

TOWN OF ESSEX PLANNING COMMISSION
REGULAR MEETING
MINUTES OF MEETING
April 9, 2026

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

ADMINISTRATION and STAFF: (*in person*): Kent Johnson, Town Planner; Katherine Sonnick, Community Development Director.

OTHERS PRESENT: (*in person*): Anne Miller; Ken Signorello; Irene Wrenner; Lorraine Zaloom; (*online*): Gina Halpin Barrett; David Skopin; Cheryl Van Epps; Lois Whitmore; Sharon Zukowski.

1. CALL TO ORDER

Chair Knox called the meeting of the Town of Essex Planning Commission to order at 6:31 P.M.

2. AGENDA ADDITIONS/CHANGES (0:46 in video)

None.

3. APPROVE AGENDA (0:49 in video)

Commissioner Duke made a motion, seconded by Commissioner Carroll, to approve the agenda as presented. The motion passed 6-0.

4. PUBLIC TO BE HEARD (1:12 in video)

a. Comments from Public on Items not on Deliberative Agenda

David Skopin thanked Planning Commissioners for their service. He confirmed that the steep slopes regulations are being reviewed for potential revisions to make it easier for developers to determine how to comport with the regulations, and that these amendments would need Selectboard approval. He asked whether all public comment, regardless of member of the public, is held to equal weight. Chair Knox confirmed this, and confirmed that the Planning Commission solicits public comment from all members of the public. Lorraine Zaloom spoke about her concerns and observations from the March 26, 2026 Planning Commission meeting. She corrected the record on several items, noting that sinkholes are primarily caused by water-driven erosion and dissolution of soluble rocks, groundwater pumping, mining, leaking pipes, and drought. She further noted that there is not great oversight at the state or municipal level on sinkholes, erosion, and screening, and that this should be taken into consideration for any RPD-I amendments. She asked that the Planning Commission take into consideration what is occurring on Town land in terms of current state.

5. BUSINESS ITEMS (13:14 in video)

a. Finalize Zoning Amendment List – Zoning Amendment Status Matrix (13:20 in video)

Community Development Director Sonnick said that the goal of this discussion is to determine which items are priorities for finalizing amendments. She noted the items that seem like they're further along in the process, including uses in the RPD-I, the RPD-I buffer, steep slopes, items in the Home Act (including density, parking, and affordable housing bonuses), grammatical and technical changes to the Zoning Regulations, modifying the expiration of Site Plan and CU approval from 1 to 2 years, childcare regulations, small ETC NEXT and Upper Main Street Planning Project changes, and merging of subdivision and zoning bylaws into one document. She further noted that agritourism will be discussed tonight, though it isn't on this part of the list. Planning Commissioners agreed that this is a solid list of the items in the matrix that are far enough along in the process to bring to the Selectboard.

They discussed timeline and how to approach working on amendments in future meetings, noting that they will target completion of some of these items by June.

b. Discussion – Amending Childcare Zoning Regulations (26:06 in video)

Director Sonnick noted that this was first introduced at the March 26, 2026 Planning Commission meeting, and that this came out of a request from the Economic Development Commission to the Planning Commission for changes to these regulations. She noted that some of the changes relate to updating definitions for day care home and day care facility, as well as separating out adult facility daycare and center-based childcare facilities and ensuring alignment with State statute. She said that the EDC requested making center-based child care and preschool programs and family child care homes a permitted use in as many districts as possible, and a conditional use in any remaining districts. She noted that child care home is a permitted use in any single-family home. She said that there were limited modifications needed for adult day centers other than in the definition. She said that center-based child care is a conditional use across many zoning districts in the Town except for the RPD-I and the MXD-C districts. She noted that conditional uses prohibit additional on-street parking, objectionable noise or disturbance to adjoining properties, compliance with state requirements, playground equipment in front yard setbacks, and that conditional use be contingent on off-street parking and provisions of appropriate screening and fencing. She asked the Planning Commission to consider whether there are more zoning districts where a conditional review isn't necessary and the requirements should be modified. She suggested modifying the use table to make center-based child care programs permitted uses rather than conditional uses in more commercial districts. She also noted that the state has a number of regulations related to child care centers, in addition to any municipal review. Commissioner Bruso said that every child care facility should be evaluated in terms of where it is placed, saying that he is not in favor of relinquishing the optional for conditional review, but he would be amenable to modifying the conditional review requirements. Chair Knox asked about the origin of the request for this review, and Director Sonnick replied that the Economic Development Commission put together this recommendation based on conversation with childcare providers who were noting administrative burden in terms of both state and municipal regulations and the shortage of childcare facilities. Chair Knox said that he would be amenable to making changes, but would like to be careful about parking requirements and ensuring there is ample parking and sidewalk infrastructure. Commissioner Bruso said that focusing on modifying conditional uses is more flexible than other mechanisms for changing regulations. Commissioner Carroll said that allowing child care facilities as conditional uses in zoning districts where it hadn't previously been allowed could be a good first step to evaluate whether these areas are appropriate for this use. Commissioners agreed with this, but wondered what the quantitative impact on the Town would be, in terms of how many more child care facilities could actually be created with these modifications. Director Sonnick said she would look into this, agreeing that having potential quantitative data would be helpful for decision-making.

The following public comments were received:

Lois Whitmore noted that Heart Works on Route 15 is an example of a child care center in a high-density, high-traffic area where pollution may have a negative impact on children's health, and that the Town should consider not allowing centers in high traffic areas. Lorraine Zaloom echoed these sentiments, suggesting that conditions could be added to allow for further setbacks to prevent exposure to air pollution. She also pointed out the economic benefit of having more child care centers. Irene Wrenner noted that this was proposed as an Economic Development Commission resolution in March of 2024 and that the need for child care in the Town is imperative, further noting that anything that can be done to decrease the delay and expense of licensed child care use would be hugely beneficial to child care centers and addressing this need.

c. Economic Development Commission – Agritourism Use Request (59:33 in video)

Director Sonnick noted that this is a recommendation from the Economic Development Commission and is directly related to an action item in the Town Plan, which is to define a new agritourism business use in the zoning regulations and allocate that use to existing zoning districts where appropriate. She said that based on the state’s definition of agritourism, the Town’s regulations are already relatively permissible, though agritourism is not specifically noted in the Town’s zoning regulations. She said that the Town could amend its definitions of agriculture to reference agritourism and the associated State statute. She said that current Town regulations do not prohibit agritourism. Town Planner Johnson noted that the Town would still conduct site plan review to ensure that applications meet zoning and land use regulations, but that the Town wouldn’t review the use itself, since it is permissible under State statute. He clarified that accessory on-farm businesses are accessory uses to a farm and can’t be standalone businesses. Commissioner Lavigne asked if this could be addressed in a round of regulation amendments, and the Planning Commission discussed whether this would be appropriate to include in amendments related to the Home Act.

The following public comments were received:

Ken Signorello said that this came up as a topic from the EDC because there could be components of agritourism that the State statute doesn’t necessarily cover. He said that agritourism is different than agriculture in that it involves visitors and parking and traffic, which might not be covered by general agriculture requirements. Director Sonnick said she would research further into this aspect of the topic.

d. Review RPD-I New Use Criteria (1:09:49 in video)

Chair Knox noted that this relates to a previous discussion of RPD-I uses and that the Commission had expressed a desire to develop a set of metrics upon which to evaluate potential new uses in this zoning district. Planner Johnson noted that the Town’s zoning regulations include a set of categories for consideration when evaluating potential new uses, including economic, social, and environmental categories and sub-categories. He provided a list of the new uses that have been proposed in this district to date, and he proposed listing them as conditional uses as a starting point. He walked through the categories (economic, social, and environmental) and sub-categories (whether the use has the potential to generate taxable revenue for the Town, whether it has the potential for job creation in the Town, whether it avoids negative impacts to quality of life, whether it provides a community need for products and services, whether it supports renewable energy and resources, and whether it minimizes impacts to nearby natural areas). He showed example rankings using quantitative scores, qualitative words, and color-coding. He solicited feedback from the Planning Commission on this approach, criteria, and potential scoring methodology. Commissioner Bruso suggested more intuitive phrasing for the social sub-categories (avoiding the use of double-negatives). Commissioners expressed a preference for a color-coding approach to scoring potential uses in these sub-categories. Commissioners also suggested breaking out the “quality of life” impacts into more sub-categories and columns (for noise, traffic, etc.) and including impacts to recreational uses as a sub-category.

The following public comments were received:

Anne Miller suggested using conditional formatting in either Excel or Google Sheets. She also asked whether the scores would be ranked or weighted. She further asked whether the Planning Commission plans to evaluate each use in the RPD-I district, or just the potential new uses that have been brought forth by the public. She said that evaluating the entire list could be a valuable exercise. Ken Signorello noted that the Conservation & Trails Committee discussed a letter submitted by a landowner for additional uses in the RPD-I District at its June 10, 2025 meeting, and that the

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Committee had concerns that the District could potentially be transformed into a regular industrial district if changes were approved. He reviewed the Committee's recommendations, which included avoiding permitting uses that could increase problematic externalities (traffic, noise and light pollution, etc), exercising caution when determining which uses to add to avoid unintended negative consequences, considering adding new permitted uses that would be complementary to recreational areas, and not adding uses related to contractor yards, machinery repair, neighborhood shopping centers, parking facilities, recycling establishments, trucking terminals, extraction of earth resources, junkyards, and public facilities. He noted that the recommendations were unanimously approved by the Conservation & Trails Committee. Chair Knox suggested adding columns to the scoring matrix to indicate whether the uses are supported by other various Commissions and Committees. Lorraine Zaloom suggested adding a component to the matrix to show a potential use's impact on water, and said she liked Commissioner Bruso's suggestion of separating out water, noise, air, and other pollution impacts. Commissioner Bruso expressed concern about potential scope creep if the Planning Commission evaluates every current use in the RPD-I District, and said they should focus on evaluating the potential new uses. Commissioner Carroll expressed support for this matrix and approach and said they should prioritize the potential new uses for now, and evaluate the other current uses in the RPD-I in the future. Cheryl Van Epps offered to share excerpts from the EPA manual from 1975, which could provide further guidance on land use control. Anne Miller suggested that the Commission needs to look at the Town holistically when considering scoring impacts for RPD-I. Planner Johnson said that it will be helpful to look at the definitions for each of the uses when considering how to score them. The Planning Commission discussed having a Google form on the Town website for Commissioners to fill out for each of the potential new uses ahead of a future meeting so that they could then aggregate and discuss scores at that meeting. Commissioner Lavigne asked that the Energy Committee be able to give input on the renewable energy scoring component. Cheryl Van Epps also suggested including hyperlinks of other website sources to help determine how to score certain subcategories.

6. APPROVAL OF MINUTES (1:57:42 in video)

a. Approve minutes from March 26, 2026 meeting

Commissioner Bruso made a motion, seconded by Commissioner Schumacher, to approve the minutes of March 26, 2026. The motion passed 6-0.

7. OTHER BUSINESS (1:58:25 in video)

None.

8. READING FILE (1:58:32 in video)

None.

9. PROPOSED EXECUTIVE AND/OR DELIBERATIVE SESSION (1:58:32 in video)

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

None.

10. ADJOURN (1:58:32 in video)

Commissioner Schumacher made a motion, seconded by Commissioner Duke, to adjourn the meeting. The motion passed 6-0 at 8:28 P.M.

Respectfully Submitted,
Amy Coonradt,

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196 Recording Secretary
197
198 Approved this _____ day of _____, 2026
199 (see minutes of this day for corrections, if any)

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