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**TOWN OF ESSEX
INFORMATIONAL MEETING FOR
ANNUAL TOWN MEETING
Monday March 1, 2021**

SELECTBOARD: Elaine Haney, Chair; Patrick Murray, Vice Chair; Vince Franco, Clerk; Dawn Hill-Fleury; Andy Watts

STAFF PRESENT: Evan Teich, Unified Manager; Charles Cole, Fire Chief; Caitlin Corless, Essex Free Library Director; Greg Duggan, Deputy Manager; Tammy Getchell, Assistant to the Manager; Ron Hoague, Police Chief; Marguerite Ladd, Assistant Manager; Karen K. Lemnah, Assessor; Dennis Lutz, Public Works Director; Sarah Macy, Finance Director; Owiso Makuku, Community Development Director; Susan McNamara-Hill, Clerk; Rob Paluba, IT Director; Travis Sabataso, HR Director; Darren Schibler, Town Planner; Ally Vile, Parks & Recreation Director

PUBLIC SPEAKERS: John Aleong; Gil Allen; Tish Boldwin; Chris Bird; Alise Certa; Marcus Certa; Annie Cooper; Patty Davis; Will Dodge; Betsy Dunn;; William Graham; Andy Hayden; Rep. Lori Houghton; Elijah Massey; Scott Moore; Mary Post; Brian Shelden; Ken Signorello; Mitchell Stern; Saramichelle Stultz; Mike Sullivan; John Terborgh; Irene Wrenner

OTHERS PRESENT: Katie Alexander; Lisa Allen; Scott Baker; Stacey Barton; Bob Bates; Wayne Beebe; Paul Behrman; Paul Beliveau; Jim Bernegger; William Bishop; Rep. Alyssa Black; Alex Blanchard; Natalee Braun; Jonathan Breen; Anna Brouillette; Bruce Brown; Laura Buermann; Molly Buermann; Lauren Bulakowski; Jeanne Bull; Casey Carmolli; Ryan Carroll; Rajan Chawla; Tom Cleary; Beth Cobb, Essex Westford School District Superintendent; Liz Coleman; Kevin Collins; Lynn Crochetiere; Susyn Dees; C. Dollinger; Lenora Dodge; Roger Dodge; Sharon Ehret; Rob Fleming; Mariah Flynn Sanderson; Rhonda L Forcier; Dylan Giambatista; Maureen Gillard; Eileen Girling; Kim Gleason; Louise Goodrich; Victoria Gragg; Linda Himelstein; Sandi Hoffman; S. Hooker; Susan Hosmer; Arabella Hubbard; Wendy Hysko;; Tim Jerman; Adam Kavanaugh; Brianna Kavanaugh; Dan Kerin; Bob Klinefelter; Kent Koptiuch; Lori Landau; Rachael Lizotte; Brad Luck; John Mangan; S. Martel; Nick Martin; Ryan McLaren; Don Miller; Ross Miller; Steve Mitchell; Candace Morgan; Keith Morley; Robyn Moore; Ashton Muraahi; Linda Myers; Hubert Norton; Susanna Olson; Linda Paroline; Jeanne Piro; Ron Piro; Betty Poulin; Roseanne Prestipino; Melissa Raeham-Ellis; Stephanie Ratte; Macie Rebel; Maria Redding; Rep. Marybeth Redmond; David Rome; Mike Ross; R. Scobie; Christine Sheftic; Marie Shepherd; David Skopin; Gabrielle Smith; Margaret Smith; Jeb Spaulding; Sarah Strauss; Jill Sullivan; Andy Suntup; Linda Suntup; Kristina Sweet; Carmelle Terborgh; Dennis Thibeault; Michael Thorne; George Tyler; Rep. Tanya Vyhovsky; James Waite; Janet Watts; Congressman Peter Welch; Aiden White; Jon Zimmerman; Sharon Zukowski Aaron; Brad; Bob; Bruce; Bruce C; Cath; Christine; David F; **deb; Deb; Deb W;** Deming; Diane; Dustin; Erna D; Essex; George's iPad; George-IPad; iPhone; iPhone Jackie; Iris; James's iPhone; Jayden; Jill 's iPhone; Julie; Kathleen; Lauren J; Lynn; Mariah; Michelle; Marie; Mary; Eric; Sheridan's iPhone; Patrick; Pboldwin; Kristine; Resa M; Richard; Rumbaugh; Sabrina; Sandi; Jason DS

MODERATOR: Steve Eustis

Mr. Eustis introduced himself as Town Moderator at 7:32 PM and led those assembled in the Pledge of Allegiance.

Mr. Franco read "An Invitation to Civility" from the book All Those in Favor by Susan Clark and Frank Bryan: *"We are gathered together in civil assembly. We gather as a community, in the oldest*

53 sense of the word. We gather to come together and try to make decisions about what is right, and
54 what is wrong. Let us advocate for our positions, but not at the expense of others. Let us
55 remember that there is an immense gap between saying 'I am right' and saying, 'I believe I am
56 right.' And that our neighbors with whom we might disagree are good people with hopes and
57 dreams as true and high as ours. And let us always remember that, in the end, caring for each
58 other, in this community, is of far greater importance than any difference we may have. Thank you
59 for being here this evening."
60

61 Mr. Eustis introduced Selectboard Chair Haney. Ms. Haney welcomed the assembly. She thanked
62 staff and Town Meeting TV for technical support of the meeting. She introduced administrative staff
63 and the Selectboard members. She recognized the Essex Junction Board of Trustees, local
64 senators and representatives, and thanked all present who volunteer in the Town of Essex. She
65 then introduced Congressman Welch.
66

67 Congressman Welch spoke to the assembly about his appreciation for Vermont's commitment to
68 democracy. He talked about the role of government and the importance of ensuring community
69 best interests, through the local service of community members. Mr. Welch discussed the impact of
70 COVID nationally and locally and talked about a new bill in Congress that would help people move
71 forward through the pandemic while supporting community vitality. He talked about his commitment
72 to vaccinations and opening schools safely. Mr. Welch took a question from Mr. Signorello who
73 wondered about Congress's direction with social media liability. Mr. Welch said congressional
74 discussions are taking place to identify best ways to monitor social media platforms before
75 determining next steps. Mr. Welch took a question from Ms. Dunn about whether new federal funds
76 for broadband could be used for infrastructure. Mr. Welch talked about his work on the Rural
77 Broadband caucus. He said money for broadband would be tailored to communities based on local
78 decision-making and needs; he reiterated the importance of local accountability.
79

80 Mr. Eustis explained how the informational meeting would run.
81

82
83 Mr. Eustis read Article I:

84
85 *ARTICLE I. Shall the reports of the Officers be accepted?*
86

87 Ms. Haney spoke about Article I, discussing the proposed fiscal year (FY) 2022 budget. She talked
88 about consolidation efforts and shared services with the Village of Essex Junction to explain
89 savings expected through consolidation. She talked about projected savings specific to FY2022.
90 Ms. Haney reviewed FY2022 budget objectives as well as new and enhanced programs. She said
91 the majority of the FY2022 budget increase is in operations, salaries, and benefits. She discussed
92 proposed staffing changes reflected in the budget.
93

94 Mr. Eustis opened public discussion of the budgets. There were no comments from the public.
95

96 Mr. Eustis read Article II:

97
98 *ARTICLE II. Shall the Town of Essex adopt the Plan of Merger of the Town of Essex, Vermont*
99 *and Village of Essex Junction, Vermont dated January 11, 2020 and the proposed Charter for*
100 *the merged municipalities?*
101

102 Ms. Haney, Mr. Murray, and Mr. Franco took turns reading through a PowerPoint presentation
103 about the proposed merger. This presentation included information about the history of
104 consolidation; why a merger is being considered; benefits for the Village and benefits for the Town

105 outside the Village (TOV); what would not change; some of the challenges for merger; a gradual
106 timeline for merger; an overview of the 12-year transitional period; annual merger-related tax
107 changes; the impact of assumptions other than zero-growth in the grand list; cumulative merger-
108 related tax changes; special taxing districts; representation, voting & governance; other important
109 features, voting & next steps.

110
111 Mr. Eustis opened public discussion about the proposed merger.

112
113 Ms. Post expressed concern with the possibility that, if the merger passes, the 12-year tax phase-
114 in plan could be changed through a charter change. She talked about concerns with the increased
115 tax rate to TOV residents with merger. Ms. Haney explained how citizen-led charter changes take
116 place including petitioning, community-wide voting, and state approval.

117
118 Ms. Dunn wondered how the Town's \$1.3 million is used by Public Works for sidewalks. She asked
119 whether reorganization with merger would include changes to salary structures and elimination of
120 high-level staff. She wanted to know how the Wastewater Treatment Facility (WWTF) is shared
121 between three communities. Ms. Haney explained how funds are transferred to the Village for
122 sidewalks and how the cost of the Sidewalk District was determined. Mr. Teich talked about how
123 the Town Manager would consider entire departments to reassign tasks over time. He said that the
124 costs to use Essex's WWTF are based on the amount of capacity needed for flow treatment.

125
126 Mr. Sullivan said that he would work hard for the 12-year tax structure to remain because this
127 merger is focused on voting for fair taxes.

128
129 Mr. Massey asked what the process would be used to reconcile the two different governance
130 structures in the different Town and Village proposed charters for merger. Ms. Haney described the
131 role of the Vermont Legislature in this process. Representative Redmond and Representative
132 Vyhovsky talked about how the Government Operations (Gov. Ops.) committee would take
133 testimony, research the issue, consult with lawyers, and learn the intentions for the two structures
134 in order to decide on the issue.

135
136 Mr. Aleong asked what current expenses would be reduced over time with merger. Ms. Haney said
137 4 departments had not yet consolidated, and would be considered, and there would be savings
138 with less duplication of purchases and efforts. Mr. Teich agreed and talked about rolling out a
139 process to identify efficiencies as well as to reorganize and merge positions and committees. He
140 noted the sensitivity needed when addressing people's livelihoods while discussing merger. He
141 said his intention with these efforts would be to maintain high-quality services.

142
143 Mr. Bird asked how the proposed merger would ensure equal representation to ensure
144 constitutionality if population numbers change. Ms. Haney described the geographic boundaries of
145 the wards and explained that the population numbers are close to equal. She said the charter
146 specifies that the wards must be changed with fluctuating population numbers.

147
148 Mr. Stern said he experienced unsatisfactory municipal and police response to his experiences of a
149 neighbor trespassing, making threats, and assaulting him. He asked that the Town of Essex serve
150 the taxpayers effectively and focus should be on ensuring Essex is a safe and healthy place to live.

151
152 Ms. Davis said Public Works is coordinating details for urban, suburban, and rural communities,
153 and suggested that the suburban parts of the Town also need sidewalk plowing. She wondered if a
154 charter change would be needed to make three sidewalk districts. Mr. Teich said one of the goals
155 of the proposed charter's Sidewalk District is to maintain a certain service level after merging, but if

156 other neighborhoods want the same level of service, it is possible for the Town to create another
157 sidewalk district.

158

159 Mr. Dodge introduced himself as the Chair of the Essex Energy Committee. He wondered if the
160 reason energy planning is not explicitly included in the merger plan is because merging the
161 community would be a vehicle toward the energy plan efficiencies and goals. He expressed hope
162 that, after the merger vote, there would be renewed focus on these goals.

163

164 Ms. Cooper said merging the community should be a process of moving forward together in the
165 most efficient ways. She agreed with Mr. Sullivan that if the merger passed, she would work to
166 ensure the continuation of the 12-year tax integration plan. She asked for clarification on what it
167 would feel like to work in a merged community versus the current structure. Mr. Teich said it would
168 be helpful to have one voice and one board to plan and work on issues. He said currently, issues
169 can be pulled in different directions and depending on where you live, different ordinances can
170 dictate decisions. He described inefficiencies with these scenarios.

171

172 Mr. Shelden said he supports the merger plan, which he called a good compromise, and thanked
173 the board and residents for their hard work on it. He said the most recent population count of the
174 Village of Essex Junction and the TOV is close enough so the representative body configuration in
175 the merger is constitutional. Ms. Haney confirmed for Mr. Shelden that a constitutionally-sound
176 redistricting process takes place with every new census.

177

178 Ms. Wrenner said she disagrees that consolidation has resulted in the elimination of duplicative
179 services. She talked about budget development, services provided, structures and staffing for each
180 municipality, to illustrate her position that efforts were not originally duplicated and that
181 consolidation did not find efficiencies.

182

183 Mr. Signorello said that after the 12-year tax reconciliation plan, the increased taxes from
184 reconciliation would stay. He said he would vote no on the merger.

185

186 Mr. Allen said during the transition of taxes over 12 years, taxes may also be raised each year due
187 to regular budget increases. He asked what the major contributing factors are for rising taxes and
188 what the benefits would be. He asked if there is a backup plan if the merger does not pass. He
189 asked what separation may mean to taxpayers. Mr. Teich and Ms. Macy said the major driver for
190 budget increases are capital costs, employee salaries, and health insurance. Ms. Haney said a
191 major benefit of the tax transition is to eliminate tax inequities. She said she could not speak for the
192 Village Trustees about what direction they would move in if the merger does not pass.

193

194 Ms. Boldwin wondered about the likelihood of the Gov. Ops. Committee approving the 3+3
195 governance model. Representatives Redmond, Vyhovsky, and Houghton restated the process the
196 committee would go through to determine the governance model. They said the 3+3 structure
197 would still be on the table, even though it is uncommon in Vermont.

198

199 Ms. Stultz said there have been multiple presentations about specific savings and efficiencies
200 within multiple departments through consolidation. She said the process of devising the proposed
201 merger was collaborative and included engagement and support from all community leaders. She
202 hoped people opposed to the proposed merger would reconsider.

203

204 Mr. Certa said he appreciates the work put into the merger, public attendance of meetings, and the
205 debates. He stressed the importance of establishing equitable taxing and representation and said
206 the merger is the best option for this.

207

208 Mr. Terborgh said he supports the merger and recognized the efforts of staff and leaders on this
209 effort. He said, although it may be a challenge to pass, he is grateful for the proposed merger.

210

211 At this point in the meeting, Mr. Eustis said members of the public who had already made
212 comments could be heard a second time but priority would be given to new speakers.

213

214 Ms. Post complimented Mr. Eustis for his skill in moderating the meeting. She said the Town of
215 Essex is already one of the largest communities in Vermont. She asked what kind of infrastructure
216 the Town would be inheriting from the Village and if there are problems. Mr. Teich talked about the
217 miles of road in the Village and described multiple structures. He said overall priorities for capital
218 projects would become shared with merger. Ms. Macy said good information can be found in the
219 Village financial statements, in capital assets and depreciation statements. Mr. Lutz said both
220 municipalities have been keeping up with capital improvements and updates.

221

222 Mr. Aleong said he supports the plan for merger. He said even though there would be a tax
223 increase in the Town, there would also be potential savings over time which could help with the tax
224 burden.

225

226 Ms. Dunn asked if there was a clause in police contracts that would make changing the department
227 difficult or impossible. She asked about the constitutionality of relying on the current MOUs
228 between the Town and Village to consolidate the departments. She asked if the Gov. Ops
229 Committee, when it conducts its review, would consider that half of the town did not vote for the
230 3+3+1 governance model. Mr. Teich said there is no "Me Too" clause in police contracts and Ms.
231 Vyhovsky restated that Gov. Ops would determine a legal, well-informed governance model.

232

233 Mr. Graham said he supports the plan for merger and hopes people will vote in large numbers. He
234 said he would support mailing ballots and voting through the mail, post-Covid.

235

236 Ms. Davis said the municipalities should consider an inter-local governance structure and
237 wondered if this would be acceptable to the Gov. Ops Committee. Ms. Vyhovsky said she would
238 look into the model and consult with legal counsel about it.

239

240 Ms. Cooper thanked the moderator. She said she hoped all of the energy on both sides of the
241 merger would move people forward to vote. She said the amount of time and money spent on this
242 merger plan has been a good investment resulting in a solid merger plan.

243

244 Mr. Bird asked for clarification from Mr. Watts on a quote. Mr. Watts explained that in the quote, he
245 meant that any part of the charter could be changed by due process, but specifically he was
246 referring to the Capital and Sidewalk districts.

247

248 Ms. Wrenner said that \$100,000 had been put aside for merger-related costs. She said in 2005-
249 2006 the Selectboard found that savings though merger would not be seen until 10 years after
250 passing. She said costs associated with merger, if it passes, are unclear and because sharing of
251 equipment is already taking place this would not equate to savings. Ms. Wrenner said the TOV did
252 not have equal representation during the merger discussions. She said the vote is for the Village
253 and Town to merge or remain at status quo, and is not a vote to separate. She questioned a
254 strategy suggested during the meeting that consultants may be engaged to help find savings post-
255 merger. She said people could review her website on the merger for more information.

256

257 Mr. Moore said his mother-in-law lives in the TOV and he and his wife live in the Village illustrating
258 that Essex is one community and to propose that the merger should pass. He said now is the time
259 for this and wondered how many hours had been spent on the topic. Ms. Haney said this would be
260 the 19th time a proposed merger is put to vote since the first one in 1958.

261
262 Mr. Dodge said he likes the term "Greater Essex" for the merged community and hopes it will stick.
263

264 Mr. Signorello said that, if the merger vote fails, new ideas will come afterward and there will be a
265 new "best way" to address the issue. He said he liked the idea of inter-local government.
266

267 Mr. Terborgh said the increased taxes of \$26 per year is less than the natural increase in taxes.
268

269 Ms. Certa said she wants to see a more equitable way to operate the municipalities because the
270 current structure is not fair. She said this issue of fairness is why merger keeps coming up for a
271 vote. She said she will not stand for status quo and supports the merger plan.
272

273 Mr. Eustis ended discussion on Article II at 10:36 PM.
274

275 Mr. Eustis read Article III:
276

277 *ARTICLE III: Election of the following: Moderator, one vacancy (1-year term) Selectboard, two*
278 *vacancies (one 3-year term and one 1-year term)*
279

280 Mr. Eustis opened the Public to Be Heard portion of the meeting and called for any other public
281 comments on issues not on the agenda.
282

283 Mr. Signorello said people who are rooted in Essex, like senior residents who have lived their
284 entire adult lives in Essex, are not able to access online, remote meetings because of limited
285 understanding of, or access to, technology. He said current, local government participation is not
286 as inclusive as it should be because discussions are not including people with the wisdom of age.
287

288 Mr. Hayden asked for an update on the status of the Crescent Connector. Mr. Teich said Public
289 Works are prepared to begin work on this in 2021, including upgrading railroad crossings and utility
290 work related to the project.
291

292 Mr. Eustis made a motion to adjourn the meeting at 10:43 PM.
293
294

295 Respectfully Submitted,
296 Cathy Ainsworth
297 Recording Secretary
298

299 **Approved this _____ day of _____, 2021**
300

301 **(See minutes of this day for corrections, if any)**
302
303

304 _____
305 **Vince Franco, Clerk, Selectboard**