

**CITY OF ESSEX JUNCTION
CITY COUNCIL
REGULAR MEETING
MINUTES OF MEETING
July 17, 2024**

COUNCILORS PRESENT: Raj Chawla, President; Amber Thibeault; Vice President; Tim Miller, Clerk; Marcus Certa (at 7:33 PM), Elaine Haney.

ADMINISTRATION: Regina Mahony, City Manager; Rick Jones, Public Works Superintendent; Jess Morris, Finance Director; Ashley Snellenberger, Communications & Strategic Planning Director.

OTHERS PRESENT: John Alden, Diane Clemens, Annie Cooper, Drew Darrow, Karen Dolan, Lori Houghton, Deb McAdoo, Tim Shea, Andrea Shortsleeve, Resa.

1. CALL TO ORDER

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

2. AGENDA ADDITIONS/CHANGES

No changes.

3. APPROVE AGENDA

None needed.

4. PUBLIC TO BE HEARD

a. Comments from public on items not on the agenda

None.

5. BUSINESS ITEMS

a. Department Head Brief to Council – Rick Jones, Public Works Superintendent

Public Works Superintendent Jones spoke about activities in the Public Works Department over the last six months. He noted that the department finally received a new pickup truck, which had been anticipated for the last year. He said there is a staff shortage, but they have hired part-time positions to help with maintenance and administrative work. He spoke about work on the Main Street waterline and that they anticipate completing that work in the springtime. He spoke about construction work on the Crescent Connector, which is slated for completion in September. He said that they obtained new software for meter readers, which should help make the process much easier.

Public Works Superintendent Jones then spoke about the next six months of activities. . He noted that the department also ordered a new dump truck, which they anticipate receiving in two years. He spoke about the difficulty in filling CDL driver positions and other positions within the Public Works Department. He said that they anticipate completing both the Main Street waterline and Crescent Connector in the next six to nine months. He spoke briefly about the difference between CDL driver and non-CDL driver positions, which are permitted to drive different vehicles for the City (specifically plow and other heavier vehicles). He displayed a map showing the upcoming paving activities on the City's streets (Prospect Street, West Hillcrest Street, Cherry Street, Cherokee Street, and parts of Abenaki and Iroquois Streets). He also noted that the department is in need of new facilities and storage. Councilor Miller acknowledged Ron Bundy (a wastewater operator) and his work with the Super Sucker 7000 to help with damaged infrastructure in Plainfield after last week's flood event.

b. *Interviews and consider appointments to the Tree Advisory Committee, Development Review Board, and Planning Commission

The Council interviewed Andrea Shortsleeve for a position on the Tree Advisory Committee. She spoke about her involvement in the community, her qualifications, and her interest in participating on the TAC. She

56 was asked by Councilors about her familiarity with the TAC’s current activities. She asked about the time
57 commitment for serving on the Committee, and City Manager Mahony explained the meeting frequency and
58 level of involvement members have. City Council President Chawla noted that there is a stipend available
59 for Committee members.

60
61 City Manager Mahony provided a more general update on recruiting for open board and commission
62 positions. She said that staff are recommending Luke Brockmeier for the Development Review Board and
63 Kirstie Paschall for the Planning Commission. She noted that there are still no applicants for the Community
64 Advisory Board and that there are three applicants for two positions on the Tree Advisory Board. She said
65 that they are recommending that the Bike/Walk Advisory Committee be reduced in size from 8 to 6 positions.
66 Councilor Haney asked why it has been difficult to recruit for the Community Advisory Board, and suggested
67 that the Police Chief come to brief the Council on these difficulties and potential strategies for recruitment.

68
69 **City Council President Chawla made a motion, seconded by Councilor Haney, that the Bike Walk**
70 **Advisory Committee membership be reduced from 8 members to 6 members. The motion passed 4-**
71 **0 (Councilor Certa absent for vote).**

72
73 c. Discussion and consideration of the Community Vision & Strategic Action Plan
74 Communications and Strategic Planning Director Snellenberger said that this item relates to discussing the
75 final Communication & Strategic Visioning report, department work plans, and a list of Council-level policy
76 and action prioritization (also called “The List”).

77 Director Snellenberger began by speaking about the Communication & Strategic Visioning Report. She
78 noted that the top pillars for prioritization that came out of that report were around housing and urban
79 design, economic and business development, and public services and facilities. She noted that the top
80 action items for implementation are providing reasonable, open, and transparent government, enhancing
81 downtown corridors, and promoting and enhancing safety.

82
83 Director Snellenberger then spoke about department head work plans for the City, which is also a
84 component of the City’s current strategic planning process. She said that this is a way for the City to align
85 departments’ day-to-day work with the Community Vision and Strategic Action Plan, as well as the budget.
86 She said that work plans will include departments’ respective projects, improvements to accomplish in the
87 next fiscal year, and evaluation methods to report out on progress. She shared an example of a work plan
88 for the Communications Department.

89
90 Director Snellenberger then spoke about “The List”, which was developed by the City Manager to inventory
91 ideas from the Council and community members for future policy and action work. She noted that in order
92 to prioritize these ideas, staff has categorized them into pillars and action items and assigned fiscal years
93 to them for implementation. She provided a brief overview of the list, cautioning that it is preliminary
94 because it does not yet include the work from the department heads’ work plans.

95
96 Director Snellenberger then outlined a timeline for work plans and future plans. She noted that from now
97 until the end of September, department heads will develop their work plans. She said that FY26 budget and
98 work plans will be presented to the City Council in the November/December timeframe. She then noted
99 that the City Council and department heads will have a retreat in April/May of 2025 for the FY26 budget, at
100 which time department heads will report out on their accomplishments from FY25.

101
102 City Council President Chawla asked several questions about the final report. He noted that it referenced
103 funding the Fire, Police, and Rescue at their current levels, which he does not think is the intent of the

statement (as level-funding would almost certainly entail cuts). He asked for more detail on how the action items intersect with the pillars that are called out for prioritization. Director Snellenberger replied that there are intersections between each of the pillars and the action items that were singled out for priority implementation. She said that much of the work in the next year will be devoted to figuring out how the pillars, action items, and work plans intersect best in order to move the work forward. City Manager Mahony also noted that they are also focusing on how communication from the Council to commissions and committees, as well as feedback, will intersect with the strategic plan and action items.

Councilor Haney noted the high emphasis placed on open and transparent government, saying that while this is a focus, it's not an indication that the current administration and Council are doing poorly. Councilor Miller said that he looks at how open communication and transparency intersection with the housing and urban development pillar, which could look like ensuring active communication to the public about development applications and updates to the Land Development Code. Councilor Haney noted the work the Council has done on the communications matrix/rubric and improving its communication and engagement with the public. Councilor Haney also spoke about the formation of a downtown economic development committee after the Transit Oriented Development project, Amtrak project, and Main Street Park projects are completed or mostly underway, citing concerns that this may take quite some time, and adding she is glad that there are provisions for a volunteer committee to start sooner. She said that she would like to discuss the formation of this committee soon. City Manager Mahony noted that those three projects will also help to enliven the downtown area.

The following public comments were received:

- Diane Clemens noted that the City must update its Comprehensive Plan by FY27, and said that the City should look at how this work dovetails with that Comprehensive Plan update. She also noted that many of the items the public is requesting (such as walking maps of the City, etc) already exist, and it's just a matter of disseminating or posting them more publicly.
- John Alden noted prior work of the Downtown Steering Committee, saying that reviewing their work could be helpful to inventory what has already been done. He noted that as a founding member of Heart & Soul, capacity and clarity remain the two top issues of importance.
- Annie Cooper cautioned against reinventing the wheel and recreating the work completed by the Downtown Steering Committee and Heart & Soul, and emphasized the importance of moving forward and making progress on the priorities and action items articulated in the final report.

Councilor Miller made a motion, seconded by Councilor Haney, that the City Council approve the amended Community Vision & Strategic Action Plan report to help guide the work plan prioritization over the coming years. The motion passed 4-0 (Councilor Certa absent for vote).

d. Discussion and consideration of FY25 Tax Rate

Finance Director Morris said that this item relates to setting the tax rate for Fiscal Year 2025. She noted that the City voted to raise \$11,110,346 in property taxes FY25, which was according to the adjusted grand list estimation when the budget was developed. She noted that because there was an unanticipated increase in the grand list since then, the tax rate decreased slightly from the rate when the budget was approved. She also noted a Tax Agreement rate or Veterans' exemptions above what the State automatically allows. She also spoke about the approved Economic Development Rate (\$0.01), which remains unchanged from the prior year. She said that the total City tax rate is 5.9% higher than FY24,

149 resulting in an estimated tax increase on a \$280,000 home of \$153 per year on the municipal portion of a
150 tax bill.

151
152 City Council President Chawla asked when residents can anticipate receiving their property tax bills for
153 FY25. Director Morris replied that bills will be mailed prior to August 15 with the first payment being due on
154 September 15.

155
156 **Councilor Miller made a motion, seconded by Councilor Haney, that the City Council approve the**
157 **FY25 tax rate as presented. The motion passed 5-0.**

158
159 e. 2024 Legislative Update

160 City Manager Mahony presented a 2024 legislative update on acts that are of relevance to Essex Junction.
161 She noted that changes to Open Meeting Law were codified in Act 133, including distinguishing between
162 advisory and non-advisory boards, and the attendance requirements for each. She spoke about Act 171,
163 which creates a uniform Code of Ethics for municipalities, which takes effect on January 1, 2025. She
164 provided details on the requirements of this new code. She spoke about Act 66, which provides for minimum
165 setback requirements for outdoor cannabis cultivation districts within municipalities, noting that Essex
166 Junction will need to evaluate and decide whether to establish Cannabis Cultivation Districts. She spoke
167 about Act 150, which pertains to libraries and includes provisions around the age up to which parents or
168 guardians have access to their child's library records, adds public libraries to the list of places where criminal
169 threatening penalties are augmented, and specifies that a library director is under the supervision of the
170 library's board of trustees unless otherwise codified. She spoke about Act 181, which pertains to housing
171 permit reforms. She said that it makes major changes to Vermont's land use planning and regulatory
172 framework to strengthen place-based regulatory recognition and investments guided by regional planning
173 and municipal action. She spoke about Act 106, which contains changes to property tax abatement and tax
174 sales. She then spoke about Act M-18, which relates specifically to Essex Junction charter amendments from
175 2023, which were relatively minor. She also noted a study around county and regional governance. She
176 spoke about S.309, which pertains to walker and biker safety. She spoke about Act 160, around domestic
177 animals at large and Act 167, which contains changes around Animal Control Officers.

178
179 Representative Karen Dolan noted that the idea around some of the Open Meeting Law and Ethics Code
180 requirements was to see some consistency at the state level to initiate a foundation of transparency and
181 openness. She also spoke about the acts related to housing, saying that cities with downtown centers will
182 play a key role in tackling the housing crisis, but the legislature wanted to give municipalities flexibility to
183 determine how they would commit to doing this.

184
185 Representative Lori Houghton spoke about Act 167 of 2022, which directed the Green Mountain Care Board
186 to hire a consultant to do a deep dive of the State's hospital and health system. She noted that many of the
187 cost increases the City is experiencing (along with other municipalities) is due to healthcare. She said that
188 the consultant has completed their assessment of the health system and will be reporting back to the State
189 this fall, to help with making changes to ensure a robust and sustainable healthcare system. She said that
190 on July 29, there will be a presentation at the South Burlington Public Library from this consultant about the
191 Burlington region's healthcare system.

192
193 f. ****Discussion and consideration of an Executive Session to discuss a Contract**
194 See item #9a below.

195
196 6. **CONSENT ITEMS**

197 a. Approve Meeting Minutes: June 26, 2024, and July 8, 2024

198 b. Approve Tax Sale Policy and Delinquent Tax Policy

199 c. Acting as the Cannabis Control Commission: Approve Tier 1 Manufacturing Cannabis on West St

200
201 **Councilor Haney made a motion, seconded by City Council President Chawla, to approve the consent**
202 **agenda as presented. The motion passed 5-0.**
203

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

205 City Manager Mahony spoke about opportunities to volunteer and donate related to last week's flooding
206 event. She noted that the City staff are still located at 2 Lincoln Street but are in a different part of the building,
207 and provided instructions on how to access it. City Council President Chawla noted a lifesaving award
208 ceremony for firefighters on July 8th, encouraging people to view the recording of the award ceremony.
209

210 **8. READING FILE**

- 211 a. Check Warrant #24048 6/18/2024
212 b. June Financial Report
213 c. VTrans feedback on Susie Wilson Rd Scoping Study and Rt 15 paving request
214 d. Police Community Advisory Board Minutes 6/18/2024
215 e. Bike Walk Advisory Committee Staff Notes 6/24/2024
216 f. Development Review Board Minutes 6/20/2024
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218 **9. EXECUTIVE SESSION**

- 219 a. *An Executive Session may be needed for the appointment of public officials
220

221 **Councilor Miller made a motion, seconded by City Council President Chawla, that the City Council**
222 **enter into executive session to discuss appointment of public officials, pursuant to 1 V.S.A. §**
223 **313(a)(3) to include the City Manager. The motion passed 5-0 at 8: 41 P.M.**
224

225 **Councilor Thibeault made a motion, seconded by City Council President Chawla, to exit executive**
226 **session. The motion passed 5-0 at 8:44 P.M.**
227

228 **City Council President Chawla made a motion, seconded by Councilor Haney, that the City Council**
229 **appoint Andrea Shortsleeve for a three-year term, Leslie Goldring for a term that ends in 2025, and**
230 **Warren Spinner for a three-year term to the Tree Advisory Committee; further, that the City Council**
231 **appoint Luke Brockmeier to the Development Review Board for a three-year term ending in 2027, and**
232 **appoint Kirstie Paschall to the Planning Commission for a term ending in June 2026. The motion**
233 **passed 5-0.**
234

- 235 b. **An Executive Session may be needed to discuss a contract
236

237 **City Council President Chawla made a motion, seconded by Councilor Haney, that the City Council**
238 **make the specific finding that premature disclosure of the contractual matters would place the city**
239 **at a substantial disadvantage and that the City Council enter into executive session to discuss a**
240 **contract, pursuant to 1 V.S.A. § 313(a)(1)(A) to include the City Council and City Manager. The motion**
241 **passed 5-0 at 8:41 P.M.**
242

243 **Councilor Thibeault made a motion, seconded by City Council President Chawla, to exit executive**
244 **session. The motion passed 5-0 at 8:44 P.M.**
245

246 **10. ADJOURN**

247
248 **Councilor Haney made a motion, seconded by Councilor Chawla, to adjourn the meeting. The motion**
249 **passed 5-0 at 8:45 P.M.**
250

251 Respectfully Submitted,
252 Amy Coonradt