

**TOWN OF ESSEX PLANNING COMMISSION
REGULAR MEETING
MINUTES OF MEETING
August 13, 2026**

PLANNING COMMISSION: (*in person*): Jonathan Schumacher, Clerk/Acting Chair; Ian Carroll; Paula Duke; (*online*): Josh Knox, Chair; Georgia Lavigne, Vice Chair; Eric Stewart.

PLANNING COMMISSION ABSENT: Dustin Bruso

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

OTHERS PRESENT: (*in person*): Anne Miller; Sharon Zukowski; (*online*): Gina Halpin Barrett, Lorraine Zaloom.

1. CALL TO ORDER

Acting Chair Schumacher 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 Carroll made a motion, seconded by Commissioner Duke, to approve the agenda as presented. The motion passed 5-0 (Commissioner Knox absent for vote).

4. PUBLIC TO BE HEARD

a. Comments from the public on items not on the Agenda

None.

5. BUSINESS ITEMS

a. Develop Fiscal Year 2027 Work Plan

Director Sonnick began by noting that it is a requirement of the Selectboard for all Town Boards and Commissions to develop and update a work plan. She said that staff have suggested items for inclusion in the Planning Commission's Fiscal Year (FY) 27 Work Plan, including Upper Main Street planning, current zoning updates (related to Act 181, grammatical updates, merging documents, and ETC Next minor changes), new zoning updates, Fort Ethan Allen planning, and forest block inventory and protection methods. She noted that the forest block inventory topic was included in the 2024 update of the Town Plan, and that it also relates to state requirements around protecting and connecting forest blocks. She said that though the state requirement was to include content around protecting forest blocks in the Town Plan (and that this requirement was met), it may be prudent for the Planning Commission to consider additional steps related to this topic, such as inventorying the forest blocks and habitat connectors and considering a related overlay district. Commissioner Lavigne asked about the internship opportunity and how it relates to the Fort Ethan Allen planning. Planner Johnson replied that UVM students are looking for opportunities to work with municipalities on projects that are somewhat independent in nature, and that staff think good opportunities for the Town could relate to Fort Ethan Allen planning or the forest block work, further noting that internships could occur for both the fall and spring semesters. Director Sonnick reviewed the 2025/2026 Planning Commission work plan items that are still in progress. Commissioner Stewart suggested breaking out the zoning changes on the FY27 work plan into discrete items. Commissioner Stewart asked how the Energy Plan intersects with the Planning Commission's work, and Director Sonnick replied that though the Energy

Plan sits with the Energy Committee, the Planning Commission could use it to inform its future goals for the Town through regulation, such as encouraging more solar usage or mapping out energy production and usage for the Town. Commissioner Carroll suggested having a member of the Energy Committee provide an update to the Planning Commission on their work and explore more collaborative efforts. Commissioner Lavigne talked about the mapping project the Housing Committee is working on, and asked whether the Planning Commission would be interested in future collaboration related to incentivizing affordable housing and other activities, such as the creation of a rental registry and looking into homes that could be rehabilitated. The Commission also discussed potential collaborative opportunities with the Economic Development Committee, Development Review Board, and the Conservation & Trails Committee. Director Sonnick said that staff can incorporate this feedback and review the draft work plan at the next Planning Commission meeting, and noted that the finalized plan is due to the Selectboard in September.

b. Electronic gas pricing sign discussion

Director Sonnick began by noting that this relates to a specific ask regarding electronic gas pricing signage, as well as a larger discussion about electronic message boards for the Town in general. She shared examples of these types of signs in Colchester and Essex Junction, and shared proposed language for illuminated signage that could be included in the Town's zoning regulations. The proposed language would allow illuminated signage for gas stations and included requirements about static display, sizing, and brightness of the sign itself. Director Sonnick said she could add language to note that this is for freestanding roadside signs. Commissioner Duke said she would be opposed to the language unless it includes requirements about sign distance from the road.

Commissioner Carroll made a motion, seconded by Commissioner Lavigne, to approve the suggested gas station pricing zoning language as written and amended during discussion. The motion passed 5-1 (Commissioner Duke dissenting).

c. Discuss internship opportunity with Community Development to support a student from UVM's Sustainable Urban Planning, Communities of Practice class

Planner Johnson began by saying that it would be beneficial for students to have an opportunity to gain real experience and practice with planning-related activities, noting that the University of Vermont (UVM) is trying to develop a planning minor program. He noted that UVM has several internship tiers, including direct internships and remote internships, and said he would like to explore an opportunity between those two that includes direct contact points with staff and an opportunity to make a presentation to the Planning Commission at the end of the internship. He spoke about the potential for a project focused on historic preservation, which would entail the development of a conceptual development plan for the historic Fort Ethan Allen area that blends historic preservation and appropriate growth. He said that this item is included in the 2024 Town Plan and that it could easily be an independent project that an intern could work on, allowing the Planning Commission to focus on other higher priority items. He noted that an intern would be expected to spend approximately 100 hours on this project over the course of a semester (or roughly 8-10 hours per week). Director Sonnick noted that the Fort itself is shared with Colchester, so there's a good opportunity to collaborate with Colchester on this project. Commissioners expressed support for this proposal, and Planner Johnson said he would keep the Planning Commission updated, given that prospective interns will be reaching out to municipalities in the coming weeks as the school semester commences.

d. Steep Slope regulation discussion

Director Sonnick began by noting that she compiled a synopsis of the Planning Commission's discussions on steep slopes since 2025, including minutes and materials presented at meetings, the

formation of a steep slopes working group and their report-outs to the Planning Commission, which also included draft regulations and revisions to that draft based on discussion. She noted that a starting point for tonight's discussion could be to determine the purpose and goals of developing revised language and comparing the draft regulations provided by the working group.

Commissioner Knox said he would like to look at the working group's draft regulations from the perspective of the original ask, including the DRB's request for zoning revisions and the Planning Commission's impetus for forming the working group. He said he would like to approach this with an eye to avoiding perverse outcomes and unintended negative consequences. Director Sonnick showed the Town Plan's map of steep slopes, and Commissioner Knox said he would like the amount of linear feet to be clear in order to determine if those 20% steep slopes truly make a site unbuildable and would cause erosion and other types of damage. He said that 5 or 10 linear feet would be fairly easily mitigated and not necessarily a naturally-occurring steep slope that would need to be preserved.

The following public comments were received:

- Sharon Zukowski noted that there shouldn't be a problem with 5 feet of rise, because the slopes are measured in 25-foot increments.

Commissioner Schumacher noted that the regulations state that slopes are measured in 25-foot increments over 100 feet, and that the measurement of the slopes as written seem sufficient. Commissioner Stewart noted that the working group's draft regulations seem long, and asked if they could be condensed. He also noted language about natural versus manmade steep slopes, and asked for an example of a manmade steep slope. Commissioner Schumacher said that both manmade and natural steep slopes are treated the same in these regulations. Commissioner Duke said that manmade steep slopes could have been made by a bulldozer or other construction equipment, or a manmade steep slope could be a large pile of sand. Commissioner Stewart said he would not be in favor of including manmade steep slopes in the regulations. Planner Johnson shared a recent example of an application that was in front of the DRB, which had steep slopes in the areas that the developer was proposing to locate building envelopes, and that the applicant was able to demonstrate that those steep slopes were remnants of trash and debris on the site. He noted that the DRB agreed with this, after conducting a site visit and viewing photographs of the site. He further noted that the new grading that was proposed to allow the siting of the building in this application would introduce new steep slopes to the site. He said that these new steep grades would presumably be created in a way that is stable, and that the DRB ultimately agreed with this approach. He said that this example is helpful when thinking about amending the steep slope regulations, because it shows the complexities involved in applying regulations to real world situations. He said that the Planning Commission may want to consider language in proposed regulations that allow for redevelopment of a site if steep slopes were created as part of a previous development that was approved. Commissioner Carroll agreed that the measurements included in the proposed steep slope regulations are adequate, and said that the Commission should focus on the goal of such regulations, which are to ensure that developments are environmentally sound and that watershed areas and other natural areas are appropriately protected. He said that any proposed development on steep slopes would have to include a strong mitigation plan. Planner Johnson also noted that the topography included in most development applications is in two-foot increments, and suggested that the regulations could relate to a height differential in two-foot increments (for example, noting that anything that is under six feet or four feet high would not reach that steep slope threshold). He said that because GIS maps can't be adjusted to account for this, they need a way to look at the maps and be able to use some kind of criteria to determine which of the steep slopes are truly steep slopes and not anomalies in the data that aren't necessarily steep slopes. Commissioner Schumacher

said that they need to write the regulations to ensure that they are not subjective and give clear guidance in terms of where developers can and cannot build. He said that he thinks the draft proposed regulations seem clear at this juncture. Planner Johnson asked if roadwork and ditches would be included in the steep slope regulations, and Commissioner Schumacher replied that they wouldn't, from his perspective. Commissioner Lavigne said that a significant amount of work was put into these draft regulations but acknowledged that they are lengthy and that other municipalities don't have steep slope regulations that are this lengthy, and expressed concern about complexity and inflexibility. Commissioner Knox asked whether the proposed regulations will help the DRB when considering applications involving steep slopes. Commissioner Carroll (who is also a member of the DRB) replied that from his perspective, the regulations need to include definitions but also need to rely to some degree on common sense, and that this set of proposed regulations is closer to what is needed but needs some slight adjustment.

The following public comments were received:

- Sharon Zukowski said that the regulations allow building on steep slopes if developers can prove with geotechnical evidence that the steep slope is stable. She noted that Burlington and South Burlington also have lengthy steep slope regulations. She noted examples of manmade slopes in Burlington (Riverside Drive) and 45 River Road.
- Anne Miller noted that with the Riverside Drive example in Burlington, those slopes are manmade and are proving very unstable. She also noted that the environmental impacts of steep slopes are not just related to water, but that steep slopes contribute to other environmental problems, such as sinkholes. She said that though the draft regulations are lengthy, they are comprehensive and should be easier to use when considering applications.

Commissioner Schumacher suggested increasing the buffer to 50 feet if a slope is abutting a waterway. He said that though the regulations are long, they are sufficiently and helpfully detailed. He suggested providing better definitions of manmade versus natural steep slopes. He also noted that though they have had discussions about revising the measurements, he wondered whether it would be feasible to apply those measurements practically, and said that this warrants further discussion. Commissioner Stewart asked how unacceptable risk is calculated or determined in the context of the proposed regulations. Commissioner Carroll said that in this context, it is the Town's determination of unacceptable risk, and Planner Johnson added that 20% is generally the best practice definition of steep slope regulations for a number of municipalities in Vermont. Commissioner Lavigne asked how Town staff feel about the steep slope regulations as proposed, and Planner Johnson replied that it would be very difficult to build on steep slopes given that process that it would require to do so, but that having some hypothetical plans or previous applications to look at and test out the draft regulations could be helpful, as could having a geotechnical engineer review and weigh in on the proposed regulations.

The following public comments were received:

- Lorraine Zaloom spoke about the 20% definition of steep slopes, noting that it was defined as such in the Town Plan based on environmental safety best practices. She also noted that it is dependent on soil types, noting that sandy soils and clay soils are different than bedrock. She also noted that if developers are not careful and judicious about where they build, the taxpayer ends up shouldering the burden of repairs. She also said that with careful oversight, development is possible on relatively steep slopes.
- Anne Miller suggested taking the last six DRB applications that were approved and conducting a retrospective analysis based on these proposed regulations. She also advocated for having

other engineers objectively review the proposed regulations. She further noted that 20% steep slope regulations are common across the country.

Commissioner Knox expressed support for testing the proposed regulations by attempting to apply them to examples of past development applications. Planner Johnson said he could find examples of past applications and that they could review these in the context of the proposed steep slope regulations at a future meeting.

6. APPROVAL OF MINUTES

a. Approve minutes from July 9, 2026

Commissioner Carroll made a motion, seconded by Commissioner Duke, to approve the minutes of July 9, 2026 as presented. The motion passed 6-0.

7. OTHER BUSINESS

Director Sonnick noted that Community Day will be held on Saturday, September 19, 2026, and noted that the Community Development Department will have a table at the event. She noted that there will be a presentation on the Transportation Master Plan as well as some education on Upper Main Street work.

8. READING FILE

9. PROPOSED EXECUTIVE AND/OR DELIBERATIVE SESSION

a. All meetings have a potential for an executive session per 1.V.S.A. §313.
No executive session held.

10. ADJOURN

Commissioner Duke made a motion, seconded by Commissioner Knox, to adjourn the meeting. The motion passed 6-0 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)