

**TOWN OF ESSEX PLANNING COMMISSION
REGULAR MEETING
MINUTES OF MEETING
June 11, 2026**

PLANNING COMMISSION: Josh Knox, Chair; Georgia Lavigne, Vice Chair; Jonathan Schumacher, Clerk; Dustin Bruso; Paula Duke; Trefor Williams.

PLANNING COMMISSION ABSENT: Ian Carroll.

ADMINISTRATION and STAFF: Kent Johnson, Town Planner; Katherine Sonnick, Community Development Director.

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

1. CALL TO ORDER

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

2. AGENDA ADDITIONS/CHANGES

None.

3. APPROVE AGENDA

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

4. PUBLIC TO BE HEARD

a. Comments from Public on Items not on the Agenda

Lorraine Zaloom noted traffic complaints around Essex Discount Beverage, and asked that left-hand turns be looked at as an option when areas hit a certain traffic count, when areas show up in a crash query report as a high traffic area, or areas where there are single-outlet roads. She also suggested that Carmichael Street be connected through, and that traffic flow through Saybrook be examined as well. She also spoke about examining the Town Plan's goals of economic development and ensuring that there is diversity in the types of businesses the are being opened in the Town.

5. BUSINESS ITEMS

a. Discuss proposed Zoning Changes

i. Home Act

Community Development Director Sonnick spoke about zoning changes that are required per the Home Act, articulating what components of the Home Act are allowed and aligned with current zoning regulations, and which are required and may necessitate zoning changes for the Town. The Planning Commission reviewed and discussed the required components, including parking requirements, allowing same density and lot size standards for multi-family dwellings as single-family homes in lots served by municipal water and sewer, density bonuses and an extra story for affordable housing development, a modification of the deadline to hold hearings (which impacts application review, sketch plan review, and preliminary subdivision approval), and limited regulation for emergency shelters and hotels. The Planning Commission reviewed the Home Act components that are allowed provisions, which pertain to allowing administrative review for minor subdivisions. Director Sonnick said that given that the Town can no longer approve boundary adjustments and simple parcels through the consent agenda, her recommendation would be to allow administrative review of boundary adjustments and simple parcels, and that they could go further and also allow administrative review of minor subdivisions. She noted that the State does not define minor subdivisions and that the Town could

contemplate modifying its definition of minor subdivisions. Commissioners agreed that they would like to move forward with allowing administrative review of boundary adjustments and simple parcels and potentially revisit allowing administrative review for minor subdivisions at a later time.

The following public comments were received:

- Lorraine Zaloom noted that many residents aren't aware of what a simple boundary adjustment can create, such as frontage, which could allow for different changes in what one can do with one's property, and she said guardrails around that would be prudent to implement. She also suggested a mechanism for better informing the public around these changes for abutting properties. She also said it would be helpful if there were a timeline for posting Mylars after approval. She also asked about language related to deeds, and suggested requirements around surveys.
- Sharon Zukowski expressed concern that while administrative review is allowed, it isn't a minimum requirement according to State statute. She expressed concern about the lack of public hearings or secondary reviews for these administrative reviews.
- Cheryl Van Epps agreed with Ms. Zaloom and Ms. Zukowski's statements, emphasizing the importance of transparency in public processes.

Commissioner Bruso made a motion, seconded by Commissioner Schumacher, to approve the required and allowed changes presented by staff regarding the Home Act. The motion passed 6-0.

ii. RPD-I Buffer

Director Sonnick said that this was discussed at the May 14, 2026 Planning Commission meeting. She noted that there was a question at that meeting about the settlement agreement and how that would impact changes to the buffer to 75 feet from 50 feet. She said the settlement agreement states that the buffer areas are included in the 60%, meaning that non-buffer areas that are not Town-owned are developable areas, and increasing the buffer from 50 feet to 75 feet takes away from that 40%. She said the settlement agreement would have to be amended. She said that this would affect lots owned by Allen Brook Development, and not the entirety of the RPD-I District. She noted that the process to change the settlement agreement is complex and involves other stakeholders, such as the Selectboard and the State. Chair Knox suggested discussing the active reforestation component of the RPD-I regulations, which can help guide the thinking around the purpose of the buffer in this district. He noted that the purpose of the buffer is to provide proper screening and vegetation, and the draft reforestation regulations do that.

The following public comments were received:

- Ken Signorello noted that a working group was tasked with developing recommendations for the buffers, and that the Planning Commission should review those and determine if it accepts those recommendations. He noted some concerns about increasing the buffer to 75 feet, which would increase the amount of conservation land, and said he disagrees with those concerns.
- Lorraine Zaloom said that one of the critical benefits of buffers is sound and noise mitigation, especially in the RPD-I District. She also emphasized the importance of four-season buffering, buffers as a tool for stormwater and runoff mitigation, the use of buffers as wildlife corridors, and the use of wider buffers so that trees are more secure and less at risk of toppling. She also noted that a number of buffers have been encroached on by developers over the years and said that the Town should look to take some of those back.

- Cheryl Van Epps spoke about the forest floor layer of the buffer, saying that naturalization of yards and lawns is key to reduce stormwater runoff. She said that they need to look at the land function holistically.
- Gina Halpin Barrett said that buffer encroachment has affected the quality of life in her neighborhood and the loss of these buffers no longer protects her neighborhood from activity in Corporate Drive, especially idling trucks along Thompson Drive. She expressed support for a 75-foot buffer.
- Anne Miller noted that the purpose of the buffers in the regulations for the RPD-I District are to provide visual screening between industrial development and adjacent streets and residential areas, as well as to maintain trails and the natural environment to the greatest extent possible.
- Director Sonnick noted a public comment from Hubie Norton that the draft reforestation language suggests that inadequate vegetation (e.g., scrubbed trees) was the reason that waivers had been given in the past for the 50-foot buffer areas, and that the buffer regulations were written to preserve what is there, that the draft appendix and reforestation plan requirements are unnecessarily detailed, potentially imposing conditions that would create a plan that would not match the existing natural environment, that the draft regulations conflict with other regulations, and that there is no need to expand the buffer area to 75 feet. Mr. Norton suggested language that a qualified professional and the Tree Warden review the existing conditions and develop a landscaping plan and include language for maintenance enforcement.

Commissioner Lavigne noted that the proposal is to increase the buffer for interior roads in the District from 50 feet to 75 feet, but that the settlement agreement is a barrier to this change. She said that alternatively, they are proposing very strong reforestation language in the regulations and strong enforcement actions for violation and keeping the buffer at 50 feet. Town Planner Johnson noted that the language in the regulations allows for a wide interpretation and that the Development Review Board (DRB) has an interest in having good, dense vegetation. He noted that the buffer section of the regulations has a good explanation of what is needed for buffers, but that it could be clearer and more specific. He suggested that the reforestation plan could be distilled into specifying what vegetation the Town wants to included in its definition. Commissioner Bruso said a could balance could be to focus on the intent of the buffer and also articulating what is not allowed, as well as a landscaping plan for the 50-foot buffers. Commissioner Lavigne said that the enforcement language in the draft reforestation requirements should be preserved in whatever the Commission pursues. Planner Johnson suggested having a forest management plan, which could guide the design of streetscapes and plantings and maintain consistency across lots. Commissioner Bruso said that any landscaping plan should remain with the lot in perpetuity (and not expire after a 3-or-5 year term, for example).

Commissioners determined that they would like to have strong enforcement mechanisms, having a reforestation or landscape management plan that indicates that the 50-foot buffer will be purposeful, that there is little appetite for increasing the 50-foot buffer to 75-feet, and that they would like to discontinue the use of waivers for buffers. Commissioner Lavigne said that she could work with the working group and staff to try and develop a proposal.

iii. RPD-I District Use Changes

Town Planner Johnson noted that they received feedback from the Conservation & Trails Committee and the Economic Development Commission. He said that these committees generally liked the idea of the matrix itself, but did not find the grading system as useful as it could be. He noted that based on feedback from three Planning Commissioners, two Commissioners supported including three of the proposed new uses (kennel, machine/repair shop [minor], and veterinary clinic). Chair Knox noted that

they did not receive feedback from the majority of the Commission, and would like to discuss further. Commissioner Bruso suggested focusing on those three proposed new uses for now, and handle the others in a future round of review. The Planning Commission agreed that they would like to see draft language for allowing kennels, machinery repair shop (minor), and veterinary clinics as potential conditional uses in the RPD-I District, for further discussion at a future meeting. The Planning Commission discussed removing junkyard, caretaker apartment, contractor yard, extraction of earth resources, neighborhood shopping center, and recycling establishment from further consideration as potential uses in the RPD-I District. They agreed to discuss convenience stores, automotive repair shop (major), hotel/motel, public facility, restaurant, trucking terminal, and parking facility further in the context of potential future uses for the RPD-I District. Commissioner Bruso suggested that food trucks could be added as a potential use in the District.

The following public comments were received:

- Ken Signorello expressed disappointment that the Planning Commission is making decisions on potential uses for the RPD-I District while not considering the input from other Town committees, even though they solicited feedback from those committees. He said that the Economic Development Commission and the Conservation & Trails Committee would like more time to be able to provide more feedback. He noted feedback from the Conservation & Trails Committee that the RPD-I current uses were the result of a settlement, and that these use changes are being requested by one of the parties to that settlement, who is a landowner in the RPD-I District, and asked what concessions are being offered in exchange for these potential changes. He advocated for better coordination between the EDC and the Planning Commission in this discussion. Chair Knox said that there will be further, more in-depth conversation on this topic at future Planning Commission meetings, at which time more feedback can be brought to the discussion.
- Lorraine Zaloom said she would love to see a numeric rating system in the matrix for determining which potential uses to consider for the RPD-I District. She spoke about economic development and ensuring that the Town is economically diverse.
- Cheryl Van Epps said that any decisions should take into account whether the Town is serving the needs of the public.

iv. Steep Slopes

No discussed. This item was postponed.

6. APPROVAL OF MINUTES

a. Approve minutes from May 14, 2026

Commissioner Lavigne made a motion, seconded by Commissioner Schumacher, to approve the minutes of May 14, 2026. The motion passed 6-0.

7. OTHER BUSINESS

None.

8. PROPOSED EXECUTIVE AND/OR DELIBERATIVE SESSION

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

None.

9. ADJOURN

**PLANNING COMMISSION
(DRAFT)**

June 11, 2026

192 Commissioner Schumacher, made a motion, seconded by Commissioner Bruso, to adjourn the
193 meeting. The motion passed 6-0 at 8:51 P.M.
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195
196 Respectfully Submitted,
197 Amy Coonradt,
198 Recording Secretary
199

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

DRAFT