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**CITY OF ESSEX JUNCTION
CITY COUNCIL
REGULAR MEETING
MINUTES OF MEETING
January 22, 2025**

COUNCILORS PRESENT: Raj Chawla, President; Amber Thibeault; Vice President; Tim Miller, Clerk; Marcus Certa, Elaine Haney.

ADMINISTRATION: Regina Mahony, City Manager; Jess Morris, Finance Director; Chris Yuen, Community Development Director.

OTHERS PRESENT: Diane Clemens, Steve Eustis, Piper Goodkind, Elena Juodisius, Scott McCormick, Elijah Massey, Kirstie Paschall, George, Jeanne.

1. **CALL TO ORDER**

City Council President Chawla called the meeting to order at 6:30 P.M.

2. **AGENDA ADDITIONS/CHANGES**

City Council President Chawla request moving Consent Item #6a to be Business Item #5e.

3. **APPROVE AGENDA**

City Council President Chawla made a motion, seconded by Councilor Haney, to approve the agenda as amended. The motion passed 5-0.

4. **PUBLIC TO BE HEARD**

None.

5. **BUSINESS ITEMS**

a. *Interview and Consideration of Recreation Advisory Committee Youth Member

The City Council interviewed Piper Goodkind for a seat on the Recreation Advisory Committee as a youth member. She spoke briefly about her background and interest in serving on the Committee. Councilors asked questions of the candidate, and she was given the opportunity to ask questions of the Council.

b. Discussion and Consideration of Land Development Code Amendments – Introduction and Warn Public Hearing

Community Development Director Yuen and members of the Planning Commission began the discussion of the latest round of proposed Land Development Code (LDC) amendments. City Council President Chawla noted that the Council would like to hold off on the portion of the LDC that deals with sandwich board signs, so that they can discuss it further at a February City Council meeting and involve business owners and other stakeholders in that discussion. Councilor Thibeault asked for background on the proposed language in 714 related to marquee signs. Commissioner Massey began by noting that much of the language in the proposed amendments aligns with regulatory language from other municipalities, such as Burlington. Director Yuen noted that the proposed amendments are based on what kind of land uses are allowed in each of the zoning districts. City Council President Chawla asked if marquee signs could be used by businesses other than theaters, and Director Yuen replied that this type of sign could be used by any business that meets the dimensional requirements, and that it would be subject to design review by the Development Review Board (DRB). Councilor Thibeault asked about the string lighting requirement in section 704 and Commissioner Massey replied that in the context of the LDC, string lights generally mean white lights used to illuminate outdoor spaces such as patios and restaurant seating, and Director Yuen noted that if the string lights are for commercial use they should be switched off after close of business, but if they are for residential use, they should be turned off after 10:00 PM. Councilor Thibeault asked about any discussion related to electronic message board signs, and Director Yuen replied that the LDC allows for electronic message board signs for municipal use. Councilor Thibeault asked about discussion related to projecting signs in section 714, and

56 Director Yuen replied that the regulation distinguishes between blade signs and larger projecting signs, which
57 are useful for larger multi-story buildings, and that the City doesn't currently have any projecting signs.
58

59 Councilor Certa asked how the City's regulations deem whether lighting is intrusive or not. Commissioner
60 Massey replied that the Planning Commission has largely based requirements on lived experience rather
61 than a quantitative limit such as wattage to determine whether lighting is intrusive. Director Yuen added that
62 the LDC contains requirements about internally illuminated signs and how bright they can be, though they
63 have not yet had to issue a violation for this. He noted that any large establishments would be required to go
64 through a site plan application to make any changes, and that there is a lighting plan component to this which
65 details how intensely individual lights can be lit. Councilor Certa noted a focus in state statute on maximizing
66 density in already-dense areas, and asked whether the City has a clear sense of what the maximum density
67 would look like. Commissioner Juodisius replied that there was public feedback on this, given the new
68 allowance of fourplexes in single-family zoned districts, but she noted that lot coverage, height limits, parking
69 requirements, and setback requirements all still apply, which limits the amount of infill that could occur.
70 Director Yuen also added that though four-plexes are now treated like duplexes in that they don't require a
71 lighting plan for approval, there are still strict requirements on the type of lights that can be installed, such as
72 maintaining dark sky compliance.
73

74 City Council President Chawla asked about requirements for temporary food trucks, such as business hours,
75 generator requirements, and location requirements. Director Yuen replied that allowing for a very temporary
76 food truck (up to 30 days) was a compromise, but there hadn't been lengthy discussion about other
77 requirements for temporary food trucks. He noted that temporary food trucks are not allowed in residential
78 zoning districts, but only where eating and drinking establishments are already allowed.
79

80 Councilor Certa asked whether existing businesses were considered when discussing the impact of string
81 lights downtown. Commissioner Massey replied that yes, several sites were part of the string light discussion,
82 and the proximity of a number of restaurants downtown to a number of residential complexes is what informed
83 the 10:00 PM recommended shut-off time for those types of lights. Councilor Certa noted that string lights
84 can help play a role in safety for parking lots at night, and asked whether a waiver of that 10:00 PM cut-off
85 time would be possible in certain circumstances. Commissioner Massey noted that there are numerous
86 options for safe walkways and safe pedestrian transportation corridors that don't include string lights. City
87 Council President Chawla suggested outreaching to the businesses in question in this discussion and ask
88 them to speak to how these proposed amendments would impact their business. Director Yuen noted that
89 prior to these proposed amendments, string lights were not permitted in the LDC because they are not dark
90 sky compliant, and noted that this wasn't written to be a major change relative to the existing regulations.
91

92 The following public comments were received:

- 93 • Steven Eustis asked whether a requirement could be included in the LDC to require a small amount
94 of public spaces in setbacks, not just 5- or 6-foot-wide sidewalks and then a wall in front of a building
95 (for example), as this presents certain accessibility issues to building fronts. Director Yuen replied
96 that there are no explicit requirements in the LDC that ground level storefronts need to be at the same
97 level as the sidewalk, and that he has asked the Transit-Oriented Development (TOD) Master Plan
98 consultants to look into this further.
99

100 Councilor Thibeault said she would like to remove the marquee and projecting sign sections of these
101 amendments, given that Essex Junction is a small city and she doesn't see those types of signs in this
102 community. Councilor Certa said he would also like to have clarity on requirements around political signs.
103 Director Yuen replied that for the projecting and marquee signs, removing this from the amendments won't
104 have an immediate impact because none of these sign types exist in the Junction currently. He noted that
105 there could be impacts in the future if (for example) shopping centers are developed downtown. Councilor
106 Thibeault said she would be amenable to removing those sections for now but revisiting it when amendments
107 related to the TOD work are brought forward. Councilor Certa agreed about removing them for now.
108 Councilors Miller and Haney said they would not be in favor of removing marquee and projecting sign
109 amendments from the proposal. City Council President Chawla said he would be in favor of waiting until the
110 public hearing on the LDC amendments to make a decision on whether those amendments should include

111 the marquee and projecting sign regulations. He also said he would like to see the cut-off time for food trucks
112 to mirror that of the noise ordinance (10:00 PM), with an exception for the Champlain Valley Fair events.
113 Other Councilors agreed with this. Councilors also agreed to leave the string lighting language as proposed
114 and take public comment on it during the public hearing related to the LDC amendments. Director Yuen
115 clarified that for election period signs, they are permitted up to 60 days before the election and must be
116 removed no later than 3 days after the election, and that public rights-of-way are available for election period
117 signs two weeks prior to an election (which is aligned with surrounding municipalities). City Council President
118 Chawla also added that the sandwich board sign language should be left in the proposal, but the references
119 should be modified.

120
121 **City Council President Chawla made a motion, seconded by Councilor Haney, that the City Council**
122 **warn the Land Development Code Amendments as discussed, including the proposed changes made**
123 **during this meeting, for a public hearing on February 12, 2025. The motion passed 5-0.**
124

125 c. Discussion and Consideration of the Fiscal Year 2026 General Fund Budget and Warn Budget Public
126 Hearing

127 City Manager Mahony began by noting that the changes between the initial version and this second version
128 of the General Fund budget for FY26 have resulted in a 2% (\$287,887) increase over FY25's GF budget,
129 and is supported by a tax rate increase of 1.5%. She also noted updates to the enterprise fund budgets,
130 saying that they will continue to change in the next several months as more FY25 experience comes in. She
131 further noted more information about the unassigned fund balance and approaches to more proactively build
132 it up. She said that while 15% is best practice, the City/Village has been at around 7% for the last number of
133 years, and staff are comfortable with not requiring a fund balance of 15% and continuing to prioritize
134 budgeting for capital needs. She also noted that the Council has the ability to reassign funds in an emergency,
135 or enter into a short-term borrowing agreement. She then spoke about the \$25,000 to fund a shared equity
136 policy advisor through CCPRC, noting that these funds were included in Winooski's budget, but not in South
137 Burlington, Essex, or Shelburne's budgets. She said that she will follow up with counterparts in Winooski and
138 at CCRPC on next steps. She provided an update on the EJRP facilities study, saying that while a ten-year
139 Master Plan is needed, there is more immediate need for a multi-purpose gym space and that it may be most
140 practical to plan for this in FY26 along with a Public Works building bond. She spoke about the timing of the
141 loader and sweeper replacements in the rolling stock capital plan, saying that they were both able to be
142 moved up a year (FY28 and FY29, respectively). She also noted that delaying the purchase of a command
143 vehicle for the Fire Department would make no practical difference on moving up the timing for the loader
144 and sweeper. Councilor Haney provided an update on her conversation with GBIC. She spoke about GBIC's
145 value to Essex Junction, primarily in support of Global Foundries. She said she would recommend funding
146 the GBIC line in the budget, given that GBIC also provides support to the broader Chittenden County area.
147

148 City Manager Mahony spoke about the community meal event that will take place on Saturday, January 25,
149 at which City staff will present the proposed budget. She said that any edits from Councilors tonight will be
150 incorporated into the version that is presented on Saturday.

151
152 Councilor Haney said she would be in favor of creating a line item in the budget to continue to grow the
153 unassigned fund balance. She suggested setting aside 1% of the budget each year to include in the
154 unassigned fund balance until the balance reaches 15% (which would take ten years). Councilor Miller noted
155 that several unions are entering into contract negotiations this year, which will lead to large increases in
156 salaries that the City has no control over. He said that while Essex Junction's budget increase this year is
157 moderate, there may be strong future headwinds to contend with. He said he would be in favor of trying to
158 move the replacement of the loader and sweeper up sooner, given that they may be costly to repair if they
159 break down. Councilor Certa said that he would like to have an understanding of EJRP's total needs (through
160 a facilities study). City Manager Mahony noted that EJRP is able to be relatively nimble in terms of its
161 programming and that focusing first on a multi-purpose gym space will not be to the detriment of developing
162 an overarching, holistic plan. Councilor Certa asked if anything regarding GBIC has changed between last
163 year and this year, given that the City did not fund its GBIC line last year. Councilor Haney replied that this
164 primarily had to do with the makeup of the Council last year, as well as the perception that GBIC caused the
165 departure of several businesses from Essex Junction. City Council President Chawla noted that he also

166 challenged GBIC to diversify their board last year, and said that they have since made improvements in that
 167 regard. Councilor Certa asked about the funding for the senior center and where it is within the budget.
 168 Finance Director Morris replied that it is not part of the General Fund but in its own separate fund, which was
 169 raised through fees or revenues specifically for senior programming. She noted that adult programming is
 170 included in the General Fund. All Councilors thanked staff for presenting a lean budget.
 171

172 Councilors continued to discuss potential changes to the budget. They discussed Councilor Haney’s proposal
 173 for a separate line item to increase funding for the unassigned fund balance. City Council President Chawla
 174 said he would be open to it, and would like to obtain public input on it during public hearings and the budget
 175 presentation. Councilors Certa said he would also be open to it, given the upcoming community discussion
 176 around the budget. Councilor Thibeault said she would be open to include it as a line item, but asked for
 177 staff’s opinion. City Manager Mahony said that the Council can increase the General Fund to include this line
 178 item at its discretion. She cautioned that utility rates are also increasing, but the exact number is not yet
 179 known. Finance Director Morris said she would be supportive of this additional line item. Councilors
 180 discussed moving up the replacement of the sweeper and loader, and Finance Director Morris noted that it
 181 would require another \$200,000 to \$400,000 transfer from the General Fund into rolling stock in order to
 182 move those replacements up. Councilors supported including the GBIC line item in the budget.
 183

184 **Councilor Haney made a motion, seconded by City Council President Chawla, to set the public**
 185 **hearing on the FY26 Budget as amended this evening for Wednesday, February 12, 2025 at 6:30 P.M.**
 186 **The motion passed 5-0.**
 187

188 d. Consideration of Council Member Appointments to Governance Committee
 189

190 **City Council President Chawla made a motion, seconded by Councilor Miller, to appoint Elaine Haney**
 191 **and Marcus Certa to the Governance Committee until the completion of the outlined work, or by**
 192 **November 1, 2025. Member terms will last for the duration of the Committee’s existence. The motion**
 193 **passed 5-0.**
 194

195 e. Approve Meeting Minutes: January 8, 2025
 196

197 City Council President Chawla noted that the spelling of Steve Eustis’s name should be corrected on Line
 198 216.
 199

200 **City Council President Chawla made a motion, seconded by Councilor Haney, to accept the minutes**
 201 **as amended. The motion passed 5-0.**
 202

203 **6. CONSENT ITEMS**

- 204 a. Approve Meeting Minutes: January 8, 2025 **now Business Item #5e**
- 205 b. Acting as the Cannabis Control Commission Approval Passion Fruit Farms Tier 1 Indoor Cultivation
- 206 License Renewal
- 207 c. Approve Submittal of Certificate of Highway Mileage
- 208 d. Approve Appeal Submittal of 2024 Equalization Study Rates
- 209 e. Approve Amtrak RFQ Award
- 210 f. Approve Stevens Park Grant Application
- 211 g. Approve Memorial Park Policy Updates
 212

213 **Councilor Haney made a motion, seconded by City Council President Chawla, to approve the consent**
 214 **agenda as presented. The motion passed 5-0.**
 215

216 **7. COUNCILOR COMMENTS & CITY MANAGER REPORT:** City Manager Mahony noted the community
 217 lunch event on Saturday January 25 at 11:30 A.M. at Champlain Valley Expo, that a number of community
 218 members and organizations will be present, and that the FY26 proposed budget will be presented.
 219

220 **8. READING FILE**

- a. Check Warrant #24066 01/10/2025
- b. City Charter with Changes as Approved by the Legislature in 2024
- c. 2024 K9 Nova Review
- d. Community Justice Center Funding Support Letter
- e. Bike Walk Advisory Committee Minutes 01/09/2025

9. **EXECUTIVE SESSION**

- a. *An Executive Session may be needed to discuss the Appointment of Public Officials

City Council President Chawla made a motion, seconded by Councilor Haney, that the City Council enter into executive session to discuss the appointment of public officials, pursuant to 1 V.S.A. § 313(a)(3) to include the City Manager. The motion passed 5-0.

City Council President Chawla made a motion, seconded by Councilor Miller, to exit executive session. The motion passed 5-0 at 9:33 P.M.

City Council President Chawla made a motion, seconded by Councilor Miller, to appoint Piper Goodkind and Oona Osbourne to the Recreation Advisory Committee with terms expiring on June 30, 2026. The motion passed 5-0.

10. **ADJOURN**

City Council President Chawla made a motion, seconded by Councilor Haney, to adjourn the meeting. The motion passed 5-0 at 9:35 P.M.

Respectfully Submitted,
Amy Coonradt