

**TOWN OF ESSEX PLANNING COMMISSION
REGULAR MEETING
MINUTES OF MEETING
May 14, 2026**

PLANNING COMMISSION: Georgia Lavigne, Vice Chair; Jonathan Schumacher, Clerk; Ian Carroll, Paula Duke.

PLANNING COMMISSION ABSENT: Joshua Knox, Chair; Dustin Bruso; Trefor Williams.

ADMINISTRATION and STAFF: Kent Johnson, Town Planner.

OTHERS PRESENT: (*in person*): Ken Signorello, Cheryl Van Epps; (*online*): Gina Halpin Barrett, Lois Whitmore, Lorraine Zaloom, Sharon Zukowski.

1. CALL TO ORDER

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

2. AGENDA ADDITIONS/CHANGES

Commissioner Lavigne proposed delaying discussion on Business Item #5a(v) and Business Item #5(a)(vii) until the next Planning Commission meeting to ensure that Community Development Director Sonnick is able to participate in the discussion.

3. APPROVE AGENDA

Commissioner Schumacher made a motion, seconded by Commissioner Carroll, to amend the agenda as proposed. The motion passed 4-0.

4. PUBLIC TO BE HEARD

a. Comments from Public on Items not on the Agenda

Ken Signorello said that the Conservation & Trails Committee and the Economic Development Committee both received the Planning Commission's memo pertaining to the matrix for RPD-I uses, and both will be responding with their own memos in the near future.

5. BUSINESS ITEMS

a. Discuss proposed Zoning Changes

i. RPD-I Buffer

Commissioner Lavigne stated that one large issue with the RPD-I buffer is the potential change from a 50-foot to a 75-foot buffer on interior roads, and asked for guidance. Town Planner Johnson said that what the Town could do is come to a settlement with the property owners in the RPD-I District, but said that this could entail requiring a reduction in conserved land in another portion of property. He said that alternatively, they could also negotiate not having a 60/40 split in terms of conserved versus non-conserved land. Commissioner Duke said that the street side of the buffer may not need to be as large, but it depends on what the buffer is intended to do. Commissioner Carroll said that he would be in favor of increasing the amount of property left untouched, but said that a 75-foot buffer for interior streets of an industrial zone doesn't seem like it is necessary. He said that past issues with the buffer were around waivers and how strict the Town had been with regulating replanting. He said that he would be more comfortable with being stricter with waivers and not allowing anything except for access drives than expanding the buffer. He also said that he would like to see stricter penalties for violating regulations. Commissioner Schumacher agreed, saying that he would like to see the 50-foot buffer stay in place and have stricter waiver and enforcement requirements. Commissioner Duke suggested that the Planting Standards should include a requirement that the loss of any of the species

requires replacement within the closest planting season. Other Commissioners agreed with this addition.

The following public comments were received:

Lorraine Zaloom noted that allowing for stormwater infrastructure in the buffer is one of the qualifying waiver criteria, and said that this could encroach upon plantings if the stormwater collection is intensive, and she said that she has concerns with still allowing stormwater to be allowed in the buffer. She asked why a 75-foot buffer is being considered, and Commissioner Lavigne replied that it is for aesthetic purposes as well as addresses concerns with tree fall. Lorraine Zaloom added that she would like to see more trees planted in certain parts of the RPD-I District, such as Corporate Drive, and screenings along recreational paths. She also said that some of the large swaths of buffers have been carved out for access roads, which is a concern. She also brought up noise buffering and proposed that sand berms be used more for this purpose. Ken Signorello emphasized that the RPD-I District is not an industrial district but a resource preservation district with some allowed industrial uses. He said that implementing a 75-foot buffer would only require sacrificing around 2 acres of land in the district, and said that stormwater should be excluded from the buffers. He also noted some concerns with precedents, and said that precedent is not binding but should rather be used as guidance. Gina Halpin Barrett noted that the 60/40 split used to be 60/15/25 until a previous settlement, which meant that developers gained another 15% of developable land. She encouraged implementing a 75-foot buffer and encouraged contemplating of more noise barriers, given that there are residential neighborhoods adjacent to some of the industrial portions of RPD-I and said that they have experienced a decreased quality of life due to the increase in industrial activity within the district. Cheryl Van Epps spoke about how the RPD-I District is intended to function in harmony with the surrounding natural area and referenced an Environmental Protection Agency guide for maintaining natural land function when developing land for industrial purposes. Sharon Zukowski expressed support for a 75-foot buffer, saying that the State's Department of Environmental Conservation recommends a 50-foot buffer as a starting point and that a 75-to-100-foot buffer is the ideal. She also cautioned about being concerned with precedent or relying on precedent, and said that having clearly articulated and strict waiver criteria could aid the Development Review Board in making determinations about when a waiver is appropriate.

Town Planner Johnson said that it may be worthwhile to also look at the Town's overall landscaping requirements in terms of screenings and potential noise mitigation. Commissioner Lavigne pointed out that the buffer zone in question is for interior roads within the district, which are not adjacent to residential properties or districts, but agreed that an overall review of vegetation, screening, and landscaping with an eye to improving regulations would be beneficial.

Commissioners discussed continuing this portion of the discussion at the next Planning Commission meeting. Commissioner Lavigne asked if staff could provide calculations for the impacts of a 75-foot buffer versus a 50-foot buffer to quantify the amount of impacted land in the RPD-I District. Other Commissioners agreed. Commissioner Carroll said he would like to see recommendations for when waivers are necessary and past history of when waivers have been granted, as well as recommendations for more strict enforcement of regulations and penalties. Commissioners also agreed to add the recommendation language around replacement of lost species to the Planting Standards section of the regulations.

ii. Childcare

The Planning Commission discussed proposed changes to the Childcare section of the Zoning Regulations. Commissioner Lavigne said that the Commission had previously discussed not making

center-based childcare a permitted use in areas where it is not already permitted, but that the outstanding issue is whether they should allow home-based childcare permitted in places where it is not currently allowed. She said that the current regulations allow home-based childcare where there are residential uses, so it seems that it is already a permitted use wherever it can be in the Town (other than in zones where single-family homes have been grandfathered in but aren't allowed). She suggested that home-based childcare could be made a conditional use or permitted use in these zones.

The following public comments were received:

Ken Signorello expressed support for modifying regulations to allow for more childcare as permitted or conditional uses in more districts. He asked why the RPD-I District was not considered for permitted or conditional use designation. Commissioner Lavigne replied that these changes are for home-based childcare and the RPD-I District does not have residential units. Ken Signorello said that the Commission should not get too preoccupied with unforeseen consequences when trying to weigh whether to allow more opportunities for childcare in the Town, given there is a critical need in the Town for childcare. He said that childcare is heavily regulated in Vermont and that childcare operators must be licensed by the state. Lorraine Zaloom expressed support for modifying the regulations to allow for more childcare in the Town, saying that it can only benefit the community and local economy.

Commissioner Carroll made a motion, seconded by Commissioner Schumacher, that the Planning Commission approve the updated uses and to schedule a public hearing on these proposed amendments at a later date. The motion passed 4-0.

iii. Home Act

Town Planner Johnson said the State made changes to statute through the Home Act that impact certain Town zoning regulations related to housing served by municipal water and sewer systems, including lowering parking requirements, modifying density and minimum lot coverage requirements for multi-unit dwellings with four or fewer units to align with those of single-family homes, allowing affordable housing developments to have an additional story in excess of the 40-foot maximum building height, and allowing a 40% density bonus for affordable housing developments (along with other statutory changes throughout). Commissioner Lavigne asked which of the proposed changes are optional and which are required by the Home Act. Town Planner Johnson said that for some of the administrative changes, the State is allowing staff to do more than the Town has staff doing, in order to make approval processes more efficient. He said that the State doesn't remove the Town's ability to take extra time to work through application processes if necessary.

The following public comments were received:

Ken Signorello asked that when the Planning Commission has the bandwidth it should think about amendments to zoning regulations to prohibit abandoned homes and vacant lots. Lorraine Zaloom agreed that she would like to know which components of the Home Act as it pertains to the Town are statutory requirements and which are optional for the Town. She expressed support for the administrative changes that would expedite processes, and expressed support for the more prescriptive articulation of the Development Review Board's authority, oversight, and coordination with the Zoning Administrator.

Planning Commissioners agreed that they would continue the discussion of this section at the next Planning Commission meeting and seek further clarity on statutorily required changes versus optional changes in the context of the Home Act.

iv. Grammatical changes

Commissioner Duke noted that language in Section 5.3 (Review Process) should be modified to remove “the” in the first line. She also noted that in Section 6.23(A), the first sentence should be modified to read “require only” instead of “only require”. Commissioner Lavigne noted minor changes to remove references to the Zoning Board of Adjustment and make modifications to references to the Planning Commission and Development Review Board, as appropriate. Town Planner Johnson also noted moving the “steep slopes” language from the Site Plan Review section into the General Standards section so that it applies to all applications. He also noted language changes in Section 6.4 (Simple Parceling and Boundary Adjustments) to reference the Forest Block and Habitat Connector maps in addition to other reference maps, as well as correct the name of the Conservation and Trails Committee. Commissioner Duke said that in Section 2.3(C)(5), “abutting propertied” should be changed to “abutting properties.” Planning Commissioners discussed the proposed grammatical edits and acknowledged that there may be more minor and non-substantial edits to be made, but expressed support for the current proposed grammatical edits as presented.

The following public comments were received:

Cheryl Van Epps asked about the process for soliciting public feedback on the proposed edits to the regulations. Commissioner Lavigne said that the public will have multiple opportunities at warned public hearings to review and weigh in on the proposed edits. Lorraine Zaloom asked how the regulations could be modified to add notification mechanisms online for minor subdivisions or permits so that the public could be made aware of potential changes. Town Planner Johnson said he would look into current processes and how those could be coordinated with the website to increase transparency to the public. Cheryl Van Epps also added that some residents may not have access to electronic notification and that hard copy notifications still need to be available in those instances.

Commissioner Schumacher made a motion, seconded by Commissioner Carroll, that the Planning Commission adopt the grammatical changes to the regulations. The motion passed 4-0.

v. Change of expiration of Site Plan and Conditional Use approval (postponed)
No discussion.

vi. Merging of the Subdivision and Zoning Regulations
Commissioner Lavigne noted that this proposed change would be to merge the Subdivision and Zoning Regulations into one document and that there are no substantive changes other than formatting.

Commissioner Duke made a motion, seconded by Commissioner Carroll, to approve the merging of the Subdivision and Zoning Regulations and to schedule a public hearing on proposed changes at a later date. The motion passed 4-0.

vii. ETC Next (postponed)
No discussion.

b. Discuss next steps in Zoning Amendment Process
Planning Commissioners said they will discuss the items not reviewed today as well as continue discussion of the changes to the RPD-I District at the next Planning Commission meeting.

6. APPROVAL OF MINUTES

a. Approve minutes from April 9, 2026

**PLANNING COMMISSION
(DRAFT)**

May 14, 2026

Commissioner Carroll made a motion, seconded by Commissioner Schumacher, to approve the minutes of April 9, 2026 as presented. The motion passed 4-0.

7. OTHER BUSINESS

None.

8. READING FILE

None.

9. PROPOSED EXECUTIVE AND/OR DELIBERATIVE SESSION

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

None.

10. ADJOURN

Commissioner Duke made a motion, seconded by Commissioner Schumacher, to adjourn the meeting. The motion passed 4-0 at 8:28 P.M.

Respectfully Submitted,
Amy Coonradt,
Recording Secretary

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