

**CITY OF ESSEX JUNCTION
PLANNING COMMISSION REGULAR MEETING
CITY COUNCIL SPECIAL MEETING
MINUTES OF MEETING
FEBRUARY 6, 2025
DRAFT**

PLANNING COMMISSIONERS PRESENT: Diane Clemens, Chair; Scott McCormick, Vice-Chair; Elena Juodisius; Elijah Massey, Kirstie Paschall

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

ADMINISTRATION: Regina Mahoney, City Manager; Chris Yuen, Community Development Director

OTHERS PRESENT: Greg Morgan, Jim Waite

1. CALL TO ORDER

Mr. Chawla called the City Council meeting to order at 6:31 PM.

Ms. Clemens called the Planning Commission 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

None.

4. MINUTES

a. Planning Commission: January 14, 2025

MOTION by SCOTT MCCORMICK, seconded by ELIJAH MASSEY, to approve the minutes of January 14, 2025, with corrections. Motion passed 5-0.

Corrections:

-On page 2, “churches” should be changed to “places of worship.”

5. BUSINESS ITEMS

a. Update on Connect the Junction TOD Master Plan

Mr. Yuen said that this project has been paused due to federal funding uncertainties. The “big ideas” report has been presented by the consultant and the draft plan could be requested in its current form if necessary. Mr. Chawla said that the cost for finishing this document could be investigated and proposed that funds be added to the budget for this purpose. Mr. Yuen said that the TOD Master Plan is intended to shape other regulations, including the Land Development Code, zoning bylaws, and capital project prioritization. Mr. Chawla suggested that this meeting be rescheduled for 6-8 weeks in the future after the funding situation is clarified.

b. Discussion on the regulation on sandwich boards

Mr. Yuen presented a slide comparing existing regulations to the proposed sandwich board regulations. Major differences include a change clarifying that sandwich board signs must be no closer than 12 feet from other sandwich board signs. The size of the sign and the regulation that signs must only be out

during business hours remain the same. Mr. Chawla said that he would prefer that sandwich board signs be removed entirely and suggested that sandwich board regulations sunset after a year or two. He said that there is no consistent enforcement on this issue. He also suggested that there be stricter standards of what “open” means in the context of modern businesses and spoke of the visual clutter that sandwich boards create. Ms. Haney said that Essex Junction does little for the business community, and that allowing sandwich boards is something small that can be done to support them. Mr. Massey said that the Planning Commission (PC) has received feedback encouraging them to be lenient regarding sandwich board signage. Mr. Certa said that inconsistent enforcement is more problematic and suggested that economic development as a whole and enforcement priorities be examined. Ms. Thibeault said that sandwich boards are being used for marketing purposes and spoke of the aesthetic improvement that occurred when the signs were removed after recent enforcement. Mr. Chawla said that the City could assist business owners with some of the funds involved with shifting away from sandwich board signs and prioritizing the signage needs of the businesses that are more hidden from view.

Mr. McCormick discussed volunteer mobilization for economic development and said that more needs to be done to promote local businesses. Mr. Certa said that collaboration should occur between developers and city officials regarding housing and economic development. Ms. Mahoney discussed minimal staff capacity to take on new initiatives. She also said that it is important to define when businesses are considered to be open and discussed the difficulties in determining if a business is more hidden in the context of content neutral signage.

Regarding the sunset of sandwich board signs, Ms. Mahoney said that this has been done in other communities. Mr. Yuen said that, if there are any changes to the warned version of the Land Development Code, it will push out adoption by a month. Mr. Chawla said that more communication and education needs to be done regarding bringing signs in during non-business hours and said that potential ticketing could be done after warnings. Mr. Certa discussed light-up signage, stating that the CVE sign contains images which appear to not be allowed by the current regulations. Ms. Mahoney said that this will be reviewed by staff. Mr. Miller suggested that rear-facing or non-streetside businesses be allowed signage, not to exceed one per complex. Ms. Thibeault said that, after an hour of discussion, no decision was made. She suggested leaving the LDC as previously warned, and to continue the discussion and allow staff to do more research. All agreed.

c. Discussion on the Comprehensive Plan topics of focus

Mr. Yuen shared a list of topics that need to be included in the Comprehensive Plan and said that the existing plan will expire in August of 2027. He would like to apply for a municipal planning grant to do additional public engagement. The Comprehensive Plan should align with the 2024 Community Vision and Strategic Action Plan. He suggested that the following be areas of focus in the Comprehensive Plan: housing, future land use map, energy planning, economic development and transportation connectivity. Mr. Yuen said each community in Vermont will receive municipal housing targets. He detailed the number of units permitted, built, and lost per year in Essex Junction. He asked the City Council if there are any other topics that the PC should incorporate into this document.

Ms. Mahoney said that the plan needs to be updated as the current plan was written prior to separation with the Town of Essex. Ms. Clemens suggested that the building story limit be decided upon with this plan. Mr. Chawla said that creative development could be implemented utilizing buffers and said that the results of the Connect the Junction project should help to determine this. Mr. McCormick described his

work on climate resiliency and said that the state may be preparing a framework for incorporating climate adaptation into municipal planning. Ms. Clemens described the Comprehensive Plan as a vision for the community and said that it is important to begin to engage volunteers now to develop it. Ms. Haney said that human services has not been included in the plan, and said that this is a key part of what makes the community livable. Mr. Chawla discussed the connection between community services and affordable housing. Mr. McCormick suggested developing a timeline for this project. Ms. Mahoney said that the project should take around two years from start to finish. Mr. Chawla suggested getting a subgroup together quarterly to check in. He also said that renewable energy is something that he would like to include in this plan.

Mr. Yuen said the Community Development Department is interested in applying for the Downtown Transportation Fund grant of \$200,000 for the Essex Junction Multimodal Train and Bus Station. This is a non-federal grant and thus could be put towards Essex Junction's \$750,000 local share for the previously awarded Federal Consolidated Rail Infrastructure and Safety Improvements Program grant. Ms. Mahoney discussed the lack of clarity regarding federal funding but said that the only way that Essex Junction has a chance to use the money is to keep moving forward.

ELANA JUODISIUS made a motion, seconded by SCOTT MCCORMICK that the Planning Commission recommend applying for the Downtown Transportation Fund grant for the Essex Junction Multimodal Train and Bus Station Improvements Project. Motion passed 5-0.

TIM MILLER made a motion, seconded by ELAINE HANEY, that that the City Council adopt the "Municipal Resolution for Downtown Transportation Fund" as presented. Motion passed 5-0.

6. MEMBERS UPDATES

Mr. McCormick said that he is a member of the Essex Rotary, and that they have around \$4,000 to spend on environmental projects. He would like to see if any of the municipalities that the Essex Rotary represents would like to use some of these funds to assist with community education. Mr. Massey discussed the Animating Infrastructure grant and said that he will be attending an applicant meeting next week. He's looking for ideas for public art installations.

7. STAFF UPDATES

None.

8. ADJOURN

RAJ CHAWLA made a motion, seconded by ELAINE HANEY, to adjourn. Motion passed 5-0 at 8:36 PM.

SCOTT MCCORMICK made a motion, seconded by ELIJAH MASSEY, to adjourn the meeting. Motion passed 5-0 at 8:36 PM.

Respectfully submitted,
Darby Mayville