CITY OF ESSEX JUNCTION
GOVERNANCE COMMITTEE
REGULAR MEETING AGENDA

Online ONLY
Essex Junction, VT 05452
Thursday, April 24, 2025
6:30 PM

This meeting will be remote only. There will not be a physical location. To join the meeting remotely:

- **JOIN ONLINE**: **Join the meeting now**

1. **WELCOME**   [6:30 PM]

2. **ADDITIONS OR AMENDMENTS TO AGENDA**

3. **PUBLIC TO BE HEARD**

4. **REVIEW & APPROVE MINUTES FROM LAST MEETING**

5. **DISCUSS GOVERNANCE CONSIDERATIONS TO EXPLORE**

6. **DISCUSS COUNCILOR/TRUSTEE SURVEY RESULTS**

7. **DISCUSS NEXT STEPS**

8. **ADJOURN**

Attachments:
- Draft Meeting Minutes April 10, 2025
- Governance Considerations to Explore One Pager
- Committee Survey Results & Discussion Information
- Community Comparisons

Members of the public are encouraged to speak during the Public to Be Heard agenda item, during a Public Hearing, or, when recognized by the Chairperson, during consideration of a specific agenda item. The public will not be permitted to participate when a motion is being discussed except when specifically requested by the Chairperson. Regarding remote participants, if individuals interrupt, they will be muted; and if they interrupt a second time they will be removed. This agenda is available in alternative formats upon request. Meetings of the Governance Committee, like all programs and activities of the City of Essex Junction, are accessible to people with disabilities. For information on accessibility or this agenda, call the Essex Junction Recreation and Parks office at 802-878-1375 TTY: 7-1-1 or (800) 253-0191.

City of Essex Junction Governance Committee Meeting Minutes

Thursday, April 10, 2025 @ 6:30 PM

Members present: Thomas Coen, Marlon Verasamy, Brian Shelden, Gabrielle Smith, Steve Eustis, Candace Morgan, Deb McAdoo, Marcus Certa

Members absent: Elaine Haney

Staff Present: Brad Luck

Steve opened the meeting at 6:32 pm.

No change in the agenda.

No public were present to be heard today.

Motion to accept minutes from the March meeting was made by Marlan and seconded by Marcus, unanimously accepted.

Marcus reviewed a presentation on the Three Forms of Government where he shared the three most common models, Council-Manager, Council-Strong Mayor, and Council-Weak Mayor governance structures, and pros and cons associated with each. See the presentation for details.

Next, Brad led us through a review of the committee member's responses to the survey questions that he circulated to the group prior to the meeting. Highlights of this discussion included:

- General agreement that any change we make should only be additive.
- The group expressed a desire to hear challenges and barriers from past and present Council/Trustee members. There was strong leaning toward 5 or 7 members, with the subcommittee work being a significant factor of consideration.
- There was general agreement that the Council choose their Council Leader.
- The length of term for 3 years was the group favorite, and the suggestion of a 2-year term to reduce the length of commitment and remove a potential barrier to participation warranted further exploration.
- The Term Limit conversation included equal pros and cons. The group was curious to learn about other community's experiences with term limits, agreement was for further exploration.

We were able to get through to survey question #5. Next meeting on 4/24/2025 will be remote only and we will finish this survey review. **Members are requested to complete the survey online before the next meeting if possible.**

Deb made a motion to close the meeting, Marlon seconded, and the vote was unanimous. Meeting adjourned at 8:25 pm.

Respectfully submitted,

Deb McAdoo

Governance Considerations to Explore

Form of Government:
Current: Council-Manager
Council-Manager, Mayor-Council (Strong Mayor), Mayor-Council-Manager (Weak Mayor)

Council Composition:
Current: 5 Councilors; President selected by Councilors

Councilor Terms Length:
Current: 3 years

Councilor Term Limits:
Current: no term limits

Election of Officials:
Current: At-Large
At-large, districts/wards, hybrid

Council Compensation:
Current: $2,500 per year

Neighborhood Assemblies

Voting Date

1. **Form of Government: Should we have a Council-Manager form of government as we do now, whereby the chief administrative officer is appointed? Should we have a Strong Mayor system like in Burlington where the chief administrative officer is an elected position? Should we have a Weak Mayor system whereby the elected leader of the council has some powers, but the role is mostly ceremonial, and the chief administrative officer is an appointed position?**

I don't know.

Seems like our current setup with a manager is working and we can remove a manager relatively quickly if needed. If gives us the opportunity to have a manager that is trained in running a municipality. For me a professional manager is going to be less political and well trained. A professional manager also allows for "average" people to be on the council. I think we need to encourage non-political, not super-connected people to be on the council.

I don't have an opinion on this yet. I am not inclined to a Strong Mayor system, but I could be convinced otherwise once we have done our research.

I first what to understand what challenges we are experiencing under our current form of government. If our current structure is working well to meet our needs, then do not think we should be looking for change for the sake of change itself. If there are current challenges, then I would want to uncover which alternative forms of government address those challenges and what drawbacks they have. Personally, having apolitical professional staff run the city makes sense to me, particularly for a city of our size.

What are the added benefits of changing to a different model than current?

Challenges of strong mayor system resulting in frequent major changes.

Does a mayor (strong or weak) align better and provide clarity given we are a city?

What are the cost implications of different models? Concerns of a strong mayor model adding additional paid political layer within government on top of existing professionals.

Concerned about power – ensuring it is limited and gives room for more voices.

Value expertise in the chief executive.

2. Council Composition: How many elected officials should we have (currently have 5)? Should the leader of the Council be elected by the Council or the people?

7. I don't know about the leadership role.

I haven't seen a reason (or anyone even hinting more is better) to have more than 5. It is easiest if the council chair is elected by the councilors as it prevents a lot of hassle with dealing with special elections if council challengers win or lots of political games if people need to resign their seats to run for head of council. We had a lot of problems with our previous system. Have there been any perceived problems with the current system?

I don't have an opinion yet on either question. I am open to expanding to 7, especially if we combine that increase with wards or other district form.

Five seems like a reasonable number given the size of our city. We want to keep an odd number so the alternative would be moving to 7. That of course makes decision making harder, increases some administrative expenses/burden, and needs to be sufficient interest from residents to serve in those new positions. Based on our peer cities, 5 seems reasonable. But again, would like to hear from folks on how our system is currently functioning, including from city councilors.

Is five equitable? How many people should one representative represent?

Having more councilors allows for larger sub-groups/committees without triggering a quorum.

Consideration of advantages/disadvantages to staggered terms and number of seats up for election at one time.

Is a smaller team (i.e. 5 vs. 7) more effective and/or efficient vs. larger?

Is a smaller number better i.e. 3 or 4?

More councilors = more voices

Would we have enough people running for elections?

3. **Councilor Term Lengths: What is the right number of years for a councilor term? Should they all be the same or different lengths?**

3-4 years

It takes a year or two to really get your feet under you to know the councilor job well. Therefore 3 years seems like a good amount of time because of this learning curve.

Don't have an opinion yet

For equity, councilor terms should all be the same length. I've never heard of different term lengths for the same elected position before. 3 years seems like a reasonable time and is aligned with our peers. But again, would want to get feedback from stakeholders — is that currently working, what challenges does it create? Current terms are overlapping (i.e. council members are up for election at different times). In general, I think this is a good idea as is brings continuity to the council while also ensuring regular participation from the public on council members. It also provides some insulation from short term political winds since not all seats are up at any one point in time. Also follows models from other cities.

Concerns of large turnover in any one given year.

Consideration of time that it takes for councilors to learn the role – learning curve.

Is a shorter term more appealing/less of a commitment for some community members?

4. **Councilor Term Limits: Should there be a maximum number of years or terms that a councilor may serve?**

No.

I generally believe term limits makes sense to keep fresh viewpoints on the council. If we add term limits, we might want to consider a number of years break before someone could run again. In other words not a lifetime limit, but rather "streaks". Perhaps 5 years off after becoming term limited.

I'm not a fan of term limits in general. Could be convinced otherwise for City Council.

Term limits are helpful if there are substantial barriers to participation and entrenched incumbency. I don't see that as current issues. Council campaigns are relatively low-cost and short. Council members have voluntarily not run again. With a small city, instituting term limits can also have the adverse effect of limiting institutional knowledge and limiting the pool of qualified candidates. It does not seem like there is an overabundance of candidates at the moment (only 2 ran for the most recent open council seat).

Concern of aggregation of power

Is it a barrier for new participation if people don't want to run against incumbents?

Value of institutional knowledge vs. new voices. Stagnation vs. fresh perspective.

Are these being used in other communities? What is the experience?

Is there a better opportunity for a smoother transition if a term limited councilor knows they cannot run again?

5. **Election of Officials: Should officials be elected at-large (without regard to residence location within the City), or through districts/wards, an overlay of wards within districts, or a hybrid of some at-large and some through districts/wards?**

At Large.

I am feeling that the city is small enough and similar enough to not need wards. I was able to follow all the Front Porch Forums prior to consolidation to one. Frequently and over long periods of time, similar issues were brought up all over the city. Without wards we can have the best people on the council regardless of where they live. It also eliminates the need to rebalance every 10 years when new census data is available. The city is also not so big that it is difficult to reach all the citizens if campaigning at-large. If we were a merged Essex (which we aren't), wards would make more sense to me since there are 3 very different regions in Essex.

I am very interested in exploring this with the committee.

I think there is a benefit to simplicity for voters, especially in a small city like Essex Junction. If we were larger, then I do see a benefit of having ward specific councilors, but based on our city size this again can have the adverse effect of limiting the pool of qualified candidates. If we did want to consider this, should be done in tandem with increasing the council size (which doesn't seem like a current need). Would also want to better understand if some areas of the city feel under-represented on the council geographically. And then what are some options to address that (i.e. through better community engagement/outreach).

6. Councilor Compensation: What is an appropriate amount to pay councilors annually for their service (currently $2,500/year)?

I don't know.

$2,500 seems like a fair amount of compensation. What are the reasons to think it is not enough? That much can certainly pay for child care, pet care, and other financial constraints of the position. It is nice to get something for your time and this seems to accomplish that.

I would like to see the compensation increased. I see the concept of volunteering for a significant time commitment like this to be outdated and exclusionary. Most residents are either full or over-employed or retired. We need to make the City Council an option for those who cannot afford to commit to the time required for free, or who wouldn't do it for free for whatever reason. I like the range of $7,500 - $10,000, but that is a pretty undereducated guess.

I think we should definitely increase councilor compensation. It is a huge time commitment and the limited renumeration is a barrier for participation for many individuals. I'm not sure yet what is the right level that is both affordable, practical, and appropriate, but maybe close to $10k/year with built in annual inflationary increases? Would want to learn what peer cities are doing, but think in general pay across the board is too low if we want to broaden who is able to serve.

7. **Neighborhood Assemblies: Should there be neighborhood assemblies?**

Yes. I am concerned about the attendance though.

I do not know enough about neighborhood assemblies. What are they trying to accomplish? What is the definition of a neighborhood? Is it better to just have city wide outreach, such as the annual meal meeting (January), and planning/zoning initiatives, celebrations (block party, etc.), etc.

I am very interested in exploring how this might work in EJ.

I think we definitely need some form of intentional community engagement strategy. I'm not sure that neighborhood assemblies are the answer (but they could be!) They strike me as a time- and resource-intensive approach and think other community engagement approaches could be more efficient at achieving the same results. But want to learn more.

8. **Voting Date: Should we vote on the budget and elect officials on Town Meeting Day? In April as it is now? Regardless, be on the same day as the school vote?**

Yes, move to Town Meeting Day.

I prefer to move both the school vote and city vote to Town Meeting Day. There is so much statewide hype and public interest in Town Meeting Day it would be great to take advantage of it.

Yes, move the vote to March Town meeting day, yes to voting on budget, elected officials and school vote on the same day.

We should definitely vote on budget, election officials, and the school budget all on the same day. Voter participation is already low — having separate dates creates greater barriers to participate and less incentive. We should consider moving all this to town meeting day in March to take advantage of statewide publicity of voting on town meeting day.

9. What other thoughts, comments, or questions do you have?

I have an open mind on things and look forward to debating the merits of the various proposals. I just listed my current insights based on my experience interacting with the city as a citizen, moderator, and member of the governing board. My general principals are to keep things as simple as possible, discourage politics and crony networks, and have as many average people involved in the governance, backed by a professional staff.

Excited to discuss, learn more, and meet with various stakeholders and officials from other cities!

Curious about other advisory/committee/etc. role for community members to engage other than Council but in a meaningful way that may address some barriers to being a councilor i.e. long-term lengths.

Average Population as a % & Square Miles % vs. City

#	Community	Form of Government	Election System	Number of Elected Officials	Leader of the Council Elected by	Term Length	Councilor Term Limits	Councilor Compensation	Neighborhood Assembly/ Other Advisory Group	Population	Square Miles	Population Per Councilor	FY26 Approved Budget	FY25 Tax Rate	Population as % of EJ	Square Miles as % of EJ	Average Population & Sq Miles %
1	Winooski	Weak Mayor	At-Large	5 (mayor+4)		Mayor (3yr), Councilors (2yr)				7,997	1.5	1,599			76%	32%	54%
2	St. Albans City	Weak Mayor	Wards (6)	7 (mayor+6)		Mayor (2yr), Councilors (3yr)				6,887	2.0	984			65%	43%	54%
3	Barre City	Weak Mayor	Wards	7 (mayor+6)		2yr				8,491	4.0	1,213			80%	84%	82%
4	City of Essex Junction	Council-Manager	At-Large	5	Council	3yr	None	$2,500	None	10,590	4.7	2,118	$12,419,241	0.9861	100%	100%	100%
5	Montpelier	Weak Mayor	Districts	7 (mayor+6)		2yr				8,074	10.3	1,153			76%	216%	146%
6	Rutland	Strong Mayor	At-Large	11		2yr				15,807	7.7	1,437			149%	162%	156%
7	Barre Town	Council-Manager	At-Large	5		3 (3yr), 2 (2yr)				7,923	30.7	1,585			75%	648%	361%
8	Williston	Council-Manager	At-Large	5		3 (3yr), 2 (2yr)				10,103	30.6	2,021			95%	645%	370%
9	Burlington	Strong Mayor	Districts & Wards	12		2yr				44,743	15.5	3,729			423%	327%	375%
10	Brattleboro	Council-Manager	At-Large	5		3 (3yr), 2 (1yr)				12,184	32.4	2,437			115%	684%	399%