

TOWN OF ESSEX
PLANNING COMMISSION DRAFT MINUTES
FEBRUARY 25, 2021

Note: This was a virtual meeting on Teams.

PLANNING COMMISSION (PC) PRESENT: Dustin Brusco, Chair; Josh Knox, Vice-Chair; John Mangan, Clerk; David Raphael; Jonathan Schumacher; Tom Furland; and Alternate John Alden.

SELECTBOARD PRESENT: Elaine Haney; Vince Franco; Patrick Murray; Dawn Fleury.

OTHERS PRESENT: Owiso Makuku, Community Development Director; Sharon Kelley, Zoning Administrator; Darren Schibler, Planner; Deana Stoneback, Administrative Assistant; Dennis Lutz, Public Works Director; Evan Teich, Town Manager; Greg Duggan, Deputy Town Manager; Steve Shaw; Diane Clemons; Nick Martin; Tracey Delphia; Sharon Zukowski; Patty Davis; Barb Chapin; Bob Klinefelter; Deb Ehler Holland; Irene Wrenner; John Egan; Ken Signorello; Greg Lyon; Michael Hoey-Lukakis; Paul O'Leary; Paula Duke; Roseanne Prestipino; Lorraine Zaloom; Robin Pierce; Annie Cooper; Jean Ashe; Chris Kessler; Alexander LaRosa; Jeremy Matosky; Diana M. Wood; Tom Williams; Dan Petherbridge; Darby Mayville; and Community TV.

At 6:33 p.m., Chairman Brusco called the Planning Commission meeting to order and took a roll call of the Planning Commissioners present. He noted that Commissioner Daly was not able to attend the meeting and John Alden would sit in as the alternate commissioner. Brusco read the Covid meeting process instructions into the record and, amended the Agenda by moving Agenda Item 2 'Discussion with the Selectboard' to be last on the Agenda.

At 6:35 p.m., Selectboard Chair Haney called a Special Select Board meeting to order and called out additions to its Agenda.

AGENDA ITEM 1: PUBLIC COMMENTS: Patty Davis, 9 Hillside Circle, spoke about biodiversity and sustainability as being our future. She stated that the town needs to shift the way projects are constructed and the wetlands need to be better protected. Davis volunteered to be on a subgroup for any task force that may be formed during the regulation amendment process.

AGENDA ITEM 2: MINUTES 2/11/21:

Vice-Chair Knox MOVED and Commissioner Mangan SECONDED a MOTION to approve the 2/11/21 minutes as written. The MOTION passed 7-0.

AGENDA ITEMS 3: OTHER BUSINESS: None.

AGENDA ITEM 4: DISCUSSION WITH SELECTBOARD: ETC|NEXT PLAN (UPDATE TO 1991 TOWN CENTER MASTER PLAN):

Owiso Makuku and Darren Schibler provided an overview. Points of discussion included:

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- The ETC|NEXT Plan replaces the 1991 Town Center Master Plan;
- Extensive public input occurred with the project which started in 2017 and included the development of a Steering Committee. They met before and throughout the process of the update; a focus group was developed; a survey was sent out to residents in the summer, yielding a total of 424 responses; an open house occurred; open discussions at the Planning Commission table and behind the scenes with staff and stakeholders;
- The plan was originally created by the consultants as a prescriptive document and it took time to shift it to a more visionary document, which received broad consensus as it was being fine-tuned;
- The location of the ETC|NEXT is at the corner of VT 289/RTE 15 out to the Historic Center, including everything in between. This allows you to get to point A & point B.
- The message the Planning Commission wanted to convey the message that the vision for the ETC was to be better connected and more cohesive.
- The studies showed that citizens wanted to have more bike and pedestrian options within the ETC, and have connections to elsewhere; they wanted more retail options and affordable housing and protect the natural and scenic resources; including much discussion on building height;
- The Plan is a new vision for the ETC area and includes interconnected, but distinct, neighborhoods; cohesive architectural character, respectful of settings; wider variety of land uses; multi-modal transportation; common palette of streetscape elements supporting activity and commerce; and attention to soils, wetlands and the general ecology of the area;
- These elements would create new opportunities for increased residential density and diversity; mixed use development and economic vitality; infill growth and adaptive reuse of buildings and land; and visual and physical connections between open space, nature and the built environment;
- Care was taken to be sensitive to the resources within the ETC, including habitat, as well as looking for areas to allow for recreation;
- This plan allows for the next steps to guide the future zone and planning documents; allows for engagement with developers and stakeholders; it establishes the right infrastructure, policies and regulations; and it allows to collaborate with municipal partners including staff departments, Economic Development; Housing; Energy and Conservation and Trails; and
- The goal of making the document be better connected and more cohesive has been successful.

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Chairman Brusco asked for the Commissioners thoughts on the Plan.

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Commissioner Raphael stated that we have the opportunity to adopt the plan and start the work. He noted that the Commission had to do the work do get a buy in at a high level. They had a great amount of public input, and he believes the people of Essex want to take this Plan to the next level.

92 Vice-Chair Knox stated that the Planning Commission wanted to stress the visionary care of
93 the document, which is why the phrase ‘Better Connected and More Cohesive’ permeates
94 throughout the whole Plan, noting that it has been 30 years since its last update. He noted that
95 this was a collaborative process and is of vision of what the people expressed during the input
96 process.

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98 Commissioner Mangan seconds all the comments that have been made on the Plan. He is
99 pleased with the outcome.

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101 Commissioner Furland felt the process was good and there is a need to discuss infrastructure.
102 He felt it was important to have a dense area for growth.

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104 Commissioner Alden noted that he was late in engaging with the Planning Commission. He
105 noted that his job as an architect has had him work on projects in and around the ETC area. He
106 was frustrated in going through the old document versus what was happening on the ground.
107 He felt the consultants did a great job with the document, but the document became too dense.
108 He was pleased that the Planning Commission directed the consultants to pull out the details
109 within the document and create an appendix. He stated the process has been arduous and
110 lengthy, but in the end is a great document.

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112 Commissioner Schumacher said “ditto” to the Commissioners comments and agrees it is time
113 to think about infrastructure and make changes. The old plan vision no longer fits. He gave a
114 nod to the Community Development staff, noting it has been a long road. He believes this Plan
115 integrated all the stakeholder’s opinions and he has enjoyed watching the integration. He said
116 it is a good plan and would like to see it moved forward and as a result, see regulations come to
117 pass.

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119 Chairman Brusco echoes the Commissioners comments. He stated that the plan started as a
120 technical document, and changes were made to make it a visionary statement document. This
121 is necessary to guide changes to the Zoning Regulations. He stated that unachievable things
122 were removed from the document.

123
124 SB Chair Haney thanked staff for the enormous amount of work it took to get this Plan
125 together. She thought it was a beautiful document and asked the Selectboard members for their
126 thoughts.

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128 SB Member Franco appreciated the work involved and likes the vision statement. He likes to
129 look at the possibilities of what “could be” and not “shall be.”

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131 SB Member Murray noted it was not the first time seeing the Plan. He is appreciative for
132 seeing the expansion of housing as it is a critical issue in the community; and for stretching the
133 plan 20-30 years as any impact on climate change was incorporated into the document. He
134 likes the Plan and thinks a “great job” was done on the Plan.

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136 SB Member Fleury thanked everyone for all the hard work done on the Plan. Her concern is
137 also on the protection of wetlands. She questioned if any developers were interested in
138 investing into the Plan.

139 In response, Schibler provided an example of a developer investing, using the Babarooso
140 project that was recently approved at the Essex Experience. He stated it took a couple of
141 iterations to work with developer Edelmann, but they were able to achieve the look the Town
142 wants to see in this area.

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144 SB Chair Haney was thankful the focus of the Plan was on walkability and accessibility.
145 Brining connectivity to the Town Center will make the area more interesting and pleasant for
146 people to walk through. She appreciates calling the document a vision. This Plan will help
147 with potential future grants. She was curious going forward how the Plan will translate to the
148 regulations. She asked if the PC would partner with the other committees, such as Housing and
149 Economic Development.

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151 C.D.D. Owiso Makuku replied that she pictures a broad concept to these committees and then
152 bring language back and forth between each other before it goes to the Planning Commission.
153 She stated that crafting the process is important.

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155 Schibler stated that collaboration was already occurring and the PC wants to invite the various
156 committees to its meetings.

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158 Chairman Brusco stated that this is not a new concept and the PC has always reached out for
159 collaboration. He stated that there will be a lot of opportunity for everyone to engage in the
160 process.

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162 SB Chair Haney noted that the school district (ESWD) and the select board had a conversation
163 about projected growth and future student population. They are interested in what future
164 development might bring in for student numbers. Staff replied that it is difficult to know what
165 a developer would submit as a proposal and suggested information may be available from the
166 CCRPC. Owiso noted that there has been a cultural shift in what a household looks like and
167 developers might also have a sense of what may be proposed. It was noted that the PC tracks
168 what has been issued in housing units with its phasing schedule, which can be shared.

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170 SB Chair asked what people can expect to see on residential density around the Essex Center
171 area. Chairman Brusco said those answers come when they get to the Zoning Regulations. He
172 noted the Plan sets the stage, but the PC wants to avoid stating "x number of building can go
173 here" and that is what they took out of the Plan.

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175 Owiso Makuku stated that Community Development is working with Public Works on grants
176 to study Route 15.

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178 Chairman Brusco stating that the PC is looking to collaborate with Public Works. The PC can
179 say what we want, but then it comes down to "what can we get." The vision will help drive
180 through the next few decades of development.

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182 **Commissioner Schumacher MOVED and Commissioner Furland SECONDED a Motion**
183 **to accept public comments. The MOTION passed 7-0.**

184

185 Patty Davis, 9 Hillside Circle, Essex, noted that Jeff Carr would be a good resource to follow

186 up with on economic data that Elaine is looking for as he follows the economist trend in the
187 State of Vermont. Davis noted that millennials are going to carry the older folks going
188 forward. Millennials are going to want to walk and bike, and noted they are going to want to
189 use their “apps” as they are not interested in the product that they can buy at the stores in the
190 ETC. However, they are interested in what the service provides. Davis continued to state that
191 millennials want to live in a biodiverse, green alternative transportation environment, where
192 their social values are valued.

193

194 Bob Klinefelter, 18 Londonderry Lane, Essex, stated that he has lived in Essex with his wife
195 for 10 years. He is a civil engineer, which is one of the reasons why the Plan drew his interest.
196 He stated the Plan was well done. He would like to see the bike/pedestrian paths prioritized as
197 he believes the area is already dense. He stated that getting around is “klunky.” He takes his
198 young son on bike rides and it is “honestly scary” anywhere around his road and in trying to
199 cross Route 15. He questioned extending the old rail bed and suggested it would be relatively
200 easy as he assumed the infrastructure was still in place. He asked if that idea had been vetted
201 and if it was town owned or privately owned property. He repeated that living in his area,
202 walking or biking is very challenging and hopes it will become a priority. He added that the
203 wetlands are already impacted by the existing trail bed, so this would also make the land a
204 good opportunity.

205

206 Schibler described the path that it is shown as a concept on the Plan. He noted that the town
207 does not own it and we don’t have any rights or easements to it at this time. The Plan will
208 allow for a conversation when property owners come in for development.

209

210 Owiso Makuku stated that because this path it is noted in the Plan, the town can use this as a
211 solid basis when applying for a grant.

212

213 Lorraine Zaloom, Route 15, Essex, stated she was curious if the vision was to include health
214 equity for people who live along Route 15. She said the main issue for her is noise and light
215 pollution. She stated the noise is getting worse and worse. She asked if these concerns were
216 discussed as a part of the vision.

217

218 Owiso Makuku stated that it was discussed in context of giving people alternate routes to move
219 around. Makuku stated that when developers come in with an application, it can be asked what
220 additional safeguards they will propose to protect future developments. Owiso acknowledged
221 that this does not help with existing development, and that Route 15 is a main corridor.

222

223 Chairman Brusio stated that the Town would need to create a sound ordinance in order to
224 regulate noise with an application. SB Chair Haney stated that Police Chief Hoague is working
225 on a noise ordinance.

226

227 Annie Cooper, stated she was the Economic Development Chair and had a meeting last week
228 regarding bike path connections. She agreed that establishing connectivity for so many people
229 and for so many different reasons was important for the entire town. She is excited about the
230 work the PC is doing and expressed her gratitude to the PC for its hard work, and for inviting
231 them to speak about this topic. She offered her help in any way needed. She is excited about
232 connectivity and the future of Essex.

233 John Egan, Chapin Road, Essex, is disappointed that the discussions of improvements won't be
234 for 10, 20, 30 years out as he, and others present, won't be able to appreciate or enjoy the Plan.
235 He asked that it move quicker from the vision to the implementation. He compared Winooski,
236 stating that they already have a high dense area, they have put up 4-5 story buildings, and
237 asked where the people would park. He said it does not make sense. He hopes that will not
238 happen in the Town of Essex.

239

240 Sharon Zukowksi, is looking at the key elements of the vision and her concern is one of the
241 main goals is to increase density and critical mass. Her biggest worry is limited capacity and
242 traffic. She stated the town does not have enough capacity for the existing sewer core, as noted
243 in a 2004 study. She is worried that striving for these goals and may not have enough sewer
244 capacity for the people who are already here. Also, increased density will bring in too much
245 traffic and there will not be enough water pressure. Her other concern was height of buildings.
246 She felt that a developer would rely on the Plan to get a 5-story building. On another note, she
247 asked that the Conservation Committee be changed to a Commission as this would allow them
248 to apply for grants.

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250 Chairman Brusco replied that the limitations Sharon Zukowski expressed have been there from
251 the beginning of the process, and the PC has engaged with Public Works from the beginning on
252 this Plan.

253

254 Tracey Delphia echoes comments on connectivity and multi-model placemaking is an
255 important aspect to connect people to their community and, it is a part of what will keep people
256 in Essex. She is excited to see the vision codified into regulations, and that all the committees,
257 public and Boards will be able to dive in and express what they want, where they want to see it
258 it and how to achieve this for Essex. She expressed her kudos to the Planning Commission,
259 staff, and everyone else involved with this project.

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261 **Commissioner Furland MOVED and Commissioner Schumacher SECONDED a Motion**
262 **to close public comments. The MOTION passed 7-0.**

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264 The Planning Commission meeting adjourned at 7:58 p.m.

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PLANNING COMMISSION

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By: _____
Dustin R. Brusco, Chair

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