

TOWN OF ESSEX PLANNING COMMISSION
REGULAR MEETING
MINUTES OF MEETING
February 26, 2026

PLANNING COMMISSION: (*in person*) Josh Knox, Chair; Trefor Williams, Clerk; Ian Carroll, Paula Duke; (*absent*): Georgia Lavigne, Vice Chair; Dustin Bruso; Jonathan Schumacher.

ADMINISTRATION and STAFF: Katherine Sonnick, Community Development Director.

OTHERS PRESENT: (*in person*): Charlie Baker, Kate McCarthy, Ken Signorello, Al Senecal, Irene Wrenner; (*online*): Gina Halpin Barrett, Anne Miller, Lois Whitmore, Sharon Zukowski.

1. CALL TO ORDER (0:08 in video)

Chair Knox called the meeting of the Town of Essex Planning Commission to order at 6:30 P.M.

2. AGENDA ADDITIONS/CHANGES (0:16 in video)

None.

3. APPROVE AGENDA (0:29 in video)

Commissioner Duke made a motion, seconded by Commissioner Williams, to approve the agenda as presented. The motion passed 4-0.

4. PUBLIC TO BE HEARD (0:41 in video)

a. Comments from Public on Items not the Agenda

Al Senecal noted that he has some outstanding questions for staff that have not yet been answered, and requested that staff do so.

5. BUSINESS ITEMS (1:59 in video)

a. Preapplication review of 2026 ECOS Regional Plan by Land Use Review Board by the CCRPC (2:04 in video)

Director Sonnick said that Kate McCarthy and Charlie Baker of the Chittenden County Regional Planning Commission (CCRPC) will present on this item.

Kate McCarthy provided a status update on the future land use maps developed as a requirement of Act 181, a status update of the ECOS Regional Plan, and shared feedback and solicited further feedback from the Commission on the map for the Town of Essex. She began by noting that CCRPC has been working on future land use maps for around a year, articulating the process through which plans were reviewed by CCRPC and the Land Use Review Board (LURB), resulting in a preapplication memo and feedback from the LURB in December of 2025. She noted that the preapplication and feedback from the LURB are now undergoing review, that CCRPC is gathering additional public feedback and working with municipalities to address changes, and that CCRPC will hold a series of public hearings and adopt a final plan for review and submission to the LURB in late Spring, with hearings on the ECOS Plans in July and August of 2026. She provided an overview of the LURB's comments and key takeaways, noting that the LURB requested more information on two out of 15 state planning goals, that they generally agreed on the mapped future land use categories in most of CCRPC's communities, that more justification is needed for newer or nontraditional centers being in a different land use category, and that they requested additional information or recategorization into a different land use category in certain instances where broad areas were being proposed as Planned Growth Areas or Village Areas. She walked through the Act 181 new framework for land use categories, calling attention to the Downtown Center, Village Center, Planned Growth Area, and Village Area categories,

noting that these are areas where there is a desire to see more investment in housing and can qualify for the state's designation programs, as well as qualify for Tier 1B partial exemption from Act 250 requirements.

Ms. McCarthy then provided an overview of the LURB's comments related specifically to the Town of Essex. She said that the LURB could not determine that the Town's proposed Downtown Center area meets requirements, and their suggestion is to provide additional information or consider another future land use category. They noted that the proposed Downtown Center does not include traditional or historic sites, and that they are requesting additional justification for why the Town considers this a Downtown Center (or that they could alternatively recategorize it into a different land use category). She suggested that CCRPC could help the Town with a roadmap for future growth in this area with ETC Next and could revisit the area in 2028. She said that the LURB determined that the Village Center meets the requirements and suggested that the area could be broadened or could be recategorized as a Downtown Center. Ms. McCarthy said that the LURB determined that the Planned Growth Areas meet requirements and that the LURB would like additional information on water and sewer service areas. She also noted that they determined that the Village Area, Resource Based Recreation, and Enterprise Areas meet requirements. She noted that they suggested expanding the Enterprise Area on Sand Hill Road to include more of the industrially zoned and developed areas.

The Planning Commission discussed the LURB's feedback. Chair Knox asked what in the Village Center meets the criteria for a Downtown Center, and Ms. McCarthy replied that it has a compact pattern that could be built upon. Chair Knox suggested that the Town could articulate the future plans to move the Town center to the proposed Downtown Center area through the ETC Next proposal, though Director Sonnick noted that there will be an advisory vote on Town Meeting Day to determine the future of the ETC Next proposal. Ms. McCarthy said that an alternative to the Downtown Center category for that area is for that area to be recategorized as a Planned Growth Area, which would also give it the Tier 1B exemption benefits. She said that CCRPC would reach out to Director Sonnick after the advisory question vote on Town Meeting Day to determine next steps for the proposed Downtown Center area. Commissioner Duke and Chair Knox expressed concern about expanding the Village Center based on the LURB's feedback, saying that it does not seem appropriate. Commissioners also determined that recategorizing the Village Center as a Downtown Center wouldn't be appropriate. Ms. McCarthy noted that CCRPC will send updated sewer and water maps to the LURB to answer its questions about water and sewer service areas. Director Sonnick noted that the sewer core maps are being updated to align with zoning requirements, and that she will connect with CCRPC staff on updates related to that work once it's concluded. The Commission agreed to expand the Enterprise Area on Sand Hill Road to include more of the industrially zoned and developed areas. The Commission discussed whether the Town should opt in to Tier 1B exemption, and Ms. McCarthy noted that Towns can opt in until the March 31, 2026 deadline (or wait for a future plan update in 2028). Chair Knox noted that while the Planning Commission supported Tier 1B exemption for the Downtown Center area, the Selectboard did not approve moving forward with that exemption when it was brought to them in 2025.

b. Discussion with Economic Development Commission about Action Items in Chapter 1: The Action Plan of the Town Plan (47:52 in video)

Irene Wrenner, Chair, and Ken Signorello, Vice Chair, of the Economic Development Commission, spoke on this agenda item. They presented the recommended priorities that the EDC passed at its February 5, 2026 meeting. They recommended promoting agritourism by defining a new agritourism business use in zoning regulations and allowing existing zoning districts to use it where appropriate. They recommended strengthening protections and expanding recreational uses in mixed-use districts,

such as allowing an indoor soccer facility at Saxon Hill and updating signage regulations for ease of navigation to parking and other amenities. They recommended addressing transportation capacity constraints tied to new development by acknowledging infrastructure limitations and setting thresholds for sewer capacity and traffic, in order to manage residential and industrial development with intention. They recommended supporting entry-level housing by adjusting regulations to allow more owner-occupied housing (especially entry-level and stand-alone senior units) to be built. They recommended allowing childcare use more broadly, by updating zoning regulations to allow childcare facilities throughout the Town. They recommended increasing opportunities for business and residential development in the western part of the Town. They tied each of these recommendations to actions or goals in the Town Plan's Action Plan.

The Planning Commission discussed the EDC's recommended action items. Director Sonnick noted that the EDC is also planning to connect with the Housing Commission, and said it would be good to determine which action items they could be working on, and which action items the Planning Commission could be focusing on.

The Planning Commission opened the discussion up to the public. Mr. Senecal noted that it is important to keep in mind that some residents don't want to develop their land. He said that the Town should talk to landowners and developers prior to contemplating a zoning change, to determine interest. Anne Miller, a member of the EDC, noted that these recommendations focus on actions that could contribute to the tax base and drive economic growth, and agreed that the Housing Commission should focus on the recommendations that pertain to housing.

c. Discussion of Zoning Amendment Status Matrix (1:07:21 in video)

Director Sonnick spoke to this agenda item, noting that it would be productive for the Planning Commission to begin to prioritize potential zoning amendments. She noted that there are working groups focused on steep slope and buffer regulations. Commissioner Williams said that the working groups should have something to present to the Planning Commission potentially at its next meeting, and that they have been working to align regulations with those of adjacent towns and municipalities. Mr. Signorello said that the Conservation and Trails Committee had suggested adopting an agricultural district overlay, and asked that the Planning Commission consider this in its status matrix. He said that this overlay would allow for simultaneous development while preserving agricultural uses for those who want them. Chair Knox said that the item in the status matrix could be reworded to reflect that overlay. Director Sonnick reviewed the list of potential zoning amendment topics, noting that most of them are currently in the discovery phase. She noted that the item relating to merging the subdivision and zoning bylaws together is mostly completed. She noted that steep slope amendments and RPD-I buffer amendments are currently being drafted. She noted that the suggested childcare regulation amendments from the EDC would be a relatively easy set of amendments to make. Commissioner Carroll suggested that the Commission begin moving forward on some easier or more technical amendments while some larger sets of amendments are going through rounds of Planning Commission and Selectboard public hearings. Director Sonnick said that once steep slopes and buffer regulation amendments wrap up, they could look to also move forward with another of the more complex sets of amendments on the matrix in the summer. The Planning Commission said it would like to hear from the steep slopes working group at its March 12 meeting, and that they would like to begin working on amendments related to uses in the RPD-I District. Director Sonnick said she could also prepare draft childcare regulation amendments for the Planning Commission's consideration at that meeting.

6. APPROVAL OF MINUTES (1:21:47 in video)

a. Approve minutes from January 8, 2026 meeting

**PLANNING COMMISSION
(DRAFT)**

February 26, 2026

Commissioner Duke made a motion, seconded by Commissioner Carroll, to approve the minutes of January 8, 2026 with an amendment to add Trefor Williams to the list of Planning Commissioners attending. The motion passed 4-0.

7. OTHER BUSINESS (1:24:20 in video)

Chair Knox noted that the Town has a specific policy on how members of the Planning Commission or other boards or commissions can comment on Town Meeting Day items on social media (and that they must note that they are speaking as private citizens, not as representatives of their respective boards).

8. READING FILE (1:25:19 in video)

- a. Letter from the public

9. PROPOSED EXECUTIVE AND/OR DELIBERATIVE SESSION

- a. All meetings have a potential for an executive session per 1.V.S.A. §313.

10. ADJOURN (1:26:26 in video)

Commissioner Williams made a motion, seconded by Commissioner Duke, to adjourn the meeting. The motion passed 4-0 at 7:58 P.M.

Respectfully Submitted,
Amy Coonradt,
Recording Secretary

Approved this _____ day of _____, 2026
(see minutes of this day for corrections, if any)