

**CITY OF ESSEX JUNCTION
PLANNING COMMISSION
MINUTES OF MEETING
NOVEMBER 7, 2024
FINAL – APPROVED DECEMBER 5, 2024**

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

ADMINISTRATION: Chris Yuen, Community Development Director

OTHERS PRESENT: Jeff Arango, Hope Freije, Sarah Lukins, Erica Lumsden, Matt Lumsden, John O'Brien, Bayla Steinke, Tam Tran, Lexi, Sian

1. CALL TO ORDER

Ms. Clemens called the 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

Mr. Lumsden said that he and his wife are realtors in Essex Junction. His real estate firm operates 24/7, and he would like to be able to keep his sandwich board sign up during all hours as well. Ms. Clemens said that the sign can always be out if the business operates 24/7.

4. MINUTES

a. October 10, 2024

MOTION by SCOTT MCCORMICK, seconded by ELIJAH MASSEY, to approve the minutes of October 10, 2024. Motion passed 5-0.

5. BUSINESS ITEMS

a. Connect the Junction Transit Oriented Development Master Plan presentation on Public and Stakeholder Feedback

Mr. Arango, Managing Principal of Framework, presented the outcomes of the recent design charette. This project is federally funded and ten communities in northwestern Vermont are participating. During the charette, the consultants held site tours and communicated with residents in a variety of locations. One specific example was tabling at the high school Homecoming game to ask children to detail their favorite place in the community. Remote options were available for some of the presentations. At the charette, participants were able to answer live polling questions via their cell phones. Mr. Arango discussed public input on the most valued things about the area, the biggest challenges, and ideas for improvement. The assets, challenges and opportunities in Essex Junction were mapped.

Mr. Arango said that major themes include prioritizing pedestrians/cyclists, mitigating sound, incorporating green space, increasing housing supply, and connectivity. Other major ideas include prioritizing people, adding amenities to development, and eliminating the idea of Essex Junction as a commuter “pass through”. Ms. Freije, also of Framework, discussed the feedback that biking and walking on Pearl Street is unsafe and reviewed potential options for improvement. Ms. Lukins, also of Framework,

discussed capitalizing on the Crescent Connector by creating interconnected greenspaces. She said that many of these ideas are pilot interventions, which will allow the City to determine if they are successful before committing to a long-term investment. The existing angled parking on Main Street was discussed, with Mr. McCormick stating that it is difficult and makes the road less walkable. Testing the possibility of pedestrianizing Main Street and Railroad Avenue was discussed, although Mr. Arango reconfiguring Main Street to two lanes, routing traffic from Main Street to Park Street through the Crescent Connector.

Post Office Square was discussed, with Mr. Arango noting the possibility of adding temporary street-facing commercial structures or for mixed-use redevelopment in the long-term. He said that there may be opportunities to increase building height to six stories, especially in the back of buildings. This would also provide opportunities to include housing and address the affordability crisis. Mr. McCormick suggested a bike path along the rail tracks and asked if modular homes had been used in other communities to increase housing access. Mr. Arango presented a revised version of Post Office Square, with six stories in the back, a plaza space, mixed-use units, and an access road. Ms. Clemens expressed concern about displacing businesses, and Mr. Arango said that he had been in touch with the property owner and that the project could take many forms and will likely take many years. During the charette, feedback on the six-story potential was mixed, but it was acknowledged that additional height may increase the financial viability of the redevelopment of these parcels, because the per-unit construction costs are lower the more floors you add. Mr. McCormick asked about whether there is sufficient housing demand to justify this scale of redevelopment. Mr. Yuen stated that regional data continues to show a severe housing shortage, and that these housing units would likely be filled if they were built. Mr. Yuen also discussed how the forthcoming municipalized housing targets stemming from the most recent Statewide Housing Needs Assessment may require that municipal plans be further adjusted. Ms. Freije discussed efforts to improve public spaces and make them more reflective of the community. Mr. Arango discussed a focus on Essex Junction for the local community, rather than a space for commuters to pass through. A written charette summary will be made public soon. Framework will take feedback from the community and develop a master plan, subsequent code updates and implementation strategy and schedule. Mr. McCormick asked about public input and engagement in the process and Mr. Yuen said that online commenting would be available on the draft. Mr. McCormick suggested attending existing meetings and events to gain additional feedback.

Ms. Clemens said that it would be difficult to include additional code updates at this point, as public hearings would need to occur. She also questioned the level of cooperation that private landowners would have with this project. Mr. McCormick said that there would be significant public feedback on the reduction in lanes on Pearl Street. Ms. Clemens expressed concern about the changes to the Veteran's Memorial Park. Mr. McCormick said that additional conversation needs to be had on how to publicize this plan, which will be discussed at the next meeting. In public comment, Mr. Tran expressed support for the plan in general but questioned having a six-story building in front of the fairgrounds. Mr. O'Brien, a member of the Bike/Walk Advisory Committee, offered help with outreach and engagement.

b. Land Development Code Amendments Proposal Public Hearing

Mr. Yuen said that the Transit-Oriented Development Master Plan will result in changes to the Land Development Code (LDC) and Comprehensive Plan over the next two years; however, there is a separate initiative currently underway to make amendments to the Land Development Code in the short-term. This public hearing is for the latter initiative. There are six themes in proposed amendments to the LDC: sign regulation changes, residential density, site/dimensional standards, stormwater regulations, food trucks,

and technical corrections. A US Supreme Court case stated that sign regulations must be content neutral. Signs can be regulated based only on time, place and manner. Sandwich boards are still allowed with restrictions. Residential density limits in the MF3 and R-O districts are proposed to be to be increased to allow for additional housing and to allow for a smooth density gradient between the city center and the outer residential districts, where density limits have already raised in 2023. Mr. Yuen discussed the impact on individual zoning districts and showed many examples of existing structures that do not meet setback the existing density and setback requirements but blend in with the neighborhood. The front setbacks for in several zoning districts would be reduced to fifteen-feet to match existing development patterns. He reviewed the special design standards in R1/R2, breaking up the property into three zones for the purpose of parking and having a twenty-foot driveway width maximum. In current standards, a duplex cannot have an accessory unit and would need to be considered a second principal structure, which is not permitted. A second principal structure, and up to four units total, is proposed in the new regulations.

Food trucks are currently permitted as temporary uses, in place for fewer than 6 months in every year, although the enforcement of this restriction has been lax since Covid. An amendment would officially allow for year-round operation. Administrative review will be allowed for triplexes and fourplexes. A fifty-foot setback would be necessary for cannabis cultivation. In public comment, Mr. Tran discussed sandwich board regulations, stating that he has been cited at his business in the past. The sign is very heavy and difficult to be brought in every night, especially in the winter. He suggested seasonal regulations for allowing sandwich boards signs out at night.

c. Land Development Code Amendments Planning Commission Discussion

Ms. Clemens will send grammatical corrections to Mr. Yuen. Mr. Yuen brought up the definition of hard surface, and the recommended update not to consider gravel hard surface for accessibility purposes. There are currently no landscaping requirements for duplexes and single-family homes, but there are strict landscaping requirements for developments undergoing site plan approval, which would no longer apply to triplexes and fourplexes if those are to be administratively approvable. He said that the Tree Advisory Committee has proposed requiring street trees for triplexes and fourplexes. He discussed footprint lots, which are allowable for ownership and finance purposes but not for zoning. Mr. Massey requested additional discussion on parking requirements. He said that he is concerned that the new triplex and fourplex driveway requirements may prevent sidewalks and other pedestrian safety features. Ms. Clemens said that this holds residential units to the same standard as businesses, where parking is required in the side or back. Ms. Juodisius said that she would prioritize limiting disruption to the lot. Mr. McCormick said that he does not see a solution to people parking in front of a lot. Mr. Yuen said that the LDC currently requires triplexes and above to be treated as multi-family properties in terms of curb cuts. Limiting curb cuts to 27 feet maximum is still an improvement from the previous maximum of 30 feet. The PC decided on a 27-foot limit for the width of curb cuts for triplexes and fourplexes without additional curbing or landscaping requirements.

The PC discussed public comments on the signage requirements. Ms. Clemens questioned how to determine if a business is truly open 24/7, and how to determine how many at-home businesses are present in Essex Junction. Mr. Yuen said that there are no changes proposed to the freestanding regulations, and said that Mr. Lumsden is currently maxed out on the size of his freestanding sign. The PC discussed a variety of options including increasing the size of freestanding signs. Ms. Clemens said that she would like to hear from businesses to see if this would meet their needs. All agreed to leave it as is. Street trees were discussed, with street trees in the right of way seen as a positive element. Ms. Clemens asked how

many permit extensions were allowable. Mr. Yuen explained some reasons why projects may slow down and need additional time to go through. He said that if additional permitting and review requirements were added it may further delay housing projects that are already hindered by factors such as the financing or construction contractor availability.

SCOTT MCCORMICK made a motion, seconded by ELIJAH MASSEY that the Planning Commission submit the Land Development Code Amendments as discussed to the City Council for consideration. No vote, motion failed.

Discussion on motion: Ms. Paschall discussed tapering of development between high-density areas and the outer residential districts (R1 and R2). Ms. Clemens said that the DRB can make waivers for this. After some discussion, the PC decided to increase properties in the RO and MF3 districts to a maximum of six units per lot.

SCOTT MCCORMICK made a motion, seconded by ELIJAH MASSEY that the Planning Commission submit the LDC amendments as discussed, including the amendments to RO and MF3 of up to six units to the City Council for consideration. Motion passed 5-0.

d. Global Foundries Battery Project letter of support

Mr. Yuen said that this is a similar letter that was presented for the solar panel project. All were in favor.

ELIJAH MASSEY made a motion, seconded by SCOTT MCCORMICK, to have the Planning Commission direct or support Chair Clemens in signing the letter for support for the Global Foundries Battery Project. Motion passed 5-0.

6. MEMBERS UPDATES

Ms. Clemens said that she and Mr. McCormick attended the Agency of Natural Resources Municipal Day. They will also attend the statewide housing conference. Mr. McCormick discussed how to blend smart housing with affordable housing. The PC will discuss future plans at the next meeting. Mr. Massey asked about the status of the mural grant project.

7. STAFF UPDATES

Mr. Yuen discussed updates on the progress of home creation in Chittenden County. He will be attending the statewide Housing Conference and the Vermont Developers Conference in the coming weeks.

8. ADJOURN

MOTION by SCOTT MCCORMICK, seconded by ELIJAH MASSEY, to adjourn the meeting at 10:10 PM. Motion passed 5-0.

Respectfully submitted,
Darby Mayville