

**VILLAGE OF ESSEX JUNCTION
PLANNING COMMISSION
PUBLIC HEARING
MINUTES OF MEETING
DECEMBER 1, 2022
APPROVED JANUARY 19, 2023**

MEMBERS PRESENT: Phil Batalion, Chair (via Zoom); Patrick Scheld, Vice Chair; Diane Clemens; Scott McCormick; Elijah Massey (via Zoom).

ADMINISTRATION: Regina Mahony, City Manager.

OTHERS PRESENT: Nick Myer.

1. CALL TO ORDER

Phil Batalion called the meeting to order at 6:31 PM.

2. AGENDA ADDITIONS/CHANGES

None.

3. PUBLIC TO BE HEARD

a. Comments from Public on Items Not on Agenda

Nick Myer, Chair of the Essex Junction Tree Advisory Committee, expressed support for the new configuration of the City's Planning Commission and Development Review Board, and emphasized the importance of collaboration and communication with other committees, commissions, and City departments. He noted an outstanding question from a previous meeting about whether the City has a Tree Management Plan, and explained where the Plan can be found on the City's website. He also noted prior conversation about Stevens Park and said that he agrees that park improvements should be made to it. Planning Commission members reiterated that they did not intend for Stevens Park to be "developed" in the traditional sense. He spoke about future development and noted a requirement of the City that 2% of any new project's budget must be devoted to landscaping.

4. MINUTES

a. November 10, 2022

MOTION by PATRICK SCHELD, SECOND by SCOTT McCORMICK, to approve the minutes of November 10, 2022 as presented. VOTING: unanimous (5-0); motion carries.

5. BUSINESS ITEMS

a. Housing – Review and Discussion of the following:

- **Housing Needs Assessment:**

<https://www.essexvt.org/DocumentCenter/View/3588/Essex-Housing-Needs-Assessment-and-Action-Plan-PDF--2019>

- **Housing Data Profile:** <https://www.housingdata.org/profile/>

- **CCRPC Housing Dashboard:**

<https://ccrpc.maps.arcgis.com/apps/dashboards/0673704bdd9c4367b746effb6aea8e2>

Planning Commissioners shared their observations and thoughts around each of the above resources pertaining to housing in Essex Junction and the Chittenden County region.

Commissioner McCormick said he found it interesting that the housing needs assessment and housing data profile are compiled from census data rather than survey data. He also expressed concern about the rental situation in the Junction, in terms of scarcity, lack of affordability, and the paucity of resources in terms of rental support. He asked about whether the Planning Commission should pursue a rental ordinance and a rental registry. He also asked about assistance from volunteers in a “boots on the ground” fashion, suggesting that this could be a good fit for AmeriCorps volunteers.

Commissioner Batalion noted a statistic from one of the websites pertaining to the Vermont Housing Finance Agency (VHFA), and that 75% of all households that qualify for this assistance don't get any assistance. He asked whether VHFA and other resources need to be better communicated to the community, possibly through measures such as requiring property owners post information about VHFA in public areas of buildings. He also noted that COVID has affected the housing situation in Vermont, particularly in exacerbating the housing shortage. Commissioner Scheld said that in terms of outreach and communication about VHFA, COVID actually helped raise awareness of such resources. He noted that VHFA implemented the State's mortgage assistance and rental assistance programs and that additional assistance programs were stood up through federal American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funds.

Commissioner Clemens said that she isn't surprised that the rental market and supply are so tight and expressed concern about how expensive housing is. She asked how the housing databases are counting the number of residences and wondered whether some may be being double-counted. She said that in terms of the effects of COVID, more people are working from home or remotely rather than commuting. She said it would be interesting to know how many more residents are now working remotely than had worked remotely prior to the pandemic. She said that if there are more people at home during the day, the Planning Commission and City should think about ways to make neighborhoods more walkable and connected to the downtown center.

Commissioner Massey said that one key takeaway from the review of information on the current housing environment is that there is significant need both in terms of rentals and homes for purchase. He said he found the demographics in the Housing Needs Assessment interesting, in that trends are indicating that households are getting smaller and that the populations of 25-35-year-olds and the population of people aged 65-and-up are both increasing. He asked whether there are opportunities in terms of types of development that are attractive both to young people and older people who are looking to downsize. He said he is interested in further exploring demographic trends and their impact on housing needs, and would like to think about how the City can create spaces that are comfortable in multi-modal, non-car-centric ways. Commissioner Clemens noted that there has been much more senior housing approved in the Town of Essex than in the Junction. Nick Myer said that the housing crunch is desperate for some seniors, since they cannot find a facility that has availability and/or is affordable. Commissioner Scheld said that the difference in numbers between the Town and City in terms of available senior housing, rentals, and houses could be due to the Town having more available land for development. He asked how the City can encourage more senior housing. Commissioner Clemens noted that starter homes are also oftentimes good retirement homes, since they tend to be smaller and have fewer levels.

Commissioner Batalion said that one focus for him while reviewing information was how the Planning Commission could influence some of the key areas of need. He noted that the Housing Needs Assessment's action plan contained a number of items that the City has already worked on, including updating land use regulations, establishing a housing commission, establishing a housing trust fund, and reducing development fees (though he noted that the City increased theirs, because they were already the lowest in the region). He noted an action item around partnering with developers and non-profits, and asked who is currently facilitating that communication for the City in the absence of a community development director. He also noted that the land use regulation housing audit had number of recommendations that the City has addressed through updating its Land Development Code (LDC), such as streamlining the application approval process for developers, simplifying the Planned Use Development (PUD) process, reducing parking requirements, and addressing Accessory Dwelling Unit (ADU) regulations.

Commissioner McCormick noted a number of recommendations that connect with other topical areas the Planning Commission has identified as priorities, including increasing walkability, increasing business development, better communication between commissions/committees, public departments, and residents, and strategies around each of these. He also noted that one recommendation was to increase the number of housing units in the City by 800 by 2030. Commissioner Batalion said that the City is on a good track with some of these (particularly increasing the number of units and encouraging more business downtown), through the implementation of Design Five Corners and the Crescent Connector, as well as allowing duplexes and triplexes in more residential zoning districts.

City Manager Mahony said that an important component of much of this work is fostering a relationship and partnership between the developers in the community and other non-profit organizations, which haven't been as active in the community to date. She said that the City doesn't own much developable land and that they need to focus more on matching the developers in the community with the non-profit housing groups, in order to create economically-integrated, inclusionary developments. She said that the Planning Commission could think about what good first steps or proactive strategies could be around this. She also added that the City could try to access community development grants. Commissioner Scheld said that he would reach out to some contacts to begin a conversation between non-profit housing organizations and developers.

City Manager Mahony also noted briefly that Katie and Ned from the Housing Commission will come to the Planning Commission's January meeting to present on inclusionary zoning. She further noted that Katie will present on the Housing Trust Fund at the City Council's December 14 meeting.

The Planning Commission discussed the potential for implementing a rental registry in Essex Junction. Commissioner Scheld said that it might be prudent to work on that jointly with the Housing Commission. City Manager Mahony said that the City Council is definitely interested in the concept of a rental registry, as it relates to a broader conversation about code enforcement for the City. She noted that Burlington and Winooski have had registries for some time, and that in Winooski, she believes, annual renewals are required and inspections are conducted every three years. Nick Myer noted that the State has been contemplating creating a statewide rental registry. Commissioner Batalion asked if the rental registry would be codified in the LDC or if it would be in an ordinance. City Manager Mahony replied that it would be an ordinance, not in the zoning regulations. She said that the Planning Commission

could work on it and present it to the City Council, but that the Planning Commission wouldn't have the same ownership as they do with the LDC, for example.

City Manager Mahony walked through the Chittenden County Housing Dashboard, which is a database of all of the housing units in Chittenden County. Commissioner Scheld noted that Vermont has the second-oldest housing stock in the country, and said that some think that Act 250 has hindered more construction in the State. Commissioner Clemens added that municipal zoning was established around the same time and has also had an impact.

Commissioner Massey noted that a large proportion of the older population is choosing to age in place. He asked about any statewide programs to help with that. Commissioner Scheld noted that several counties or municipalities have initiatives (like HomeShare Vermont) that match individuals in need of housing with residents who are willing to open up their homes. He said he would be interested in developing materials pertaining to housing access resources (that include programs like HomeShare Vermont) for distribution around the community and on social media.

Commissioner Batalion noted several takeaways from this discussion, including engaging developers and non-profit housing organizations, working on community engagement around assistance, and looking into the rental registry regulations in Burlington and Winooski.

6. MEMBER UPDATES

None.

7. STAFF UPDATES

City Manager Mahony noted that the City is conducting second interviews with two candidates for the Community Development Director position, which will occur the week of December 12th. She also provided an update on the Railroad and Main building, noting that the business itself moved to Williston but that there has not yet been a property transfer nor has the property come into compliance with the conditions of the original approval.

8. ADJOURNMENT

**MOTION by DIANE CLEMENS, SECOND by PATRICK SCHELD, to adjourn the meeting.
VOTING: unanimous (5-0); motion carries.**

The meeting was adjourned at 8:14 P.M.

RScty: AACoonradt