes to the Planning Commission section for the Annual Report.

AGENDA ITEM 6: APPROVAL OF MINUTES

A. Approve minutes from November 13, 2025 and December 11, 2025.

November 13, 2025 minutes should have clarification of DRB and PC members. Motion to approve minutes of November 13, 2025 with changes made by Ian Carroll, seconded by Paula Duke. Approved 6-0.

December 11, 2025 minutes, correction to Dustin Bruso's last name spelling on line 124. Motion to approve minutes of December 11, 2025 with changes made by Paula Duke, seconded by Georgia Lavigne. Approved 6-0.

AGENDA ITEM 7: OTHER BUSINESS

Discussion about the Town Meeting Showcase on Monday, March 2nd. The Planning Commission will have a table, and the request was made of members who might be able to attend and staff the table.

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AGENDA ITEM 8: EXECUTIVE SESSION: None.

At 8:11 p.m., Commissioner Bruso Moved and Commissioner Duke Seconded a Motion to Adjourn. The Motion passed unanimously.

PLANNING COMMISSION

By: _____
Joshua Knox, Chair