

**TOWN OF ESSEX PLANNING COMMISSION
REGULAR MEETING
MINUTES OF MEETING
July 9 2026**

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

PLANNING COMMISSION ABSENT: Josh Knox.

ADMINISTRATION and STAFF: Kent Johnson, Town Planner;

OTHERS PRESENT: (*in person*): Art Johnson; Lynn Johnson; (*online*): Patty Davis; Gina Halpin Barrett; Anne Miller; Cheryl Van Epps; Lorraine Zaloom; Sharon Zukowski.

1. CALL TO ORDER

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

2. ELECTION OF OFFICERS

Town Planner Johnson called for nominations for Chair of the Planning Commission.

Commissioner Duke nominated Josh Knox to be Chair of the Planning Commission. The motion to passed 6-0.

Town Planner Johnson called for nominations for Vice Chair of the Planning Commission.

Commissioner Bruso nominated Georgia Lavigne to be Vice Chair of the Planning Commission. The motion passed 6-0.

Town Planner Johnson passed the gavel to Vice Chair Lavigne to preside over the remainder of the meeting.

Vice Chair Lavigne called for nominations for Clerk of the Planning Commission.

Commissioner Carroll nominated Jonathan Schumacher to be Clerk of the Planning Commission. The motion passed 6-0.

3. AGENDA ADDITIONS/CHANGES

None.

4. APPROVE AGENDA

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

5. PUBLIC TO BE HEARD

a. Comments from Public on Items not on the Agenda

None.

6. BUSINESS ITEMS

a. Discuss proposed changes to RPD-I Uses

The Planning Commission discussed the uses in the RPD-I District that still warranted further discussion after review at their June meeting. These include Automotive Repair Shop, Convenience Store, Hotel, Motel, Machinery Repair Shop - Major, Parking Facility, Public Facilities, and Restaurant. Commissioner Duke said that she would favor making Automotive Repair Shop a conditional use. Commissioner Carroll said that he would favor making Automotive Repair Shop a conditional use, allowing Convenience Stores and Hotel/Motels as permitted uses, potentially making Machinery Repair Shop – Major a conditional use, potentially considering Parking Facility as a conditional use, considering Public Facilities as a conditional use, and allowing Restaurant as a permitted use. The Planning Commission discussed making all new uses conditional, if they add any to the RPD-I District. Commissioner Schumacher said he would not be in favor of adding any of the potential uses noted above to the RPD-I District (but would be fine with adding the three uses discussed at the Commission’s June meeting, which include Kennel, Machine Repair Shop – Minor, and Veterinary Clinic). Commissioner Lavigne said she would be in support of adding Automotive Repair Shop a conditional use, allowing Convenience Stores and Hotel/Motels as permitted uses, potentially making Machinery Repair Shop – Major a conditional use, potentially considering Parking Facility as a conditional use, considering Public Facilities as a conditional use, and allowing Restaurant as a permitted use. Commissioner Stewart said he would be in favor of the above listed uses as permissible in the RPD-I District, except for Automotive Repair Shop, Machinery Repair Shop – Major, and would be comfortable with Parking Facilities and Public Facilities as conditional uses. Commissioner Bruso said he does not have enough information or criteria to determine which of the outstanding uses could be considered to add to the RPD-I District, except that he would be comfortable with allowing a subset of Restaurant uses for food trucks/mobile food vendors. Town Planner Johnson said that the Planning Commission should be aware that any uses could also allow for accessory uses, and should also think about the traffic implications of any new uses. Commissioner Bruso noted that all of these uses will increase the traffic in this area on its existing roads, and reiterated that he thinks the Commission doesn’t have enough information to fully vet the above noted potential uses. Commissioner Carroll noted that if potential uses are added as conditional uses, the Development Review Board (DRB) would need to review and approve them.

The following public comments were received:

- Lynn Johnson expressed concern about allowing retail such as Convenience Stores in the RPD-I District, if it will impact traffic. She said that there are a number of residential properties around this District, and that there are ramifications for adding any new uses.
- Sharon Zukowski asked if any new conditional uses for the RPD-I District could have additional conditions that need to be met at a minimum in order for the Development Review Board to consider them, such as ample screening. Planner Johnson noted that yes, some uses have additional criteria in addition to the general standards in zoning.
- Anne Miller asked about the process for selecting criteria that the Planning Commission is using to evaluate and score potential new uses in the RPD-I District, and Commissioner Lavigne replied that they are still working through that process.

Commissioners discussed next steps, saying that they would be comfortable with adding the three new uses as discussed at the June Planning Commission meeting (Kennel, Machine Repair Shop – Minor, and Veterinary Clinic). Commissioner Schumacher said it would be good to add more minimum criteria to these three as conditional uses. The Commission discussed the difference between minor and major Machinery Repair shops, noting that the former have fewer noise impacts than the latter. The Commission said that they would like to see minimum criteria for Machine Repair Shop – Minor related to noise impacts, and minimum criteria for Kennel related to noise impacts and screening.

Commissioner Bruso made a motion, seconded by Commissioner Carroll, to move forward with the three uses that the Commission has reviewed and agreed upon (Kennel, Machine Repair Shop – Minor, and Veterinary Clinic), review those three uses for any additional conditions or criteria that would be appropriate, and move forward with making them conditional uses in the RPD-I District. The motion passed 6-0.

b. Discuss proposed changes to RPD-I Buffer

Planner Johnson said that after the Planning Commission's June 11 discussion, there seems to be consensus that the 50' buffer areas approved in recent years in the RPD-I District are insufficiently dense and insufficiently natural in appearance. He noted that staff considered the discussion and the recommendations from the RPD-I Buffer Working Group to draft proposed edits to the regulations that address a majority of the concerns raised. He noted the inclusion of draft language stating that the DRB will not waive buffer requirements in the 50', 100', or 200' buffers. The Planning Commission reviewed and discussed the proposed edits to the RPD-I regulations in both Table 2.14 and the General Standards. Commissioner Duke requested adding language to General Standards section 3.2 that screening should mitigate sound as well as glare from motor vehicles. Commissioner Bruso said that the purpose of each buffer should be addressed separately, given that the buffers are used for different functions. Commissioner Lavigne noted that the original intent of this activity was to add more clarity around the 50' buffers, and the Commission should focus on the 50' buffer topic for now. Commissioner Bruso suggested drafting criteria for each sized buffer to add to the standards. Commissioner Bruso also expressed support for the language added to General Standards Section 3.2(A)(3)(e), as it defines what buffer designs should include for vegetation. The Planning Commission discussed how to draft language that would address both how plantings would look in the near term as well as the long-term. Commissioner Bruso said there should be a consistent landscaping design and approach for the 50' buffer that developers can use to design their landscaping plans for each development, and that the criteria for plantings and screenings should be clear but flexible enough to meet the variety of needs in the 50' buffer. Other Commissioners agreed. Planner Johnson noted additional language stating that plantings need to coordinate with adjacent properties as well. He said that while they shouldn't micromanage developers through prescriptive regulations, they could provide diagrams and visual descriptions of acceptable examples. Several Commissioners said that a list of appropriate species of plantings be incorporated by reference, to ensure that invasive species are not used in plantings. The Planning Commission discussed whether to include language about buffer waivers.

The following public comments were received:

- Lynn Johnson expressed support for breaking the vegetation requirements into tall, medium, short types of plantings.
- Anne Miller asked if the buffer serves a role in preserving the natural resources in the RPD-I District as one of their purposes. She said that they should include this as part of the purpose of the buffer.

Planning Commissioners asked staff to incorporate revisions discussed tonight into the draft language, including determining relevant reference documents from the State, separate and delineate the different sized buffers, and include more specific language on the purpose and intent of the 50' buffer.

c. Discuss Signage zoning change request

**PLANNING COMMISSION
(DRAFT)**

July 9, 2026

Planner Johnson noted that this is a recent request from Essex Discount Beverage for an internally illuminated gas pricing sign. He also noted that new municipal signs at 80/90 Upper Main Street could be similarly illuminated. He noted that staff have begun preliminary research on what language could be added to the regulations to permit such signage. Commissioners discussed these requests, saying that they may need further information in order to make a decision. Planner Johnson said that having some examples to look at might be useful for the Commission. He said he will also determine with the requesting business how urgent this request is, so that the Commission can work it into its work plan and list of priorities.

7. APPROVAL OF MINUTES

a. Approve minutes from June 11, 2026

Commissioner Schumacher made a motion, seconded by Commissioner Carroll, to approve the minutes of June 11, 2026 as presented. The motion passed 4-0-2 (Commissioners Carroll and Stewart abstaining).

8. OTHER BUSINESS

Commissioner Carroll noted that it might be good to hold a joint Planning Commission and Development Review Board meeting soon to discuss some of the larger topics that have been discussed recently, such as buffers and steep slopes.

Commissioner Lavigne thanked Trefor Williams for his years of service on the Planning Commission.

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

Commissioner Duke made a motion, seconded by Commissioner Brusco, to adjourn the meeting. The motion passed 6-0 at 8:34 P.M.

Respectfully Submitted,
Amy Coonradt,
Recording Secretary

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