



**OAK RIDGE PLANNING & ZONING BOARD MEETING
JANUARY 22, 2026 - 7:00 P.M.
OAK RIDGE TOWN HALL**

MINUTES

Board Members Present

Jason Streck, Chair
Patti Paslaru, Vice Chair
Ron Simpson
Patrick Fiorentino
Clay Flynt, ETJ Representative
Christy Leimone, (Alternate, sitting)

Staff Present

Sean Taylor, Planning Director
Sandra Smith, Asst. Town Mgr./Town Clerk

1. CALL TO ORDER

The meeting was called to order by Chair Jason Streck at 7:00 p.m.

2. APPROVE AGENDA

Ron Simpson made a motion to amend the agenda to add a discussion of the Planning & Zoning Fee Schedule as Item 6, with subsequent items renumbered accordingly. Vice Chair Patti Paslaru seconded, and the motion passed unanimously (6-0).

3. APPROVE MINUTES

Ron Simpson made a motion to approve the Special Called meeting minutes from December 2, 2025, and Clay Flynt seconded. The motion passed unanimously (6-0).

4. PUBLIC HEARING

PUBLIC TRAIL EASEMENT CLOSING. Being that certain eight-foot-wide public trail easement running along and parallel with the western lines of Lots 6, 8, 9, and 10 of the Ashford Subdivision for a distance of 867.28 feet, more or less, per plat approved for recording by the Town of Oak Ridge on August 24, 2023, and recorded on August 25, 2023, in Plat Book 213, Page 42 of the Guilford County Registry.

Chair Jason Streck explained that individuals in support of and in opposition to the request had a total of 20 minutes each during which to speak and five minutes each thereafter to offer their rebuttals.

Planning Director Sean Taylor read the public hearing description into record. Taylor clarified that the public hearing was being held so the Board could make a

recommendation to Council ahead of the Town's public hearing on the proposed easement closure scheduled for the following month.

Streck opened the public hearing.

Proponents:

Jon Deline, 7796 Polar Drive, stated his support of closing and removing the easement on the grounds that the approval of the easement was improperly processed and that the quality and location of the trail was wrong for the Town. He noted that the easement abutted his rear property line. He emphasized that he had no prior knowledge of the easement until after it had been approved and noted that it was incumbent upon the Parks & Recreation Advisory Board to have first held a public hearing of the easement to garner public input. He stated that the easement conflicted with the Land Use Plan and that a public trail did not belong in a RS-40 zoned residence. He added that the easement was not in compliance with policies 2.2.2, 1.3, 4.2.2 and 4.2.3 in regards to pedestrian plans and neighborhood designs. Deline further suggested that the trail was not critical to the Mountains-to-Sea trail path and that other locations for a trail were more suitable. He noted that the trail forced him to install an unplanned fence for privacy and security. He contended that building the 8-foot-wide path would require removing protected trees. He stated that attempts to recuse a council member from the hearing would marginalize the voices of the constituents she was elected to represent. He stressed his favor of trails and indicated a willingness to press forward to find a more suitable solution.

Lucas Thomas, 7799 Panda Court, expressed concern for public safety and for potential increases in pedestrian and vehicle traffic in the area, citing limited space for parking for a trail located between the Ashford and Bear Creek developments. He objected to the lack of advance notice regarding the easement prior to its approval and to what he perceived as the disparagement of individuals seeking to ensure proper due process in its handling.

Dr. David Ehrmann, 6821 Koala Drive, stated his support for the closure of the easement based on the apparent mishandling of its processing. He urged the Board to consider the statements presented in favor of the easement's closure.

Opponents:

Anne Steele, 8927 Grove Park Drive, chair of the Oak Ridge MST Committee, spoke on the physical, mental, social and economic benefits of trails. While acknowledging that the trail was not currently a part of the MST trail, she stated that its inclusion was anticipated. She confirmed that the trail was buildable without requiring removal of any trees or major changes to the existing topography. She stressed that in the spirit of being a good neighbor, the committee had made offers to build fences or plant landscaping for privacy to affected property owners, offers which had not been accepted. She noted that the easement was legally recorded and its removal would be a disservice to the Town. She urged the Board to consider keeping the easement.

Jim Kinneman, 8502 Hollow River Court, asked the Board to recommend to Town Council that it retain the dedicated trail easement as it was a public asset that had been properly dedicated, legally recorded and intentionally placed to serve a long-term goal. He stressed the value of connectivity which the trail would provide and emphasized the positive impact trails would have on property values which is substantiated by national and local data. He contended that vacating a permanent public asset to resolve a private dispute would set an undesirable precedent and undermine the long-term vision of the Town's Land Use Plan.

Martha Pittman, 8018 Fogleman Road, concurred with Kinneman's contentions that the easement closure would set a dangerous precedent and undermine the integrity of the Town's zoning and development ordinances, as well as the Board's authority to interpret such ordinances. She believed the easement to have been lawfully donated and recorded and as such designated as a permanent right of access. She stated that contesting the permanent right of access of the easement could invite challenges to other legally sanctioned property rights and development approvals. She remarked that reopening the matter of the easement after its legal recording in August 2023 and after the January 2024 recommendation to keep it open would call into question the Board's credibility and impartial judgment.

Mike Kimel, 5601 Tanyard Court, spoke from personal experience on positive interactions with fellow hikers while on trails and on the natural beauty of trails in Oak Ridge. He stressed the planning and vision invested in trails and the connectivity they provide in the Town which directly impacts quality of life.

Terry Hammond, 1815 Oak Ridge Road, expressed her intent to donate a preservation easement to the Town and indicated that the reconsideration of rescinding a legally recorded easement gave her pause regarding the permanence and security of public assets. She stated that Councilwoman Lindsey Clark's recusal from the upcoming hearing would be appropriate given her personal involvement in the matter, citing Clark's lawsuit against the Town regarding the easement, the result of which could be influenced by the easement's closure.

Rebuttals in favor:

Jon Deline, 7796 Polar Drive, reemphasized his support for trails while advocating for the closure of the easement due to the apparent improper processing of its approval. He pointed out again that another route for the trail into Summerfield posed a better and safer alternative. He disputed the claim that no trees would be removed during the installation of the 8-foot-wide trail and invited Board members to walk the area with him to explore possible alternatives. He stressed the inadequacy of the trail's location, emphasizing its proximity to his own home, and argued that the people for whom the trail would offer connection to neighboring areas had voted unanimously against it. He advocated preserving trail connections elsewhere more amenable to safe and secluded natural areas where it would be less costly to build.

Rebuttals in opposition:

Jim Kinneman, 8502 Hollow River Court, stressed the importance of reestablishing connectivity within the Town to promote walkability over connectivity within the MST system.

Ben Walraven, 5931 Pepper Road, acknowledged the practical need for expanding trail infrastructure to support the Town's burgeoning growth, particularly in light of the rapid development occurring at the airport. He questioned the prudence of dedicating additional time to revisiting a matter that had already been decided.

Streck closed the public hearing.

Board Discussion:

Ron Simpson asked if the emails received prior to the hearing would be read into record. Sandra Smith, Assistant Town Manager/Town Clerk, advised that the Board had previously received and reviewed the emails and this constituted sufficient action to proceed.

Christy Leimone inquired into the process undertaken by the Board at the easement's first introduction for dedication. Simpson replied that the easement dedication had been a part of the subdivision's review and approval process which is a mechanical process to determine that all technical requirements by ordinance were in compliance. He added that the subdivision approval process is not a public hearing and clarified that the Parks & Recreation Advisory Board was not involved in any trail approval process. He commented that Council maintained a preference for trail easements to promote walkability. Taylor added that unlike a rezoning case which does require a public hearing and where certain standards for trail easements outlined in the ordinances must be met, this easement was being introduced into a RS-40 district which was a straightforward subdivision approval case.

Patrick Fiorentino asked for clarification whether trees would be removed to install the trail. Taylor responded that the MST Committee had deemed the trail feasible without necessitating any tree removal. Fiorentino added that while the easement approval had been processed legitimately in compliance with applicable rules, he encouraged broader dissemination of information in such matters to promote community awareness and input.

Clay Flynt cautioned against setting a precedent if the easement approval were to be reversed.

Vice Chair Patti Paslaru clarified that the easement case had been heard on two prior occasions by the P&Z Board and as a quasi-judicial hearing with the Board of Adjustment and that this was the third, not second, reconsideration of the easement. She stressed that the two prior decisions had resulted unanimously in the denial of easement closure and that no new evidence had been presented since these reviews other than the lawsuit currently being filed by newly elected Councilwoman Lindsey Clark. She pointed out that rules, if changed, should occur moving forward and not retroactively based on who is elected to Council. She emphasized the importance of

protecting property owners' rights while also upholding the spirit of neighborliness within the community.

Simpson reemphasized the danger of setting improper precedent by withdrawing an easement that had already been rightfully and lawfully deeded to the Town. He noted that the matter had been properly reviewed as a plot plan within a subdivision case, and that public comment would only have been permitted if Council elected to convene a public hearing, which it had the authority to do.

Streck pointed out that a landowner's right to choose what to do with his own property was a protected right. He stressed that the Board's responsibility was to ensure that land use ordinances and regulations were consistently applied in all cases and expressed disappointment at accusations suggesting mismanagement of cases. He expressed concerns about setting an improper precedent and the potential for financial loss to the Town, stating that had the dynamic of Council not changed recently, this case likely would not have been reopened.

Vice Chair Patti Paslaru made a motion to deny the public trail easement closing, and Patrick Fiorentino seconded the motion. The motion passed unanimously (6-0).

5. NEW BUSINESS

A. Election of Chair

Ron Simpson made a motion to nominate Jason Streck to continue as Chair of P&Z Board, and the vote was unanimous (6-0).

B. Election of Vice Chair

Chair Jason Streck made a motion to nominate Patti Paslaru to continue as Vice Chair of P&Z Board, and the vote was unanimous (6-0).

6. FEE SCHEDULE

Taylor suggested the Board study the current P&Z fees in anticipation of the upcoming review of the Fiscal Year 2026/27 budget. He explained that the fees were built to cover the Town's costs in conducting P&Z services such as subdivision and rezoning reviews and filing fees. He noted that the fees had not been revised in the past 14 years and provided an overview of comparative data from neighboring municipalities to place the Town's current fee structure in context. He stated that he would present a comprehensive analysis comparing the Town's fees with those of neighboring municipalities and offer recommendations for proposed fee adjustments for the Board's consideration at its next meeting.

7. PUBLIC COMMENTS

- Jim Kinneman, 8502 Hollow River Court, expressed gratitude.

- Ron Simpson reflected on the pros and cons of conducting public hearings for subdivision reviews, noting that the current practice of reviewing compliance of plot plans to ordinances and standards is a straightforward process.
- Sean Taylor clarified that the subdivision review process was a technical review conducted to ensure compliance with established ordinance standards and, as such, did not require public engagement. He explained that rezoning cases which included more complicated transitions to or from RPD or PDR rezonings involved subdivision reviews and were subjected to public hearings where public input was permitted.
- Jason Streck posited whether Council had the authority to allow public hearings during a subdivision technical review, which he stated is a statutory review. Patti Paslaru questioned if a public hearing of a subdivision case would need to be advertised. Sandra Smith responded that the Board had the authority to permit public comment at any point during case reviews; however, she noted that the Town attorney strongly discouraged this, since the case may not have been previously advertised and the public would not have been properly informed of the opportunity to provide input.

8. ADJOURNMENT

Vice Chair Patti Paslaru made a motion to adjourn the meeting at 8:12 p.m., and Patrick Fiorentino seconded. The motion passed unanimously (6-0).

Respectfully Submitted:

Sandra B. Smith, MMC, NCCMC
Assistant Town Manager / Town Clerk

Jason Streck
Chair