

Town of Starksboro
Development Review Board
Minutes (DRAFT)
October 8, 2026

Members Present: Ben Campbell (via Zoom), Evelyn Boardman, Rob Liotard, Tom Perry, Luke McCarthy (via zoom).

Members Not Present: Rich Warren, Arnell Paquette

Applicants Present: Bela Benitez

Visitors: Fabi Benitez, Cecilia Elwert

Others Present: Stephen Rooney, Zoning Administrator

Minutes Prepared by: Stephen Rooney on 10/12/2026

Meeting called to order by Vice Chair Evelyn Boardman at 6:33 pm

Changes to the Agenda:
None

Public Comment: None

Outstanding Minutes Review:

The minutes from the 9/10/26 meeting were reviewed and accepted without comment.

Hearing #26-DRB-06CU Benitez Sauna/Spa Conditional Use Review.

Introductions and Sign-in Sheet distributed.

C.Elwert asked about the definition of interested parties. S.Rooney noted that that status was available should she wish to appeal the decision, and that the full definition was provided on the back of the sign-in sheet. C.Elwert stated she did not wish to be considered an interested party.

Conditional Use Review Hearing opened at 6:37pm
Vice Chair Evelyn Boardman read the warning.

E.Boardman asked if there were any conflicts of interest or Ex parte communications. None were reported

E.Boardman swore in the applicants.

E.Boardman read the Exhibit List. There were no modifications.

Testimony:

B.Benitez read the project description and response to review criteria in Exhibit F.

C.Elwert asked if the business would operate year-round and charge a fee. B.Benitez responded yes to both questions.

E.Boardman asked how the business would be advertised. B.Benitez responded that it would be initially through word-of-mouth, and through a reservation system like AirBnB Services (not the rental system, but the service system).

E.Boardman asked if it was a steep path down to the river. B.Benitez responded no, the existing path winds down to the river.

C.Elwert asked if they had to do any work to the path and if there was any concern about erosion. B.Benitez responded that they had done some mulching, and if it became slippery they may need to address that. The applicant uses the trail regularly and doesn't believe the additional traffic will cause undue erosion.

C.Elwert asked why the maximum reservation was limited at two people. B.Benitez responded that it was due to the capacity of the sauna.

R.Liotard asked if there would be more than one group of two scheduled in a day. B.Benitez responded yes, there might be two groups with an hour or two break between them for cleaning and air-out the sauna.

C.Elwert asked about the location of the trail, and it was pointed out on the map in Exhibit G.

E.Boardman asked about the green masking edit on the map, B.Benitez responded it was an edit to remove a shower that was originally proposed, but that when they discussed the shower with the State it was considered wastewater and so they removed it to avoid regulatory complications, and the fact that the shower would not be available in the winter regardless.

C.Elwert asked about the new parking spaces. B.Benitez responded that they added these spaces where there used to be garden space by laying gravel. E.Boardman asked if these spaces were the primary parking on site. B.Benitez responded that the drive was U shaped with two access onto Route 17, and that there were a couple of parking spaces in front of the garage, but they normally used the garage for storage and parked in the tractor barn. S.Rooney confirmed that 4 spaces was the requirement and that the applicant had confirmed there was room for these spaces.

B.Campbell asked if the path from the sauna to the river required people to go back up and around as shown on the map. B.Benitez responded yes.

E.Boardman asked if the sauna was wood-fired. B.Benitez responded that it was electric.

C. Elwert asked if the applicant required the DRB to make an exception to the current or proposed zoning in this District. S.Rooney noted that a commercial recreation use was allowed with conditional use approval by the DRB in all districts except the FC and WS districts, and that the proposed zoning amendments being considered by the PC did not modify this.

S.Rooney noted that the original permit for the camp (Exhibit H) was for a private camp not used for rental or commercial purposes, and this CU review would amend that permit if approved.

S.Rooney reviewed the ZA review memo and technical analysis in Exhibit I. He noted that the sauna had been deemed exempt in a phone conversation between the applicant and a previous ZA when it was proposed and built in 2026. He noted that the correspondence the applicant has had with State regarding wastewater should be forwarded for the record and as a potential condition of the zoning permit. He noted that stream bank alteration was not allowed without a state permit, and that the new River Corridor bylaw allowed the existing trail to remain but that the stream had to be allowed to change the entrance naturally.

R.Liotard asked if guests' parking needs might overlap between reservations. B.Benitez responded no, they needed time to clean and air-out the sauna between guests, so this should not be an issue.

L.McCarthy voiced concern about the dangers of entering Route 17 at that location due to the speed of traffic in that area, and asked about options to ensure guests did not end up backing out onto the road. B.Campbell concurred, and asked for confirmation that guests would not be booked back-to-back, which might complicate traffic exiting the site. B.Benitez repeated that they would not have back-to-back bookings as they needed time to reset the facilities.

C.Elwert asked about whether the water levels in the creek were adequate. B.Benitez noted that there were a few places to sit, even if not fully submerged.

C.Elwert asked if there would be nude bathing. B.Benitez responded that there would be bathing suits, but was not sure about Vermont statute on this subject.

C.Elwert asked about Vermont statute on people traversing streams; as she understood the property boundary to follow the middle of the brook. B.Benitez noted that they did post the bank to notify folks in the stream about the status of the property off shore, but she understood the stream itself to have public access. S.Rooney noted he was not sure of the statute involved here. E.Boardman noted that she believed traverse the creek bed was allowed, and T.Perry noted that he believed this had not been clearly adjudicated.

C.Elwert noted that she was aware of knotweed on the property from when the Ryersbachs owned the parcel and was concerned that trail maintenance or use might spread this down to the creek. L.McCarthy concurred. B.Benitez noted that they had been taking using black tarps over these areas to curb the spread of this invasive species.

S.Rooney reviewed the six proposed conditions in the ZA review memo in Exhibit I.

Motion:

B.Campbell moved that the Board accept the application and testimony provided as meeting the requirements necessary to conduct the Conditional Use Review as set forth in the bylaws.

R.Liotard seconded.

Vote: All in favor.

T.Perry asked if the previous exemption of the camp in Permit 08-151-ZP (Exhibit H) needed to be addressed by the DRB to allow it to be used for commercial use. S.Rooney stated yes, the application requires the DRB to consider amending this permit and giving approval as part of this conditional use review.

Motion:

R.Liotard moved to close the hearing. B.Campbell seconded.

Vote: All in favor.

Motion:

R.Liotard moved to go into closed Deliberative Session. B.Campbell seconded.

Vote: All in favor.

The applicants were dismissed.

Closed Deliberation

Motion:

E.Boardman made a motion to adjourn at 8:35pm. T.Perry seconded. **Vote:** All in favor.