

**VILLAGE OF ESSEX JUNCTION
PLANNING COMMISSION
MINUTES OF MEETING
JULY 6, 2023
FINAL**

MEMBERS PRESENT: Patrick Scheld, Vice-Chair; Diane Clemens; Scott McCormick; Elijah Massey
ADMINISTRATION: Chris Yuen, Community Development Director
OTHERS PRESENT:

1. CALL TO ORDER

Mr. Scheld called the meeting to order at 6:34 PM.

2. AGENDA ADDITIONS/CHANGES

None.

3. PUBLIC TO BE HEARD

a. Comments from Public on Items Not on Agenda

None.

4. MINUTES

a. June 8, 2023

MOTION by DIANE CLEMENS, SECOND by SCOTT MCCORMICK, to approve the minutes of June 8, 2023. Motion passed 3-0. Elijah Massey was not yet in attendance.

5. BUSINESS ITEMS

a. Community Vision and Strategic Action Plan RFP

Mr. Yuen gave a brief overview of the RFP, stating that it is intended to find out what residents want Essex Junction to look like. Ms. Clemens said that some of the things mentioned in the RFP no longer exist, such as the print newspaper and Farmer's Market. Mr. McCormick said that there were five proposals submitted. Mr. Scheld asked if the PC would be able to meet with the selected firm; Mr. Yuen said that he would try to schedule such an opportunity.

b. Land Development Code Amendments Public Engagement Summary

Mr. Yuen said that the survey received 217 responses. Of those responses, 206 lived in Essex Junction, and only 14 respondents indicated that they rented rather than owned their home. Many respondents had higher than average income. Mr. Yuen said that even though many respondents thought that some proposals (i.e., expanding duplex/triplexes) would not benefit their own families, they were good for the City as a whole. Ms. Clemens expressed concern about the lack of knowledge in some of the survey respondents and said that there could be some NIMY (not in my backyard) attitudes. Mr. McCormick said that this survey has a wealthier group of respondents than average, and that this may skew the results. Ms. Clemens noted that many participants spoke against "big box" stores. The opinions on parking were discussed, noting that many respondents felt that two vehicles are required for each household with two adults. Mr. Scheld said that he hopes that respondents will consider the use of public transit and other alternative transportation options. Mr. Yuen pointed out concerns about the

winter parking ban, and the limits that it put on residents during these months. Ms. Clemens said that it would be helpful to further communicate public parking locations, especially during the winter.

Mr. Yuen said that the transit-oriented-development (TOD) section of the project will focus on how best to use the transit resources that exist based on development projects. Ms. Clemens said that she thought that this study would look at the TOD district on Pearl Street and determine how it could be better used. She requested more information on this project, Mr. Yuen said that he would include this in the next meeting's packet. Regarding the survey, Mr. Yuen noted strong support for bike/walk and green infrastructure. Ms. Clemens said that some private businesses have been removing their bike racks, possibly due to fear over theft. Mr. Yuen said that this could possibly be addressed if there is a site plan amendment to an existing location or via enforcement if a bike rack was in the existing plan.

b. Rental Registry & Inspection Program

- Review first draft of Ordinance
- Goals and objectives of program
- Key policy choices to be made
- Getting feedback from Council

Mr. Yuen said that Winooski inspects both rental units and public buildings. He said that it would be helpful for Essex Junction to begin with just inspecting rental units. Ms. Clemens said that she believes that it is important to focus on public safety and ensuring that safety codes are enforced. The PC discussed the role of a fire inspector, and when one would be required. Mr. Yuen suggested keeping the titles listed in the document as more general to allow for staff flexibility. Mr. Scheld said that renters tend to be the most marginalized, and the least able to negotiate for the safety of their living spaces. He suggested using federal housing guidelines as a starting point and said that any household that receives a housing voucher is required to live in a property that meets HUD standards. Mr. Massey asked the PC if they felt that it is important to also include short-term rentals in this ordinance. Mr. Scheld said that it would be helpful to see how many short-term rentals are in the community. Mr. Yuen said that the City Council has requested that the PC consider this issue as well. Ms. Clemens said that she feels that it is important to look at all rentals, not just long-term units, and Mr. Massey said that doing such would help to create confidence in the rental quality in the City.

Answering a question from Mr. McCormick, Mr. Yuen said that the minimum housing standards would be derived from the Vermont Rental Housing Health Code. Mr. Yuen said that it is important to clarify the goals and objectives of the program, key policy choices that need to be made, and when the PC feels they will be ready to get feedback from the City Council. Ms. Clemens said that an amendment needs to be made to the current code to detail enforcement for the rental registry. The City Council would need to amend Chapter 9 of the existing code, as it references the police department handling inspections.

Mr. McCormick asked what the next steps would be to submit this document to the City Council. Mr. Yuen said that he could make the staff edits but suggested that the PC work on the purpose and objective section during the current meeting. Mr. Scheld suggested including verbiage stating that this code is intended to enforce the Vermont Rental Registry Health Code, ensuring that the regular inspection of these units occur. He also said that it would be helpful for the City to have some financial resources to assist smaller landlords' funds to fix property issues. Mr. McCormick said that he did not think that the program itself would have these funds, but that it would be helpful to identify outside sources of funds.

Ms. Clemens recommended that there be some type of restrictions to ensure that the landlords are in need of these funds, similar to the recreation scholarships. Mr. Yuen suggested verbiage in the statement of purpose stating that it is intended to connect landlords to necessary resources.

Mr. McCormick suggested that the following be included as objectives, but noted that the specific wording may still need to be adjusted:

- Develop inventory of residential rental properties in Essex Junction.
- Ensure the adequate life and safety of all residential rental properties.
- Improve opportunities to connect landlords to adequate resources for improving their properties.

All indicated their support for these objectives.

Mr. McCormick said that he estimated that it will take over a year to create the registry, and asked if landlords should be charged during this time. He also expressed concern that one person would not be able to conduct all the inspections required. Mr. Yuen said that he believes that the rental schedule can be flexible and suggested a rough estimate of one inspection every four years. The pros and cons of a randomized inspection schedule were discussed, as well as the ability of tenants to call in requests for inspections. More frequent inspections could be conducted for problematic properties. Mr. Massey suggested leaving the language of the ordinance intentionally vague. Mr. McCormick suggested utilizing the Grand List to gain information on which properties were rented. Mr. Yuen will work to summarize what was said at this meeting and determine where guidance is needed. He will bring forth a revised ordinance for the next meeting. Ms. Clemens said that she would like to know what the City Council felt on the potential changes. Mr. Yuen suggested that the PC formally present to the City Council this fall.

6. READING FILE

a. Nothing this month

7. MEMBERS UPDATES

Ms. Clemens said that the Vermont League of Cities and Towns has video resources on rental registries.

8. STAFF UPDATES

a. City Office operational changes

Mr. Yuen said that the City Office is now open, and the Clerk's Office has moved in.

b. Vermont Department of Housing and Community Development "Homes for All" pilot community application

Mr. Yuen said that Essex Junction was not selected for this opportunity. The LDC updates are now live on the website and are screen-reader friendly. Ms. Clemens suggested that this be more easily accessible on the website and that it be further publicized. Mr. Yuen said that applications for the City Planner position are open. The next Planning Commission is tentatively scheduled for August 10.

9. ADJOURN

MOTION by ELIJAH MASSEY, SECOND by DIANE CLEMENS, to adjourn the meeting at 8:54 PM. Motion passed 4-0.

Respectfully submitted,

Darby Mayville