

**VILLAGE OF ESSEX JUNCTION
INFORMATIONAL HEARING MINUTES
WEDNESDAY APRIL 7, 2021**

VILLAGE TRUSTEES: Andrew Brown, Village President; George Tyler, Vice President; Rajan Chawla; Dan Kerin; Amber Thibeault

ADMINISTRATION and STAFF: Evan Teich, Unified Manager; Greg Duggan, Deputy Manager; Tammy Getchell, Assistant to the Manager; Wendy Hysko, Brownell Library Director; Rick Jones, Public Works Superintendent; James Jutras, Water Quality Superintendent; Marguerite Ladd, Assistant Manager; Karen Lemnah, Assessor; Brad Luck, Essex Junction Recreation & Parks Director; Sarah Macy, Finance Director; Linda Mahns, Administrative Assistant; Susan McNamara-Hill, Clerk; Robin Pierce, Community Development Director

OTHERS PRESENT: Alice Allen; Joel Baird; Jonathan Breen; Joe Breuer; Jennifer Catella; Diane Clemens; Annie Cooper; Erna D; Jeff Deslauriers; Tracey Delphia; Rep. Karen Dolan; Roy Gates; Maureen Gillard; Rep. Lori Houghton; Wendy Hysco; Joan MacKenzie; Scott Moore; Mike Czaplicke; Mike Resa; Saramichelle Stultz; Mike Sullivan; Andy Suntup; Linda Suntup; Ann Wadsworth; Andy Watts; Jess Wisloski; Irene Wrenner; George; iPhone; Ken; Ken's iPhone; Roy5

MODERATOR: Steve Eustis

1. CALL TO ORDER

Mr. Eustis introduced himself as the meeting's moderator. He called the meeting to order at 7:00 PM.

2. PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE

Mr. Eustis invited the assemblage to join in the Pledge of Allegiance.

3. NATIONAL ANTHEM

The National Anthem was performed by Emma Blatt.

4. WELCOME AND ANNOUNCEMENT

Mr. Brown introduced all staff in attendance, members of the Board of Trustees and distinguished guests. Mr. Eustis explained how the 2021 Village Annual Meeting would differ from previous years and requested civility and respect throughout.

5. PRESENTATION AND DISCUSSION ABOUT ARTICLE 1:

Mr. Eustis read Article I at 7:08 PM: Shall the voters approve an annual General Fund Budget in the amount of \$5,641,278 for fiscal year July 1, 2021 to June 30, 2022, \$3,745,866 of which is to be levied in taxes against the Village Grand List?

Mr. Brown presented information about Article 1. He described the budget as status quo, constructed to continue current services. He talked about the rolling stock funds, which moved to department budgets, and funds for buildings maintenance. He stated the budget reflects stable costs for staff. Mr. Brown provided a summary of the general fund. He said contributing Factors for the 5.1% increase in the general fund were salaries and benefits; capital transfer; restoration and maintenance of buildings; board stipends; professional services; salary study; paving; salt costs and a net decrease. He talked about the reasons behind increasing stipends for the Trustees, and committee members. He said the increases will help people overcome barriers to participating and incentivize the opportunity for people who have historically been marginalized to serve on committees and boards. Mr. Brown said the estimated tax impact of

54 the budget will bring the tax rate to 0.97%, resulting in the estimated tax increase to a \$280,000
55 property of \$8.96. Mr. Brown provided an overview of where Village resident tax dollars go by
56 percentage to Village services, Town services and the School budget. He shared examples of
57 how capital funds are planned to be spent in the upcoming year on the completion of the
58 Densmore Drive Culvert replacement and road reconstruction; a truck purchase; playground
59 equipment purchase; a manhole repair and conservation efforts.
60

61 Mr. Eustis opened public discussion of Article 1. There were no comments from the public at
62 this time.
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64 **6. PRESENTATION AND DISCUSSION ABOUT ARTICLE 2**

65 Mr. Eustis read Article 2 at 7:18 PM: Shall the Town of Essex adopt the Plan of Merger of the
66 Town of Essex, Vermont and Village of Essex Junction, Vermont dated January 11, 2020 and
67 the proposed Charter for the merged municipalities?
68

69 Mr. Tyler provided overview of the land acquisition fund. He said it was originally created to
70 accumulate money to purchase property in the Village center as a downtown revitalization
71 strategy. He said \$300,000 was used for capital expenses and the remainder was left
72 accumulating interest. Mr. Tyler said it would be appropriate for voters to choose to transfer the
73 fund's \$82,700, balance to the Economic Development fund because it is for similar purposes.
74

75 **7. PRESENTATION AND DISCUSSION ABOUT ARTICLE 3**

76 Mr. Eustis read Article 3 at 7:21 PM: Shall the voters approve extending the one cent Capital
77 Improvement tax (also known as Economic Development tax), as established in 2016, to be
78 reconsidered at annual meeting in 2024.
79

80 Mr. Tyler presented information about Article 3. He said the Economic Development fund, also
81 known as the penny on the tax rate, generates about \$120,000 per year. He said the fund was
82 set up for three years, with a requirement that, after the third year, voters would be asked to
83 approve the continuation of the tax. He described the fund a good investment into the
84 downtown. He said int 2021, it was used to purchase space near the Firebird Café, where a
85 park can be built. He showed an artist rendering of potential use for the park. He said the fund
86 also helped pay for Open and Outside event costs; small improvements at Village center; and
87 to purchase 33 public parking spaces in a parking garage being constructed.
88

89 Mr. Eustis opened public discussion of Article 2. There were no comments from the public at
90 this time.
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92 **8. PRESENTATION AND DISCUSSION ABOUT ARTICLE 4**

93 Mr. Eustis read Article 4 at 7:26 PM: Shall the annual stipend for the position of a Trustee of the
94 Village Board of Trustees be raised from \$500 to \$1,000?
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96 Ms. Thibeault provided information about Article 4. She said the stipend increase for Trustees
97 is intended to help diversify participation on the Board. She showed how the increase from
98 \$500 to \$1000 equates to a per meeting payment of \$18, and she described how it would make
99 the stipends equitable, as compared to Essex, Colchester, and Burlington. Ms. Thibeault talked
100 about additional stipend increases, for those who serve on various other committees in the
101 Village, to \$50 per meeting per person. She said this was intended to help people cover
102 expenses that may result from attending meetings.
103

104 Rep. Dolen said she appreciates the Trustees asking for reasonable compensation in an effort
105 to bring new voices to the table. She talked about how stipends can make a difference in
106 people's ability to participate.
107

108 **9. PRESENTATION AND DISCUSSION ABOUT ARTICLE 5**

109 Mr. Eustis read Article 5 at 7:31 PM: Shall the voters approve holding the 2022 Annual Meeting
110 on Wednesday, April 6, 2022 to act upon any articles not involving voting by Australian ballot
111 and to reconvene on Tuesday, April 12, 2022 to vote for the Village officers and transact any
112 business involving voting by Australian ballot?
113

114 **10. PRESENTATION AND DISCUSSION ABOUT ARTICLE 6**

115 Mr. Eustis read Article 6 at 7:32 PM: By a non-binding resolution, shall the Essex Junction
116 Board of Trustees be advised to draft a charter to create the independent City of Essex
117 Junction, for consideration by the Village of Essex Junction voters no later than November
118 2021, should efforts seeking a vote for reconsideration on the issue of merger fail. We advise
119 that the charter shall not include any union municipal districts, interlocal contracts, special tax
120 districts or other relationships within the Town of Essex for the provision of Village Government
121 services. The only exception may be for the consideration of police services.
122

123 Mr. Kerin explained that Article 6 is being asked because 5% of the Village voters signed a
124 petition to find a direction for moving forward, if the merger revote does not pass. He said the
125 petitioners are hoping for a charter that separates the Village from the Town. He clarified that if
126 a vote on Article 6 passes and a charter is created, any charter changes need approval from
127 the legislature. Mr. Kerin said the Trustees are planning to develop an advisory board to
128 consider options if the merger revote fails. He said he believes that merger would make Essex
129 stronger but, if it fails, the communities will find a way to move forward amicably.
130

131 Mr. Eustis opened public discussion of Article 6.
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133 Rep. Houghton thanked the Trustees for their fast response to the petition and for their
134 leadership on this issue.
135

136 Mr. Sullivan thanked the Trustees for the hard work involved with the merger issue and
137 commended everyone involved in the effort.
138

139 Mr. Deslauriers asked what the benefits would be if the Village were to become its own,
140 independent city. Mr. Kerin said that taxing would change so Village residents would no longer
141 also pay taxes to Essex Town. He explained that the Town outside the Village grew services in
142 recreation, fire and more over time, and the Village helps pay for these, even though there are
143 redundancies. He talked about how the conclusion or IBM's machinery equipment tax resulted
144 in increased taxes transferred to the Village, which began some of the tax equity discussions.
145

146 Mr. Czaplicke asked for clarification on what services the Village taxes to the Town pay for. Mr.
147 Brown said the taxes go toward everything in town government, which includes some
148 duplicative services. Mr. Kerin explained that, when the Village originally was formed within the
149 Town, it established services that the Town did not need or want. He said the Town outside the
150 Village grew, over 150 years, to a point where they wanted similar services. He said the Village
151 is an incorporated municipality within the Town, which is why the taxpayers have to pay for
152 both. Mr. Tyler added that, under state statute, an incorporated village must exist inside a town,
153 and must continue to pay taxes to the town, but the town is not required to pay for services into
154 the incorporated village. He said that many other Town and Village arrangements in Vermont
155 have found equitable status quo ways to deal with the structure, but when the Town outside the
156 Village grew the Essex municipalities did not find a status quo.
157

158 Mr. Sullivan asked if the Town could hold a second revote if the merger revote on April 13
159 passes. Mr. Brown explained that a second revote cannot take place because a question can
160 only be asked of voters one more time during a year and this revote constitutes as that.
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11. ANNOUNCEMENT ABOUT ARTICLE 7

Mr. Eustis read Article 7 at 7:54 PM: To elect Village officers required by law including: Moderator (one year term); two Village Trustees (2 three-year terms); one Library Trustee (five-year term)?

Mr. Eustis explained that polls at the Highschool would be open on Tuesday April 13 from 7:00 AM to 7:00 PM but people could instead choose to mail-in or drop off ballots at the Town office until April 12. Ms. McNamera-Hill said ballots must be received by the end of polls on Tuesday.

Mike Sullivan suggested that people should consider taking their ballots to the Town offices or polling location instead of mailing them, due to the short window of time left.

Mr. Teich explained that when a ballot is mailed locally, it will go to a poll mailing center in a different part of the state before coming back to Essex. Ms. McNamera-Hill thanked the US Postal Service workers for their hard work.

Rep. Dolan thanked staff for their experience and work to conduct an effective vote.

12. PUBLIC TO BE HEARD

Mr. Tyler stated there is false information circulating claiming he is the sole writer of the proposed plan of merger charter being voted on. He clarified that the process was all-inclusive of Trustees, Selectboard members and Legal Counsel.

Mr. Chawla presented an overview of VT Act 164, which will regulate the production and sale of cannabis. He said municipalities can opt-out of cannabis sales, but not production. He talked about the types of licenses that will become available and explained the legislature's timeline for discussions and license development. Mr. Chawla said that communities will need to opt-in if they want to be able to allow retail sales but they could then control the locations of cannabis sales through zoning. He invited the public to attend Village Planning Commission and Trustee meetings to be part of this discussion. He said towns will be able to issue Cannabis sale licenses to establishments but incorporated villages cannot. Mr. Teich said that, once elections are over, this topic will be prioritized and Community Development Directors are conducting outreach on the topic. Mr. Duggan said a combined effort will include appointments from the Trustees, Police Department and Economic Development Commission to address the issue.

Mr. Brown provided an update on the Crescent Connector. He showed a map of Pearl, Lincoln Park, Maple, and Main streets which illustrated the road to be established. He said federal funds will be used to link streets and bypass train tracks to improve travel from Essex to Williston. He said plans include increased public parking; improved property development; better opportunities for walk and bike transportation; and traffic diversion away from the Village center. He said this year's first phase of the project will replace train crossing intersections to improve driving, including establishing rail guards. Mr. Brown said that the second phase of the project, next year, will establish the road. Mr. Tyler thanked the Village attorney, engineer, and Community Development Director for their efforts on this major rebuild.

Mr. Sullivan wondered whether the train crossings could be established as quiet crossings where horns are not blown. Mr. Teich said that Central Railroad may consider this in the future but were not ready to consider addressing the federal rail administration guidelines for quiet crossings with the Crescent Connector project.

Mr. Sullivan requested that the Police Chief address the issue of people on high speed motorbikes at 2:00 AM in the Town and Village.

215 Mr. Brown expressed gratitude to the community over this pandemic year, for coming together
216 to help each other and share acts of kindness.
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218 **13. ADJOURN**

219 Mr. Eustis adjourned the meeting at 8:23 PM.
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221
222 Respectfully Submitted,
223 Cathy Ainsworth
224 Recording Secretary
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