ESSEX, VERMONT
CONSERVATION & TRAILS COMMITTEE
REGULAR MEETING MINUTES
TUESDAY, JULY 14, 2026 - 6:00 PM

Minutes prepared by Duane Millar Barlow, approved on Tuesday, August 11, 2026

MEMBERS PRESENT: Bino Cummings, Chair; Erin De Vries, Vice Chair; Duane Millar Barlow, Clerk; Bart Bechard; Paul Davis; Morgan Kirk; Carrie Macfarlane (remote); Sarah Salatino; Ken Signorello

ADMINISTRATION and STAFF: Hans Nedde, Parks & Trails Coordinator

PUBLIC: Adam Morse, Executive Director, Fellowship of the Wheel

RECORDING: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5SMXRBlbbo8
Times associated with each agenda item are approximate.

1. Call to Order (00:06:29)

The Conservation Trails Committee meeting of July 14th was called to order by Hans Nedde. The meeting was noted to be an organizational meeting, at which the committee would elect its chair, vice chair, and clerk.

2. Election of Chair (00:07:44)

The outgoing chair opened the floor for nominations for the position of chair. Hans Nedde accepted nominations for the position of chair.

Ken Signorello nominated Bino Cummings, noting that he had previously served as vice chair.

Before the vote, Bino Cummings briefly addressed the committee, acknowledging that he had large shoes to fill following the previous chair and stating that, if elected, he would serve to the best of his ability.

There being no other nominations, a vote was taken. **KEN SIGNORELLO nominated BINO CUMMINGS for the position of Chair. The vote carried 8-0-1, with BINO CUMMINGS abstaining.**

Bino Cummings was declared elected as Chair and assumed control of the meeting.

3. Election of Vice Chair and Clerk (00:09:08)

Following the election of the chair, Bino Cummings opened nominations for vice chair. Morgan Kirk nominated Duane Millar Barlow; Duane Millar Barlow nominated Ken Signorello;

and Erin De Vries nominated herself.

A vote was taken for each nominee in turn. Duane Millar Barlow and Ken Signorello received no votes. **Erin De Vries received unanimous support and was elected Vice Chair.**

Bino Cummings noted that because Erin De Vries would now serve as vice chair, a new clerk would need to be elected. He explained that it is traditional for the newest member of the committee to serve as clerk. Erin De Vries, who had most recently served as clerk, described the role: attending meetings, recording notes using a provided template, reviewing the meeting recording sent by Hans Nedde, drafting the minutes, presenting them for approval at the subsequent meeting, making any adjustments, and uploading the final version.

Bino Cummings nominated Bart Bechard as the newest member of the committee for the position of clerk. Bart Bechard accepted the nomination. Duane Millar Barlow then volunteered to serve as clerk instead, noting he had previously held the role and was developing a tool to assist with meeting minutes. Bart Bechard withdrew his nomination.

A vote was taken on Duane Millar Barlow for Clerk. The vote carried 9-0.

Bino Cummings confirmed the elected officers: himself as Chair, Erin De Vries as Vice Chair, and Duane Millar Barlow as Clerk.

4. Agenda Additions/Changes (00:16:21)

Sarah Salatino raised the possibility of adding a presentation on a pollinator garden site at Indian Brook, noting that she and Morgan Kirk had visited the site and that she had completed a report, and that no formal action would be needed.

Ken Signorello advised that the Secretary of State discourages adding items to the agenda unless there is a time-sensitive or emergency situation, particularly for action items, so that the public has the opportunity to be informed. The committee agreed to defer the presentation to the next meeting rather than add it to the current agenda. **The chair noted that a presentation on the pollinator garden at Indian Brook would be added to the agenda for the next meeting.**

No other additions or changes to the agenda were proposed, and no vote was required.

5. Public to Be Heard – Adam Morse, Fellowship of the Wheel (Saxon Hill Trails) (00:18:10)

Adam Morse, Executive Director of the Fellowship of the Wheel, appeared before the committee to discuss Saxon Hill Trails and the organization's financial situation.

Morse described the Fellowship of the Wheel as maintaining 11 different spaces in Chittenden County, including multi-use trail networks such as Saxon Hill, Hinesburg Town Forest, and Sunny Hollow, as well as some bike-specific parks. He characterized Saxon Hill as the most popular network the Fellowship maintains. He noted that the organization focuses on multi-use trail design, including making trails passable by bike through features such as ramped boardwalks.

Morse said the catalyst for his appearance was the committee's prior discussion of a potential parking pass or admission fee at Saxon Hill. He explained that the Fellowship has traditionally advocated strongly for free access to trails, with that position having previously been described internally as a "hard no" on any admission fee. However, he noted that the organization has faced increasing financial pressures, including membership decline, storm damage, and reduced grant funding. He described a 27% membership drop over five years, which represents 45% of the organization's annual budget, and said the membership loss equates to approximately $30,000 in revenue and a reduction in trail crew capacity from roughly 2,500 hours per year to 1,700 hours per year. He added that the Fellowship had applied for over $125,000 in grants following storm damage in Hinesburg in 2024 but had received only $8,000. Given these pressures, he said the board is now more open to exploring ways to generate revenue and raise awareness.

Members asked Morse several questions. In response to a question about what a Fellowship membership provides and its cost, Morse explained that an annual membership costs $60, supports trail maintenance directly, and includes a member benefits package with lodging discounts, restaurant discounts, and other offers totaling over $8,000 in value. He noted that the Fellowship has approximately 1,400 members across 11 networks, and that roughly 90% of survey respondents reported using Saxon Hill regularly. He estimated that 80% or more of Saxon Hill users are not Fellowship members.

A member noted that the town currently pays for a porta-potty and plowing of the Saxon Hill parking lot, and asked whether Morse was aware of those expenses. Morse acknowledged he had not been aware of the porta-potty cost; Ken Signorello characterized the town-Fellowship relationship as a great partnership.

Ken Signorello described a proposal in which a town park pass or a paid Fellowship of the Wheel membership would be required for entry when a park attendant is present, modeled on a similar arrangement between the Waterbury Trail Alliance (WATA) and Little River State Park, where members receive a card to present at the gate. Morse confirmed that the Fellowship could easily produce such membership cards. Ken Signorello noted that a town park pass for non-residents costs $78 per year, while a Fellowship membership costs $60, and suggested that linking the two could boost Fellowship membership significantly.

Ken Signorello also raised the issue of the RPD-I zoning district adjacent to Saxon Hill, noting that industrial uses are being considered for addition to that zone at the request of a landowner, and that many of the buffer requirements designed to mitigate conflict between industrial and recreational uses have been waived. He encouraged Morse to attend a planning commission meeting to make the Fellowship's perspective known on how zoning and enforcement decisions affect the value of the trails.

Ken Signorello requested that the topic of a potential park pass requirement at Saxon Hill be placed on a future agenda, and offered to prepare a specific recommendation in advance, including inviting Morse back to that meeting. No action was taken at this meeting.

6a. Approve Minutes from 06/09/2026 (00:49:33)

The chair asked whether any members had changes to the minutes from the previous meeting. One member noted that "Saxon Hill" was misspelled on line 86 of the draft minutes, with an incorrect letter in the name. The chair confirmed the correction.

MORGAN KIRK made a motion, seconded by KEN SIGNORELLO, to approve the minutes from 06/09/2026 as amended. The vote carried 9-0.

7a. Advise DRB on Development Application – 15 Leo Drive (00:51:22)

Hans Nedde introduced the item, noting that the committee periodically reviews development applications and provides advisory recommendations to the Development Review Board (DRB). He explained that the committee's areas of focus include trails, natural resources, aesthetic resources, cultural resources, trees, landscaping, and open space, and that he would share the relevant development review checklist with the committee. Bino Cummings noted that the committee is advisory only and stays within its purview, with typical topics including invasive plants, trail use and access, buffers, slope steepness, and wetlands.

The application before the committee was for a proposed eight-lot commercial subdivision at 15 Leo Drive, located along Route 15 toward Jericho. Ken Signorello noted that the committee had previously reviewed this application on July 8, 2025, and summarized the five recommendations made at that time: relocating the water line further into the property to allow street trees to be placed in the town right-of-way; adding a third street tree per property; burying power lines and utilities; connecting Leo Drive to Saxon Hill Road; and establishing a 20-foot trail easement into the 50-foot buffer in anticipation of future trail development. The committee observed that the applicant appeared to have responded to several of these recommendations, including adding street trees and addressing the shared-use path, and members noted that it was encouraging that the applicant had listened to prior feedback.

Discussion turned to the VAST snowmobile trail, which had previously crossed the property. Ken Signorello noted that the applicant proposed an eight-foot-wide paved recreational path and a ten-foot-wide non-motorized gravel path, but that there was no explicit mention of VAST trail access in the application documents. After discussion, the committee concluded that the VAST trail rerouting was ultimately a matter between the VAST organization and the property owner, and that it was not appropriate for the committee to make a formal recommendation on it. The committee also noted that Parks and Recreation had already contacted the applicant in May 2025 asking whether they had communicated with VAST about rerouting.

Erin De Vries raised the question of whether the buffer along Saxon Hill Road, which abuts a residential district, should be increased beyond the proposed 50 feet, given that the subdivision zoning is fully industrial and the eventual commercial uses and building placements are unknown. She suggested that a larger buffer — in the range of 75 to 100 feet — would provide greater protection for neighboring residential properties. Duane Millar Barlow raised the concern that recommending a new item not previously raised could be perceived as inconsistent or as a moving target by the applicant, given that the committee had already reviewed the application a year earlier. After discussion, Erin De Vries agreed to strike the buffer increase recommendation in the interest of consistency.

The committee agreed on a single recommendation: that the applicant bury utility lines where possible, in order to help maintain the scenic overlay district and provide infrastructure resilience during storm events. Erin De Vries drafted the recommendation letter during the meeting, framing it as a follow-up to the committee's previous recommendation of July 8, 2025, and opening with an acknowledgment of the changes the applicant had already made in response to prior feedback, as suggested by Carrie Macfarlane.

KEN SIGNORELLO made a motion, seconded by SARAH SALATINO, to transmit the recommendation to the Development Review Board. Motion passed 9-0.

Bino Cummings asked Erin De Vries to send the letter to Hans Nedde, copying Cummings and Duane Millar Barlow.

7b. Approve Meeting Schedule for FY27 (01:32:50)

The committee took up the item of approving its meeting schedule for fiscal year 2027. Ken Signorello noted that, per the committee handbook, the standard procedure is either to confirm the existing schedule or to consider a change, and that this should be done annually.

The existing schedule had the committee meeting at 6:00 p.m. on the second Tuesday of each month. A member noted that a newly added standing meeting immediately precedes the committee's meeting and suggested moving the start time to 6:15 p.m. to allow for a transition. Hans Nedde indicated that staff could work with whatever time suited the committee.

Discussion followed on the merits of 6:00 versus 6:15. Paul Davis stated his preference for keeping the 6:00 start time, reasoning that even if the meeting started a few minutes late it would still be earlier than 6:15. Erin De Vries expressed support for 6:15, citing the difficulty of arriving on time given family commitments and the benefit of having a buffer after the preceding meeting. Another member noted that historically the committee had met at 6:30 p.m. and moved to 6:00 due to difficulty ending meetings on time, and that the staff pressure that prompted that change no longer appeared to be a factor.

KEN SIGNORELLO made a motion, seconded by DUANE MILLAR BARLOW, to set the committee's meeting schedule for FY27 to the second Tuesday of each month at 6:15 p.m. The vote carried 8-1, with PAUL DAVIS dissenting.

7c. Adopt for Submission to Selectboard FY 26/27 Work Plan (01:36:34)

The chair introduced agenda item 9, adopting the FY 26/27 Work Plan for submission to the Selectboard. He noted that the work plan, maintained in Google Sheets, had been developed over the course of the year and that the primary purpose of the agenda item was to formally approve it for Hans Nedde to transmit to the Selectboard. Ken Signorello explained that while members' names appear next to items, no one is specifically committed to any task, that the plan can be amended mid-year if circumstances change, and that it serves as a guideline informing the Selectboard of the committee's activities.

The chair invited Ken Signorello to explain the work plan to newer members, particularly Bart Bechard. Ken noted that the plan includes both recurring commitments — such as the annual Arbor Day tree planting, part of the town's Tree City designation — and new initiatives, and encouraged Bechard to review the document, find something he is interested in, or propose a new item for the committee's consideration.

Ken Signorello confirmed he would provide Bechard with access to the Google Sheets document via a generic user account, and noted that a PDF copy is also attached to the meeting minutes.

The committee then reviewed several open items in the work plan. A question arose about a funding source listed as the "My Town Pollinator Project"; members were uncertain of its origin but speculated it may have come from former member Betsy. Morgan Kirk indicated she would explore that funding source, as well as the Xerces Society's "Bee City USA" program, as a potential complement to the town's Tree City designation.

A question mark was noted next to Bino Cummings's name on the non-vehicular transportation project task. Bino explained that this task relates to the Keystone Project, in which he has attended some meetings but has not been deeply involved, and suggested Duane Millar Barlow may have been more active. Hans Nedde noted that he joined after the project was adopted and was not involved in its planning, but expected to be involved in the next steps, which remain somewhat uncertain. The committee discussed whether it would be appropriate to invite Keystone Project staff to give the committee an update at a future meeting, and there was general agreement to pursue that. The chair suggested that he, Bino Cummings, and Duane Millar Barlow discuss getting it on the agenda.

KEN SIGNORELLO made a motion to submit the amended FY 26/27 Work Plan to the Selectboard. The motion was seconded by ERIN DE VRIES. Motion passed 9-0.

7d. Approve Trail Naming Recommendations (01:43:08)

Carrie Macfarlane, Morgan Kirk, and Duane Barlow presented proposed trail names for three Essex parks — Forestdale, Lang Neighborhood, and Pinewood Park — explaining that Hans Nedde is working on mapping trails in Essex parks and that three maps are nearly ready, pending trail names. The sub-committee conducted a community survey that received more than 90 responses, and established criteria including community input, brevity, clarity, and an inviting quality.

For Forestdale, the committee agreed on two trail names: "Hemlock Loop Trail" for the loop through the hemlock-dominated lower section, and "Beech Ridge Trail" for the upper trail, replacing the originally proposed "Beech Loop Trail" and "Swallow Ridge Trail" respectively. Four connector names were also proposed to help users navigate between parking areas and trails.

For the Lang Neighborhood, the sub-committee proposed "Bumblebee Trail" for a short trail connecting two roads, chosen because it is short and sweet, thematically reflects the trail's character, and fits the animal theme popular in the community survey. No amendments were proposed for this name.

For Pinewood Park, the sub-committee proposed "Winwood Trail" for a trail connecting Wind Ridge Road and Pinewood Park, combining "Wind Ridge" with "Pinewood" based on a suggestion submitted in the survey. No amendments were proposed for this name.

Ken Signorello commended the sub-committee, noting that the prepared proposal with rationale is the proper way to bring work to the committee rather than arriving with an idea and attempting to develop it on the fly.

KEN SIGNORELLO made a motion to transmit the trail name recommendations, as amended, to the Parks and Recreation Department. The motion was seconded by BART

BECHARD. Motion passed 9-0.

Hans Nedde thanked the sub-committee, describing the document as thorough and well-researched. Hans Nedde suggested that in the future, trail adoption and trail naming should be brought to the Selectboard together, and agreed to discuss with his department whether trail names should go through the Selectboard for approval, noting he would include community-adopted names when next bringing new trails forward.

In response to a question from a newer member, Hans Nedde described the trail adoption process: he identifies trails that the Parks and Trails department intends to maintain and designate as official Essex trails, brings them to the committee for feedback, and then takes them to the Selectboard for adoption, with trail naming now to be integrated into that process.

7e. Staff Update on Trails and Potential Action (02:03:13)

Hans Nedde provided a staff update on trails, noting the committee had requested it at the previous meeting.

Hans reported that the town currently has no tree warden and encouraged anyone with a lead on a potential candidate to come forward. He noted that the absence of a tree warden is particularly significant given the second item in his update: the ash tree street tree management plan, originally created in 2018 by the Conservation Trails Committee. **Hans asked the committee to review the plan and be prepared to discuss it at a future meeting.**

Hans provided background: the town has a large number of green ash trees on town rights-of-way that are susceptible to the emerald ash borer and will eventually all die. He explained that the trees were surveyed, and those worth preserving were identified for treatment by injecting insecticide into the cambium of the tree. He noted that public works is currently injecting the 13 trees identified for treatment and that they need to be monitored to determine which ones require removal.

A member asked whether the trees had been mapped, and Hans confirmed that a map and an associated app had been produced identifying all the trees. The committee noted that the point person for that project has not been identified, and the chair suggested Morgan Kirk continue in that role. Morgan agreed to take on the task of gathering that information and helping move the project forward.

Morgan asked whether the work would be done in partnership with the tree warden and public works. Hans confirmed that the tree warden would be the primary partner, with public works also involved.

Hans then provided an update on the RTP grant for the accessible trail at Indian Brook. He reported that wetlands had been delineated and that a site visit with the state had raised concerns about how far the proposed trail deviated from the existing trail footprint, given that the site is in wetland buffer zones. Hans explained that the contractor will be asked to realign the trail to stay as close to the original footprint as possible while still maintaining accessible grades, and that as a result the project — previously scheduled for late summer or fall — will likely be pushed to the following summer.

Erin De Vries noted she had observations about the trail design based on her family's use of the three campsites at Indian Brook over the past three years. She expressed concern that routing the accessible trail through the campsite area could increase foot traffic past campers' tents and diminish the quiet camping experience. Hans confirmed that the plan is for the accessible trail to end at the furthest campsite, with the goal of making the campsites themselves accessible. He acknowledged Erin De Vries's concern that the improvement could increase general foot traffic through the area.

Morgan Kirk suggested posting a notice at the site kiosk indicating when campsites are occupied and asking walkers to be considerate of campers. Another member suggested signage at the entrance to the camping area reminding visitors to be respectful of campers.

Hans then raised the item on the work plan regarding identifying lands for conservation using the conservation reserve fund. He noted that a parcel adjacent to Pinewood Park — through which a trail currently passes — may be donated to the town in full, which could allow for additional trail development.

Ken Signorello noted that the committee had submitted an application over a year ago to conserve a property on the river, and that the transaction had not yet been completed. He asked Hans to raise the matter with his supervisor, noting that at least one former committee member now on the Select Board has also been advocating for it. Hans confirmed that the delay is related to a change in the HOA, which is still working through the process, and that the town remains at the table.

Erin De Vries, speaking from her professional experience in real estate and land acquisition, noted that such transactions typically take two or more years, and that HOA changes mid-process add further complexity. Ken Signorello replied that the appraisal had been completed and the HOA had been ready, and that the involvement of the Winooski Valley Park District — which had been invited in at the town's request — had contributed to the delay.

Hans noted that there were many other trails and conservation items he could report on and offered to answer questions at any time. **Hans Nedde committed to providing an update on the Keystone project at the next meeting.**

9. Adjourn (02:15:55)

KEN SIGNORELLO made a motion to adjourn, seconded by MORGAN KIRK. The motion passed unanimously.