

City of Keene
New Hampshire

CONSERVATION COMMISSION
WORKSHOP MINUTES

Tuesday, February 17, 2026

3:30 PM

2nd Floor Conference Room,
City Hall

Members Present:

Gary Flaherty, Chair
Councilor Michele Chalice
Steven Bill
Thomas Haynes, Alternate (Voting)

Staff Present:

Mari Brunner, Senior Planner

Members Not Present:

Barbara Richter, Vice Chair
Katie Kinsella
William White
Ken Bergman
Bob Milliken, Alternate
John Therriault, Alternate
Alexander Von Plinsky, IV, Alternate

1) Call to Order

Chair Flaherty called the workshop to order at 3:38 PM.

2) Workshop:

- A) Conservation Land Protection Criteria – The Keene Conservation Commission will hold a workshop to discuss priorities for acquiring conservation land, guidelines for acquiring legal interest in conservation land, and potential updates to the Commission’s adopted Land Protection Criteria.

Commissioners discussed how the results of this workshop would be presented to the whole Commission. This workshop was called to differentiate it from the regular meeting, provide an hour to discuss the Land Protection Criteria, and come up with ideas to share with a larger group—whether at the Conservation Commission meeting immediately following this workshop or a discussion again at the March 2026 meeting. The ultimate goal would be for the Commission to approve the updated Criteria. The 2018 Land Protection Criteria were included in the Commission’s February 17, 2026 Workshop Agenda packet, in addition to the draft 2026 Guideline for Acquiring Legal Interest in Conservation Land and Keene Conservation Priorities Checklist provided by Vice Chair Richter.

Discussion continued, as Commissioners began reviewing the 2018 Land Protection Criteria that were updated in December 2025 (shown in the Commission’s 01/20/2026 agenda packet). Mr. Bill thought the numbering system for the criteria and Vice Chair Richter’s proposed “Keene

Conservation Priorities Checklist” should be synchronized. Mr. Haynes thought the Land Protection Criteria should be as user-friendly as possible. Ms. Brunner pointed out the difference between the two documents: Land Protection Criteria and Conservation Priorities Checklist. She suggested that the Commission should determine changes needed to the Criteria, which would inform the changes needed to the Checklist (that is supposed to support the Criteria).

Discussion diverted briefly as the Commission confirmed that it wanted to keep Vice Chair Richter’s addition of “urban forests” under the existing #2 “Protect Forest Resources” (later renamed #3 “Protect Forest Ecology”).

The Commission agreed that Land Protection Criterion #1 “Protect Water Resources” was oversimplified and created two items: #1 “Protect Surface Water Resources” and #2 “Protect Groundwater Resources.”

Mr. Haynes questioned whether the Commission needs the two documents it was presented with. Mr. Bill said the checklist probably makes sense and could be useful when trying to score a piece of land and deciding whether it meets a threshold for whether the Commission should do something. Mr. Haynes wondered about combining the two documents to reduce paperwork. Ms. Brunner thought that would be an option but explained her understanding from Vice Chair Richter than the Land Protection Criteria are intended as the official policy adopted by the Commission and the Checklist is intended as a tool to aid the Commission when it has a specific request to consider. Councilor Chalice asked which document the public would see and Ms. Brunner thought both. Councilor Chalice hoped that would be the case and if so, she suggested that under each “Potential Benefit” on the Checklist, there could be a hyperlink to the relevant Land Protection Criteria. Ms. Brunner suggested focusing on the Land Protection Criteria because the Conservation Priorities Checklist would be based on the adopted Criteria.

The Commission proposed revisions to the 2018 Land Protection Criteria (updated December 2025). “Protect drinking water,” was added as both #1.a and #2.a. under #1 “Protect Surface Water Resources” and #2 “Protect Groundwater Resources.” Ms. Brunner asked about the difference between drinking water and groundwater. Mr. Bill and Chair Flaherty agreed that drinking water would be from reservoirs, well water, and potable water that has been purified. Surface waters would be those like rivers and streams that are untreated.

The Commission finalized revisions for the first two Land Protection Criteria on water resources:

1. Protect Surface Water Resources
 - a. Protect drinking water.
 - b. Maintain natural frontage on rivers, streams, lakes, ponds, and reservoirs.
 - c. Maintain or enhance wetlands, vernal pools, floodplains, buffer areas, and riparian zones.

2. Protect Groundwater Water Resources
 - a. Protect drinking water.
 - b. Protect land overlying aquifers and aquifer recharge areas.

The Commission discussed the new #3 “Protect Forest Resources” in the 2018 Land Protection Criteria (updated December 2025). For #3.a., “Tracts of woodland with sufficient size, appropriate soils, and other attributes that support responsible forest management, including the production of

timber and other forest products,” Mr. Bill asked what “*Tracts of woodland with sufficient size,*” means. Mr. Haynes said it means whatever he wants it to mean. Mr. Bill noted that the Commission was coming up with a checklist for people to determine whether something qualifies. Chair Flaherty agreed that they could come up with a size. Councilor Chalice suggested eliminating the phrase “*with sufficient size,*” and the other Commissioners agreed.

The Commission discussed the definition of an “*urban forest.*” Mr. Bill wondered if trees on a lawn would qualify. Chair Flaherty said his research showed that an urban forest is basically any tree; the entire City of Keene would be the urban forest.

Councilor Chalice was concerned that she did not see any mention of “ecosystem” related to #3 “Protect Forest Resources.” Mr. Bill thought it was captured under #5 “Protect Wildlife and Nature Areas.” Councilor Chalice wondered if a term could be added to #3, addressing that the Commission wants to see the components of a whole ecosystem within a forest, and how many components a particular tract of land may have when considering a healthy or whole forest. The Commission agreed to change the title of #3 to “Protect Forest Ecology.” Chair Flaherty found this narrower but still general enough and Mr. Haynes thought it was a great suggestion.

The Commission continued discussing revisions to refine #3.a. Mr. Haynes suggested: “Maintain or enhance woodlands in association with other ecological attributes,” which the other Commissioners liked. Councilor Chalice asked if there would be a reason that the Conservation Commission would recommend buying a parcel of land to timber it. Ms. Brunner said yes, the City has some forestry management plans (e.g., the Greater Goose Pond Forest) and in the Conservation Commission’s enabling legislation, one duty is managing land. For example, there could be a town forest. Mr. Bill mentioned that the City would be harvesting a lot of red pine due to red pine scale and Councilor Chalice asked if the Conservation Commission would be reviewing permits for that work. Ms. Brunner said there would be no permits associated with it, but City Council would receive updates on it because everything is approved through City Council; the Council’s Municipal Services, Facilities and Infrastructure (MSFI) Committee would be receiving an update on it within the upcoming month. Councilor Chalice asked if she could request the Conservation Commission have advanced access to that update and provide comments for the MSFI meeting. Ms. Brunner said she could pass that request to the Director of Parks and Recreation, Carrah Fisk-Hennessey, but in general City staff like to give that information to Council first, so they are not contacted by residents or Committee members with questions about things they have not seen yet. Discussion ensued about whether this would go directly to the MSFI Committee or to the City Council first. The Commission agreed that this conversation could continue during the regular Conservation Commission meeting.

Chair Flaherty reminded the Commission that these edits were not final. The Commission agreed on the edit to #3.a., “Maintain or enhance woodlands in association with other ecological attributes,” and did not think examples were needed at this time. For #3.b., the Commission agreed to strike, “*steep slopes.*” The Commission agreed to add #3.c., regarding urban forests, and discussed the best phrasing. Mr. Bill questioned the difference between a “forest” and a “woodland.” Chair Flaherty called a *forest* a large area by definition and a *woodland* smaller, such as a wood lot or park. Councilor Chalice suggested #3.c., “Protect the integrity, biodiversity and health of Keene’s urban forests,” and the Commission agreed. Mr. Bill asked if that would include the forested areas around the Wastewater Treatment Plant. Chair Flaherty said that by definition even one tree in someone’s yard in Keene is a part of the urban forest. Councilor Chalice clarified

that these are Land Protection Criteria, so if someone asked the Commission to look at a forested area, these are what would be used to say whether that area is valuable enough to expend funds. Mr. Bill thought so.

Discussion ensued about #3.d. Commissioners thought “*Build upon*” was awkward or unclear. Ms. Brunner explained Vice Chair Richter’s rationale for this sub-item: she was thinking of tiny parcels of land (i.e., 1/4-acre to 3/4-acre) that the Commission had recently acquired, which directly abut large, undeveloped tracts of forested land. So, Ms. Brunner thought the intent of this statement was about building upon or adding to those larger fragments. Mr. Haynes suggested changing “*build upon*” to “*expand*” and the Commission agreed. Discussion ensued briefly as Mr. Haynes also suggested adding a #3.e. about responsible forest management in terms of timber production (e.g., the Goose Pond Forest) and the Commission agreed.

The Commission finalized revisions for the third Land Protection Criterion on forest ecology:

3. Protect Forest Ecology
 - a. Maintain or enhance woodlands in association with other ecological attributes.
 - b. Protect slopes with grades greater than 15%.
 - c. Protect the integrity, biodiversity and health of Keene’s urban forests.
 - d. Expand large unfragmented blocks of forests.
 - e. Support responsible forest husbandry.

The Commission discussed what became #4 “Protect Agricultural Resources.” Councilor Chalice felt like the three sub-items covered a lot of ground. She wondered if there was a place for community gardens and the Commission assessing land that could be uniquely appropriate in terms of its proximity to residences. Chair Flaherty and Councilor Chalice agreed that it would fall under #4.c., which they revised slightly to read, “Land that is suitable for urban agriculture, such as community gardens.” The edit was intended to help the public understand the Commission’s meaning of “*urban agriculture*.” These could include raised beds, bee-friendly gardens, the roundabouts, and more. Councilor Chalice wanted something included to remind people that this is not only about farming and there are smaller uses of land to produce food that can have a beneficial impact on the community.

Mr. Haynes wondered if #4.a. should just be about farmlands and #4.b. should focus on soil. Ms. Brunner explained Vice Chair Richter’s rationale, wanting to rephrase it from the 2018 version that said, “Land well suitable for agriculture *that do not have prime soils*,” to “*open fields with prime soils*,” Phrasing it more in the positive. Councilor Chalice liked “*open fields*” because there are pieces of land that have prime agricultural soils that are not currently farmland. Chair Flaherty agreed, noting land in fallow. Mr. Bill said the Monadnock Conservancy directs a lot of energy toward such land.

The Commission finalized revisions for the fourth Land Protection Criterion on agriculture:

4. Protect Agricultural Resources
 - a. Support existing farmlands and open fields with prime soils and other attributes that support agriculture or have the potential to support agriculture.
 - b. Land well suitable for agriculture that has state or locally important soils.
 - c. Land that is suitable for urban agriculture, such as community gardens.

The Commission discussed #5 “Protect Wildlife and Natural Areas.” For #5.a, “Property with large tracts of undeveloped habitat and corridors important for wildlife,” Chair Flaherty said he was unsure the City of Keene has “*large tracts*.” Mr. Haynes said it does, depending on the definition. He referred to the Greater Goose Pond Forest, for example, which is large compared to most tracts of land in the state. Chair Flaherty also mentioned the property along Old Gilsum Road. The Commission agreed that the City has “*significant tracts*,” which Councilor Chalice said would not be qualifying them small or large. She wondered if these Criteria would cover any species showing up on a particular piece of land (e.g., wolves). The Commission agreed that it would be covered by “*corridors*” and “*maintain ecologically significant*,” and that all critters were covered. The Commission agreed to keep #5.b. through #5.d. as they were written. Mr. Bill requested the addition of #5.e., “Unique geologic features,” and the Commission agreed.

The Commission finalized revisions for the fifth Land Protection Criterion:

5. Protect Wildlife and Natural Areas

- a. Property with significant tracts of undeveloped habitat and corridors important for wildlife.
- b. Maintain or enhance land containing ecologically significant or rare natural communities or species.
- c. Priority land that is identified in the New Hampshire Wildlife Action Plan, Natural Resource Inventories, or existing Land Management Plans.
- d. Other lands which increase the diversity and viability of wildlife populations, including fields, riparian areas, land contiguous to existing protected natural areas, and land that can serve as a buffer to developed areas.
- e. Unique geologic features.

Discussion ensued about the new #6 “Protect Cultural, Recreational, and Scenic Value.” In #6.a., “Land that offers opportunities for appropriate outdoor recreation by the public,” Mr. Haynes wondered how the Commission would define “*appropriate*.” The Commission agreed to strike the word “*appropriate*” from #6.a. Mr. Haynes said the policies or plans for those lands would guide the appropriateness of those activities. The Commission agreed to keep the rest of criterion #6 as it was written:

6. Protect Cultural, Recreational, and Scenic Value

- a. Land that offers opportunities for outdoor recreation by the public.
- b. Scenic views, ridgelines, and other aesthetic areas.
- c. Landscapes that preserve the region’s cultural and historic heritage.
- d. Land that promotes connectivity of recreational networks.

The Commission discussed the final criterion #7, “Collaboration and Leverage.” Ms. Brunner asked if this was about prioritizing lands so that the burden on the City would be less. There was agreement. Mr. Bill added, for example, if Gilsum and Keene wanted to cooperate on preserving land, that it would be a priority. The Commission discussed #7.b. as it was written, noting that nearly everything in Keene is vulnerable to development pressure, so they agreed to revise it as, “Land with ecological value that is vulnerable to development pressure.” The *ecological value* is the distinguishing feature to qualify, and the Commission agreed that it was broad enough.

Ms. Brunner wondered whether there should be something about prioritizing land that is not in a developed area, following Master Plan comments on infill development. Councilor Chalice mentioned Greenfield development and Mr. Bill mentioned flood storage at the Kingsbury site.

Ms. Brunner thought that would be covered by other things. Councilor Chalice agreed, stating that it is not a Land Protection Criterion and the City is not trying to protect ecological value within Kingsbury. Mr. Bill asked if a developer wanted to turn that whole site into housing, with no criteria for preserving any pieces of it. Ms. Brunner said they would have to comply with the floodplain, the Surface Water Protection Buffer, and take care of the contamination. Discussion continued about the pros and cons of allowing housing on tracts such as that vs. pushing it away, with Mr. Bill mentioning concerns for some of the newer high-density tracts, but Councilor Chalice stating that they do not take up a lot of undeveloped land.

Mr. Haynes asked to revise #7.a. to be less wordy and the Commission agreed on, “To protect land with willing collaborators.” Ms. Brunner pointed out that Vice Chair Richter left a note that #7 “Collaboration and Leverage” could be moved to the Conservation Priorities Checklist instead of the Land Protection Criteria. Commissioners agreed to keep it as a Criterion.

The Commission finalized revisions for the seventh Land Protection Criterion:

7. Collaboration and Leverage
 - a. To protect land with willing collaborators.
 - b. Land with ecological value that is vulnerable to development pressure.
 - c. Land where there are landowners willing to support conservation and protection.

Ms. Brunner would send both the red-lined and final versions to the Commission for their review. Then, the group could compare it to the Conservation Priorities Checklist categories, some of which might be able to be more consolidated as well.

The Commission reviewed language that was highlighted in yellow at the top of the 2018 Land Protection Criteria (updated December 2025), which Vice Chair Richter added regarding abutting conservation land: “*Land directly abutting existing conservation land is a high priority for protection. Expanding existing conservation areas is an efficient use of City resources and makes it easier to steward and manage land. In addition to abutting lands, the Conservation Commission will review potential land purchases that score high on the Priority Checklist.*” The Commission agreed to keep the language because to date, most land that it had encouraged the City to purchase abutted conservation land. It makes sense as a high priority to protect from development. Councilor Chalice noted that the Council was getting pressured about land that does not pay taxes, so spelling out why these particular parcels are valuable is helpful when talking about more conservation dollars for less tax dollars.

3) **Adjournment**

There being no further business, Chair Flaherty adjourned the meeting at 4:22 PM.

Respectfully submitted by,
Katrana Kibler, Minute Taker

Reviewed and edited by,
Mari Brunner, Senior Planner