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**CITY OF ESSEX JUNCTION
CITY COUNCIL
REGULAR MEETING
MINUTES OF MEETING
June 12, 2024**

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, Harlan Smith, Interim Building Coordinator; Ashley Snellenberger, Director of Communications and Strategic Initiatives;

OTHERS PRESENT: John Alden, David Beurle, Luke Brockmeier, Christina Corodimas, Drew Darrow, Ken Linge, Scott McCormick, Bridget Meyer, John O'Brien, Kirstie Paschall, Marlon Verasamy, Resa.

1. **CALL TO ORDER**

City Council President Chawla called the meeting to order at 6:30 P.M. He said that in previous City Council meetings members of the public have made racist and anti-Semitic comments and that these comments have disrupted presentations that were made during the public comment period. He said that the City Council does not condone such language and opposes it. He said that such comments are deeply harmful and are entirely inconsistent with the community's values. He said that while it is not possible to prevent harmful speech during public comments, the Council will continue to condemn such comments publicly.

2. **AGENDA ADDITIONS/CHANGES**

City Manager Mahony proposed moving the executive session #5g up to #5d. City Council President Chawla requested moving the tax sale policy from the Consent Item #6b to be Business Item #5h.

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**

a. Comments from public on items not on the agenda

Bridget Meyer spoke about sign on the corner of Railroad Street and Main Street, saying that it previously had had a clock in it but now is derelict and does not look appealing. She suggested that the City could take it down, that the City could replace the clock space with a painting in the sign, or the City could replace the clock.

John O'Brien commended the summary of last month's meeting that Councilor Miller posted on Front Porch Forum, saying that the summary was comprehensive and engaging. He said that in the current climate, it is wonderful and vital to see that level of engagement with the public.

5. **BUSINESS ITEMS**

a. Vermont Bond Bank Presentation

Ken Linge of the Vermont Bond Bank presented on this item, saying that it provides an overview of the financial benchmark assessment and Essex Junction's current position and debt capacity. He began by listing the various bond bank programs available in the state, which include a pooled loan program, state revolving funds, other lending programs related to flexible loan funds, energy projects, and flood recovery, and support and technical assistance for capital planning and debt capacity purposes. He outlined advantages and considerations for each type of loan program. He spoke about how the Bond Bank can support renewable energy and energy efficiency projects, including leveraging federal funding. Councilor Certa asked if these loans could help the City develop a weatherization program, and Mr. Linge replied that

56 the Bond Bank isn't able to make loans to the private sector or residents, but to governments. He outlined
57 an illustrative timeline, noting that applications to the Bond Bank are typically due in December and May,
58 with funding available at the end of February or July. He spoke about the financial assessment component,
59 saying that they follow the same commonly used national methodologies for assessing credit. He said they
60 look at operating ratios and debt ratios and compare them to benchmarks and medians for other similar
61 municipalities.

62
63 Mr. Linge spoke about debt observations on governmental activities specific to Essex Junction. He said that
64 a strong cash position implies liquidity if expenses or revenues differ significantly from projected amounts.
65 He said that the government's actual long-term debt to value, long-term debt per capita, and annual debt
66 service on the governmental actual long-term debt as a percentage of the budget are well below the Vermont
67 medians. He said that adding new debt stresses ratios, though not the government actual long-term debt to
68 value when compared to Moody's. He said that the local economics appear quite healthy, even though the
69 municipal tax rate is 86% above the Vermont median. He said that quality capital planning and reserve fund
70 management suggests that there is capacity for effectively scheduling projects and distributing the impacts
71 of new debt. He said that this indicates an ability and willingness to cover debt service. He spoke about local
72 economic and social indicators, including population growth and household incomes.

73
74 Mr. Linge then spoke about operating ratios and debt ratios for the City's enterprise funds. He noted that it
75 appears that in the Water Fund, there is enough excess revenue to cover operating costs and debt service.
76 He said that operating margins for the Water Fund are tight and there is limited unrestricted revenue
77 available, though the days cash on hand is higher than the Vermont median. He said that there is a debt
78 service coverage ratio that is greater than 1.25x, which indicates that there is immediate debt capacity. He
79 said that the debt service to budget and debt to revenues is well below the Vermont median. He then spoke
80 about the Wastewater Fund and its takeaways. He said that the operating margin is in line with the Vermont
81 median, that there are health reserves, that the debt service coverage ratio is too low to have additional debt
82 capacity at this time without increasing revenue, and that debt to assets, debt to revenues, and debt service
83 to budget are all well above the median. He then spoke about the Sanitation Fund and the assessment
84 takeaways. He said that the operating margin is below the Vermont median, that there are healthy reserves,
85 that the debt service coverage ratio is high enough to incur immediate additional debt capacity, that the debt
86 to assets, debt to revenues, and debt service to budget are all well below the median, signaling additional
87 debt capacity. He said that for all enterprise funds, quality capital planning and reserve fund management
88 suggests that there is capacity for effectively scheduling projects and distributing the impacts of new debt.

89
90 Mr. Linge noted that the financial benchmark assessment isn't a guarantee of funding or a loan approval but
91 is information and guidance about capacity. He stressed the importance of capital planning.

92
93 b. Discussion and Consideration of the 2 Lincoln Renovation

94 Interim Building Coordinator Smith provided an overview of the current status of the 2 Lincoln renovation
95 project. He said that the goal is to renovate the building to house municipal staff for the City. He spoke about
96 how the City awarded the Construction Manager contract to Bread Loaf Corporation in September of 2023,
97 and that they now have 100% designs. He said that they have put much of the work out to bid and that Bread
98 Loaf worked to develop alternates 1, 2, and 3 for the Council's consideration for inclusion in the scope of the
99 project. He said that alternate 1 is the vaulted ceiling in the lobby to keep the character of the age of building,
100 and that the total was \$38,900. He said that staff left alternate 1 out of the proposed project but have included
101 alternates 2 and 3, which are the vestibule and teen center space, respectively. He said that staff met with
102 the architect team on Monday June 10 and confirmed that the cost estimates for the project are accurate
103 (\$2,883,888 for the project plus \$294,690 for alternates 2 and 3). He noted that the City has \$2,638,336 of
104 available funding earmarked for the project, and that staff would like the Council to weigh in on several of the
105 proposed options for accommodating the shortfall.

106
107 City Manager Mahony said that there is a shortfall of about \$500,000, and that there are several options for
108 addressing this shortfall. These include local option tax funds that weren't necessary in FY24, which include

109 \$40,158 for the code enforcement/rental registry position and \$28,000 for a stormwater grant match). They
110 also include assigning a projected conservative FY24 quarter four revenue of \$200,000, and the balance of
111 \$84,765 to this project. She said that this would assign \$325,000 to this project, and that this does not include
112 projected FY25 LOT fund revenue. She said that the remaining funding needed could come from the capital
113 reserve fund.

114
115 Councilor Haney asked about the alternates that had been previously discussed. City Council Manager
116 Mahony replied that the Council's previous direction was to call several of the features out as alternates and
117 determine what the costs are with and without those alternates, which is what this discussion does. Interim
118 Building Coordinator Smith noted that the municipal offices will move into the senior programming space on
119 July 8-10, and the construction start date will be early November with scheduled completion in June of 2025.

120
121 Councilor Miller asked for more detail about the vestibule component of the project. Interim Building
122 Coordinator Smith replied that the vestibule increases aesthetic appeal, accessibility, energy efficiency, and
123 as a protection area in the winter. Councilor Miller asked about the mechanical zone costs for the teen center
124 alternate. Interim Building Director Smith replied that the mechanical improvements are around improving air
125 circulation, given that the current system does not include a central air system. He said that the new system
126 would serve the teen center and the bathroom and lobby areas. Councilor Miller asked about the kitchenette
127 costs, and Interim Building Coordinator Smith replied that the costs are for electrical and plumbing.

128
129 Councilor Certa said that the plan as proposed covers the current uses of this building, but that they may not
130 fit with what the long-term uses of this building will be. He said that he hopes that upcoming facility reviews
131 for the Parks & Recreation department will take the senior and teen programming into consideration, given
132 that 2 Lincoln may not be the best place for these programs in the long term. He said that he also thinks that
133 a vaulted ceiling would better represent the community both aesthetically and in the long term, so he is
134 conflicted about some of this proposal. Interim Building Coordinator Smith noted that the City can elect to
135 choose the vaulted ceiling option further into the project, if it seems that there will be leftover contingency
136 funding or if the Council finds another way of securing \$39,000. He said that the decision about the ceiling
137 does not need to be finalized tonight. He also said that these improvements put the building in a better
138 position of future conversion, should the needs for the building evolve in the future.

139
140 City Council President Chawla said that the Council gave guidance on what it wanted for the teen center
141 space already and that taking the opportunity to address the HVAC now is wise. He said that he generally
142 supports this, and that if the Council can get fair warning on the vaulted ceiling portion, they can reconsider
143 it at a future meeting and determine whether funding can be secured for it.

144
145 Councilor Haney asked if assigning funds from the capital reserve would impact or defer other projects, and
146 City Manager Mahony replied that no, there are no negative impacts from using funds from the capital reserve
147 for this project.

148
149 The following public comments were received:

- 150 • Christina Corodimas, Director of Essex CHIPS, spoke about the importance of the CHIPS program
151 for the youth of Essex Junction, and said that she hopes the interests of the children in the community
152 are taken into account in these decisions.

153
154 **Councilor Certa made a motion, seconded by Councilor Miller, that the City Council re-assign \$68,158**
155 **in LOT funds for this project; assign an additional \$284,766 in LOT funds for this project; assign**
156 **\$215,242 from the capital fund reserve for this project; and authorize the City Manager to move**
157 **forward on the renovation of 2 Lincoln with the funds as identified by staff herein, to include but not**
158 **be limited to execution of a Notice to Proceed. The motion passed 5-0.**

159
160 c. Strategic Plan Report Presentation and Discussion

David Beurle, a consultant working on the Strategic Plan, provided a presentation on the draft report. He began by providing an overview of the timeline for the engagement process, noting that it began in August/September 2023 and included listening sessions, think tank sessions, and community surveys. He said that in terms of responses, 425 people responded to survey #1, 150 people responded to survey #2, that there were monthly steering committee meetings, 6 focus groups with a total of 84 participants, 40 think-tank participants, and a community-wide open house. He spoke briefly about findings from these engagements. He spoke about the six strategic pillars that are the building blocks to getting to the community's desired future state, which include housing and urban design, public services and facilities, economic and business development, transportation and connectivity, environmental stewardship, and community engagement and decision-making. He said that the second community survey focused on these pillars, how they should be prioritized, and how individual issues would fit into them. He noted that the top priority pillar is housing and urban design, followed by economic and business development. He noted that out of these exercises, they developed 18 key actions across the pillars. He spoke about the order of implementation for each of these, noting that the first action to be implemented should be the provision of responsible, open, and transparent government, followed by enhancing the downtown and corridors. He said that the pillars are strong and the actions are being refined even further, and he is confident that there was a good community engagement process to develop this. He noted that the second survey is still open and that the report will be finalized after that.

City Manager Mahony said that the final report will inform both the five-year strategic plan for the Council and annual work plans both for the Council and for department heads in the City. She said that the Council will conduct its own prioritization based on the findings of this project and the departments' annual work plans will also tie into these. She said that in the fall, they should be able to put these components all together.

Councilor Certa spoke positively as a member of the Steering Committee and said that the experience was positive overall. He said that they are finding that overall, this vision still aligns with strategic work that was conducted previously, such as Heart & Soul. He emphasized the importance of community feedback and thanked the volunteers in the community for their time during this process.

The following public comments were received:

- Scott McCormick thanked the City staff and consultants for their work on this. He spoke about the importance of environmental stewardship and noted that while it did not rise to the top as a priority like housing does, it is important to think about the pillars in an interconnected and interdependent way (for example, thinking about weatherization and affordable housing).

d. *Discussion and Consideration of an Executive Session to discuss a contract

City Council President Chawla made a motion, seconded by Councilor Certa, that the City Council make the specific finding that premature disclosure of the contractual matters would place the city at a substantial disadvantage, and that based on that finding, the City Council enter into executive session to discuss a contract, pursuant to 1 V.S.A. § 313(a)(1)(A) to include the City Council and City Manager. The motion passed 5-0 at 8:21 P.M.

City Council President Chawla made a motion, seconded by Councilor Certa, to exit executive session. The motion passed 5-0 at 8:47 P.M.

e. Discussion and Consideration of Direction Setting for the FY26 Budget Process

City Manager Mahony said that there was an initial conversation about improvements to the budget process as well as setting direction for the FY26 budget at the Council's April 24th meeting. She said that staff reflected on that feedback and have several recommendations for process improvements.

City Manager Mahony spoke about the budget process in general. She noted that this next budget will only be the City's third, and that they will have 18 months of actual experience (which isn't much but is more than

214 for FY25). She also noted that the Strategic Plan will be in place and will be a useful guide for future planning
215 efforts. She noted that the budget process will begin earlier than last year, with Council direction provided to
216 staff in June, which will provide more time for staff and department heads to meet the Council's goals. She
217 said that staff will try to provide enterprise budgets earlier in the process, but cautioned that because they
218 are tied to rates, the earlier they are presented, the less accurate the projected rates will be.
219

220 City Manager Mahony also spoke about the Council's budget process and potential improvements. She
221 spoke about the difficulties of holding a full Budget Day, and spoke about alternatives. These include a
222 Council member liaison for each department, but said that staff are not recommending this alternative, given
223 that the City Manager's job is to be that liaison. Another alternative was the formation of a Finance
224 Committee, but noted that staff determined that it would not solve the problem the Council is trying to solve.
225 She spoke about an alternative of two three-to-four hour long meetings on December 11 and December 18,
226 prior to which staff will prepare 5-to-10 minute department videos covering their FY26 budgets and annual
227 work plans. She said that Councilors and the public could review these videos ahead of time, which would
228 make for a shorter Q&A period at the Council meetings on the budget.
229

230 City Manager Mahony then spoke about bringing the budget to the community and engaging the public on it.
231 These include continuing the Open House/Community Meal, as well as Coffee Chats and neighborhood
232 forums that staff can help organize.
233

234 City Manager Mahony then spoke about future improvements. She noted that the Strategic Plan, Annual
235 Workplan, and Council Retreat process will greatly improve the overall budget process. She noted that the
236 City will use Questica software to track FY25 expenditures, which will be useful for planning for future budget
237 years (though not FY26). She noted that staff will also be investigating performance or outcomes-based
238 budgeting and will pilot this with the Strategic Plan and Annual Workplan.
239

240 She asked for City Council feedback on the proposed alternatives for Budget Day, as well as for overall
241 Council direction on the percentage increase/decrease to target for the FY26 budget.
242

243 Councilor Haney suggested that the Council keep the full-day Budget Day, out of consideration for
244 department heads and City Councilors. She also said that in terms of reviewing the budget, having all
245 presentations on one day allows her to see the budget more cohesively and in a big-picture way. She said
246 that in terms of the budget percentage increase/decrease, she suggested that departments examine their
247 budgets for operational efficiencies, not necessarily for cuts. She said that there will likely be increases in the
248 budget due to health insurance premium increases, contractually-obligated increases for staff, and the very
249 much unknown education tax increase at the State level. She said given that, she would be comfortable with
250 a 3% maximum increase. Marlon Verasamy, a member of the Essex Westford School District Board, noted
251 that the latest estimate Statewide for an increase is 15% across districts for FY25.
252

253 Councilor Miller spoke in support of a full-day Budget Day, for many of the same reasons expressed by
254 Councilor Haney. He said that the pressures on Essex Junction residents are enormous and will only
255 continue. He said that the City needs to do its diligence to control what it can and would be supportive of a
256 minimal budget increase for FY26.
257

258 Councilor Certa expressed support for a full-day Budget Day. He said that in terms of the budget, he would
259 like to see a level-funded budget, but recognize that that isn't realistic, but said he would like to work toward
260 that as a goal. He said that the Council and staff should be working through difficult questions early in the
261 budget process. He asked if Questica supports outcomes and performance-based budgets. Director Morris
262 replied that strategic and performance-based budget is an add-on to the Questica software, and said she is
263 working to receive a demonstration of the software and a cost estimate for consideration for future budgets.
264 Councilor Certa recommended that department heads include a review of their performance on last year's
265 metrics during their presentations. He also said that while he recognizes that the liaison approach may not

266 be what staff recommends, he asked that some form of it be considered in future, as he found that a deep
267 dive into several department budgets was extremely helpful and valuable to him in his decision-making.
268

269 Councilor Thibeault agreed with keeping an all-day Budget Day as well as a maximum budget increase of
270 3%.
271

272 City Council President Chawla said he would like to see an incorporation of diversity, inclusion, and
273 belonging, as well as team-building and community-building both within the City and out in the community.
274 He said he would like to see a serious commitment to these topics in the FY26 budget. He expressed support
275 for measuring performance and how it affects the budget and tax rate. He tentatively agreed with a 3% overall
276 tax increase but asked City Manager Mahony to exercise flexibility in determining how to arrive at that
277 increase. He noted that every department has its own challenges and realities, saying that recognizing that
278 allows the City to be nimble. He said he isn't supportive of a full-day Budget Day, given other constraints for
279 him, but said he would like to see how scheduling plays out. He then spoke about enterprise budgets, saying
280 that he would like to understand the cost of having non-recreation activities (childcare, preschool, after
281 school) on the overall recreation budget. He asked what offering new services does to the overall department
282 and fiscal impacts, saying that he would be interested in conducting this analysis for the FY26 budget to
283 make informed decisions. Councilor Haney said that the Council is interested as a whole in doing a deep
284 dive into the Recreation budget and scrutinizing it more thoroughly to increase transparency. Councilor Certa
285 said he would like to understand the impacts of the programs that serve both Essex Junction and other
286 municipalities' residents. City Council President Chawla expressed support for the idea of departmental
287 budget videos.
288

289 f. Discussion and Consideration of Next Steps for Main Street Park

290 City Manager Mahony said that this item is to provide responses to previously-asked Councilor questions on
291 the topic of Main Street Park, and obtain direction for next steps. She noted that the grant would still be
292 \$200,000 even if the City reduced its contribution to 20% or \$20,000 and minimized its design proposal for
293 the project. She said that the options staff are laying out are 1. Continue with currently proposed design,
294 which has \$200,000 in grant funding and \$278,002.46 in municipal contributions, 2.Reduce the scope as
295 described above to the minimum match rate, and 3. Halt work on the project and return funds to the
296 Downtown Transportation Funds Grant.
297

298 Councilors expressed support for Option 2. Councilor Haney said that she would be interested in pursuing
299 the lowest cost option for that area, given that there will be a significant amount of construction in the future
300 related to the Crescent Connector and future projects. She said she would support Option 2.
301

302 The following public comments were received:

- 303 • Bridget Meyer said she would be in support of shade sails as part of the design for the park, better
304 planters, and potentially something to improve the surface of the park. She asked who is developing
305 the plan for this. City Manager Mahony replied that the thinking is to go back to the landscape architect
306 with this direction. Ms. Meyer said that it will be important to have community involvement, input, and
307 feedback on the design of the park.
308

309 **City Council President Chawla made a motion, seconded by Councilor Haney, that that Council**
310 **authorize City Staff to resume work on the Main Street Park, with a lower-cost design, as discussed.**
311 **The motion passed 5-0.**
312

313 g. Health Officer Appointment

314 City Manager Mahony noted that the Health Officer position was moved to the Essex Junction Fire
315 Department and that staff are recommending that the City Council recommend to the Vermont Department
316 of Health that John Rowell, Assistant Fire Chief, be appointed the City's Health Officer.
317

Councilor Haney made a motion, seconded by Councilor Certa, that the City Council make a recommendation to the Department of Health to appoint John Rowell to the position of Health Officer for the City. The motion passed 5-0.

h. Tax Sale Policy and Delinquent Tax Policy **was Consent Item #6b**

City Manager Mahony said that changes at the State level were made to requirements around tax sale policies and that staff are currently analyzing the changes and how they align with the City's current tax sale policy, and that they should have something to present to the City Council at an upcoming meeting.

Councilor Haney asked that a legislative summary discussion occur at an upcoming City Council meeting.

6. **CONSENT ITEMS**

a. Approve Meeting Minutes: Amended May 8, 2024; May 22, 2024

b. Tax Sale Policy and Delinquent Tax Policy **now Business Item #5h**

c. Approve Block Party Applications (Hiawatha Ave and Acorn Circle)

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

7. **COUNCILOR COMMENTS & CITY MANAGER REPORT**

City Manager Mahony provided an update on the ladder truck and its repairs. She noted that businesses are open during the Crescent Connector construction project.

Councilor Certa requested that the Bike Walk Advisory Committee's meeting minutes be more detailed, especially around public comments, to help Councilors and other members of the public understand the topics being discussed and feedback on them.

8. **READING FILE**

a. Check Warrant #24046 5/31/2024

b. Champlain Water District 2024 Water Quality Report

c. May Financial Report

d. Tri Town Sewer Committee Minutes 05/15/2024

e. Bike Walk Advisory Committee Minutes 05/20/2024

f. Police Community Advisory Board Minutes 05/21/2024

9. **EXECUTIVE SESSION**

a. *An Executive Session may be needed to discuss a contract

See item #5d above.

10. **ADJOURN**

Councilor Haney made a motion, seconded by Councilor Certa, to adjourn the meeting. The motion passed 5-0 at 9:47 P.M.

Respectfully Submitted,
Amy Coonradt