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**CITY OF ESSEX JUNCTION
CITY COUNCIL
MINUTES OF MEETING
March 27, 2024**

COUNCILORS PRESENT: Raj Chawla, President; Amber Thibeault, Vice President; Marcus Certa, Clerk; Andrew Brown; Elaine Haney.

ADMINISTRATION: Regina Mahony, City Manager; Wendy Hysko, Library Director; Harlan Smith, Interim Building Coordinator.

OTHERS PRESENT: Dorothy Bergendahl, Jim Conley, Helen Donahey, Jean Grant, Ursula Haverback, Karen Hergesheimer, Fred Leuchter, Resa Mehren, Nick Meyer, Tim Miller, Rick Monet, Sheila Porter, Warren Spinner, Dennis Thibeault.

1. **CALL TO ORDER**

Councilor Chawla called the meeting to order at 6:30 P.M.

2. **AGENDA ADDITIONS/CHANGES**

3. **APPROVE AGENDA**

4. **PUBLIC TO BE HEARD**

a. Comments from public on items not on the agenda

Karen Hergesheimer thanked Councilor Certa for coming to a library event for the public and said that they had a good conversation and she appreciates him coming and participating. She thanked staff of the Brownell Library for all of the work that they do in the community.

5. **BUSINESS ITEMS**

a. Library DH Brief to Council

Director Hysko began by thanking Councilor Haney for attending last week's Library Trustee meeting. She said that the library is quite busy and continues to see high visitor volumes from all ages. She said that she is working with the City on planning for a roof replacement, and has applied for a large grant to help pay for that, as well as to pay for upgrades to make the front entrance more ADA-accessible. Councilor Chawla asked when the City will hear back about the grant, and Director Hysko replied that they should hear back this summer, and that the grant is quite competitive, though she believes that the City is a good candidate.

Councilor Certa acknowledged the significant number of challenges occurring at Brownell, saying that he looks forward to hearing from staff and Trustees on possible solutions and collaborating to improve the challenges. He also acknowledged the overwhelming support in the community for the library. He said that he has heard specific feedback from many members of the public who would like the library to be open on Saturdays during the summer. Director Hysko noted contractual and budgetary constraints around increasing hours on Saturdays, but thanked Councilor Certa for this feedback.

Councilor Chawla asked for details about the different ways that users can access the library and its materials. Director Hysko replied that the library has print materials that visitors can access and check out, an extensive audio-visual collection, digital audiobooks, e-books, and magazines, which are available on-demand, ten public computers, laptops, a newspaper database that includes local papers, online streaming, magazines in non-English languages, robust kids programming, and a library of things (garden tools, instruments, other types of tools, various pieces of equipment, and games that can be checked out).

54 Councilor Certa asked how the library approaches being accessible to the City’s non-English-speaking
55 New American community. Director Hysko replied that there have been challenges with language
56 barriers, but that there are translation services available electronically that have helped. She noted that
57 the youth of the New American community tend to also help interpret and interact with staff, as they tend
58 to learn English more easily through their participation in the school system. Councilor Certa asked
59 whether there may be perceived barriers to accessing the library on the part of the New American
60 community, and Director Hysko spoke about outreach activities that the youth staff conduct in the
61 schools to provide education on the library as a resource.

62
63 Director Hysko spoke about the limited hours of operation and lack of a pay phone at the train station,
64 saying that she has witnessed it causes stress among some community members who may not have a
65 smartphone nor another way of purchasing tickets if they arrive at the station and it is closed. She noted
66 that many of these individuals come to the Brownell Library in search of a pay phone or internet
67 connection to help with purchasing tickets and checking schedules. She asked that this be taken into
68 consideration as the City pursues more upgrades at the train station.

69
70 The following public comments were received:

- 71 • Jean Grant, a Library Trustee, spoke about some of the other library initiatives and programs.
72 She noted that the library has a seed swap program, as well as a museum pass check-out
73 program.

74
75 b. Update from Tree Advisory Committee

76 Nick Meyer, Chair of the Tree Advisory Committee, provided an update on the committee’s activities this
77 past year, as well as spoke about the general benefits of having a healthy urban forest in the City. He
78 noted that the Tree Committee has planted around 250 trees since it was formed (37 in the past year).
79 He spoke about the committee’s partnership with Branch Out Burlington to buy young trees, grow them
80 for several years, and plant them in the City. He spoke about Arbor Day outreach events to local schools.
81 He spoke about the City’s Tree City USA designation and associated requirements. He spoke about
82 community engagement events over the past year. He spoke about various collaboration activities with
83 the Development Review Board as well as the Public Works Department.

84
85 Warren Spinner, a member of the Tree Advisory Committee, spoke about the discovery of the Emerald
86 Ash Borer beetle in Essex Junction in December. He spoke about the committee’s work to spread the
87 word among the community about this infestation. He said that the City has been proactive and has
88 worked since 2019 to remove about 60 ash trees from the City (and has about 100 more of them to still
89 remove). He said that the City has also received a grant from the State to help with this remediation and
90 to replace the trees that were removed with more diverse species. Councilor Chawla asked how a
91 resident could ask for a replacement tree on their private property, and Mr. Spinner described the
92 process, saying that the City would plant a replacement tree and maintain it for a year. Councilor Certa
93 asked about the impact of the Emerald Ash Borer beetle on the public parks and green spaces. Mr.
94 Spinner replied that the only public park with native ash trees growing is Cascade Park. Councilor Haney
95 asked about removal of ash trees on private property, and Mr. Spinner replied that the property-owner
96 would need to cover the cost, but that the Tree Advisory Committee could serve as technical advisors
97 and consultants to assist in selecting replacement trees. Councilor Chawla asked if there is state funding
98 to help homeowners remove trees, and Mr. Spinner replied that though the cost of tree removal is not
99 covered by the state grant the City has, the grant will cover the cost of planting on private property.

100
101 c. 2 Lincoln Remodel Update and Discussion

102 Building Coordinator Smith began by speaking about the design phase and cost estimates for the
103 renovation project for 2 Lincoln Street. He noted that the initial cost estimate came in high, which

104 required revisions to the scope of the project to reduce its cost to fit within the budget. He noted that the
105 second iteration of cost estimates after the change in scope are also above the budget of funds available
106 for the project. City Manager Mahony provided a more detailed description of the current and proposed
107 layouts once renovations are completed, if the City pursues the current scope of work for the project.
108

109 Building Coordinator Smith described what had been in the original project scope and what has been
110 removed as a result of the first value engineering exercise. He noted that the original scope proposed
111 to upgrade the building to three-phase power, relocate its generator, add an elevator, address the lobby
112 and resident services, address public bathrooms and meeting spaces, address the office space layout
113 for security, workflow, and efficiency, address the HVAC system and install it on the roof to maintain
114 basement storage, and accommodate Teen Center needs where possible. He said that this scope's cost
115 estimates were outside of the target for the project's budget, at which point a value engineering exercise
116 was conducted to remove certain parts of the scope and reconfigure others to be done more cost-
117 effectively. He said that these changes included leaving the building's power as single-phase, changing
118 certain aspects of the lobby, reducing the vestibule from three bays to one bay and addressing ADA
119 concerns to the vestibule, moving the HVAC system to the basement, adding a sewer line lining, and
120 addressing door replacements and Teen Center types of flooring. He said that even after this exercise,
121 the new cost estimates are still outside of the target for the project's budget by about \$350,000. City
122 Manager Mahony said that they are now moving forward without taking a second round of items out,
123 and would like to put this project out to bid to obtain actual cost estimates from contractors.
124

125 Councilor Chawla said that he would like to approach this project in a way that enough renovation occurs
126 to not need future upgrades in the near-term, and that he would like it if the City can find enough funding
127 to have meaningful and needed renovations now. He said that in terms of feedback, he would have liked
128 to see public restrooms be included in the scope, noting that they came out after the first value
129 engineering exercise. He also asked whether going with the more expensive energy option now might
130 pay off in increased energy efficiency and savings in the future. He expressed a desire to look at
131 including window restoration and resealing back into the scope of work. He also noted that it is difficult
132 to tell how much of a cost impact the Teen Center is having on the project, so firmer estimates for that
133 line item specifically would be helpful to see. He asked whether the sewer lining could be funded through
134 the capital budget.
135

136 Councilor Haney said that she anticipates that once this goes out to be and preliminary estimates come
137 back, it will be high and will necessitate further reduction in scope anyway. Building Coordinator Smith
138 replied that though the market will not return to pre-Covid levels, some of the trades have been able to
139 obtain more labor and become more competitive, which is why the City is pursuing obtaining a
140 Guaranteed Maximum Price, which should reflect the true costs. He said that they do not anticipate the
141 cost being much different than the current \$2.9 million estimate. City Manager Mahony noted that if they
142 do not receive the library grant funding, they could have around \$200,000 available potentially for this
143 project. She also noted that there are energy grants from the state available, though the City would not
144 likely qualify for some of them because it is not low-income. She said that the LOT fund would be the
145 only other bucket of funding available for this.
146

147 Councilor Brown said that if there are opportunities to get firmer estimates from potential contractors, he
148 is supportive of that as a way of moving forward. He also said that the City should get a head start on
149 addressing its future building needs in terms of the Fire Department and Public Works buildings, and
150 think about the option of bonding.
151

152 Councilor Certa expressed concern about removing the vestibule from the project scope list completely,
153 and also expressed concern about not making some of the public safety improvements. He asked about

154 the electric vehicle charging station and whether it could potentially be a revenue-generating
155 mechanism. City Manager Mahony said that she would look into this further. Building Coordinator Smith
156 noted that an EV charging station may be a new requirement at the state level for new buildings or
157 buildings undergoing renovation.

158
159 Building Coordinator Smith suggested that they could request alternate add pricing estimates in RFP
160 responses from contractors, to get a sense of what various wish-list items would cost if they were
161 pursued in addition to the base scope of work (for example, a bidder could include an optional cost
162 estimate for heat pump installation in addition to the replacement of the heating system). He said that
163 the window restoration and resealing line item would also be a good candidate for an alternate add
164 estimate. Councilor Haney asked about the benefits of going to a three-phase energy power system.
165 Building Coordinator Smith explained that it is more energy efficient, though the payback would be longer
166 (50 to 100 years) than some other energy efficient solutions, because the building runs on a generator
167 system. He said that it would improve the longevity of the equipment, as well, but that the three-phase
168 system line item was a relatively easy item to remove from the scope. Councilor Thibeault agreed with
169 the approach of having alternate adds included in bid responses to the RFP for this project. She said
170 that they should also keep the Land Development Code and the City's Energy Plan in mind when
171 developing this project scope.

172
173 Building Coordinator Smith said that they are targeting releasing an RFP in May with responses due
174 back in early June.

175
176 The following public comments were received:

- 177 • Dorothy Bergendahl asked for more information about the Senior Center and what will occur with
178 it in the context of this renovation project, including the timeline for renovation and what changes
179 are being made to the space. City Manager Mahony said that the City offices will move into that
180 senior space during renovation and that there is a level of contaminant work that will be done
181 even before the office space moves into the Senior Center. She said that previously-
182 communicated timelines have not changed.

183
184 d. Discussion & Consideration of Green Mountain Transit Funding Support

185 City Manager Mahony said that GMT for the last number of years has been working with ARPA and
186 one-time funding from the federal government to help manage their operations and have been
187 experiencing increased costs. She said that they are confronted with a bad fiscal situation in FY25 and
188 an even worse fiscal situation in FY26, as much of this federal funding will sunset at that time. She said
189 that the state has been trying to come up with solutions for how to address some of these funding
190 challenges and gaps and decreased revenue in the transportation fund. She said that GMT's ask is
191 currently an ask of the state legislature. She noted that Burlington's City Council approved a resolution
192 of support and Shelburne is also working on a letter of support to its legislative delegation as well. She
193 offered to develop a letter of support for GMT on behalf of Essex Junction as well, if Councilors are
194 amenable. Councilor Chawla said that Burlington's resolution is a good starting point for a letter, as well
195 as the talking points from GMT itself. He said it would be worth noting that Essex Junction is on one of
196 the busiest GMT routes in the City and that all of the planning and potential development for tackling the
197 housing crisis requires an investment in public transportation in order to be successful. Councilor Haney
198 noted that the Town of Essex should have a serious role in this as well, and suggested partnering with
199 them to reach out to the legislative delegation. Councilor Chawla also suggested creating and pushing
200 out a call to action on Front Porch Forum for residents to reach out to their legislators on this topic.

201
202 **Councilor Brown made a motion, seconded by Councilor Haney, to authorize the City Council**
203 **President to sign a letter on behalf of the City Council asking Chittenden County State**

204 **Representatives and State Senators to support the recommendations of the Report on Funding**
205 **Sources for Public Transit Nonfederal Match into the transportation bill. The motion passed 5-0.**
206

207 6. **CONSENT ITEMS**

- 208 a. Approve Meeting Minutes: March 13, 2024
209 b. Approve Finance Policy Updates
210 c. Approve Annual Local Emergency Management Plan
211 d. Approve Gem & Mineral Club Banner Application
212

213 **Councilor Certa made a motion, seconded by Councilor Haney, to approve the consent agenda.**
214 **The motion passed 5-0.**
215

216 7. **COUNCIL MEMBER COMMENTS & CITY MANAGER REPORT**

217 City Manager Mahony noted that City offices and the Library will be closing at noon on April 8, 2024 for
218 the solar eclipse. She noted that the City offices has pairs of eclipse glasses for distribution to the public.
219 She noted that certain residents may receive correspondence from MSK Engineers, and said that this
220 is a legitimate communication pertaining to a lead line inventory project to identify and remove any
221 remaining lead service lines in the community.
222

223 Councilor Chawla apologized to the community once more for the racist and hate-filled speech that has
224 occurred at a number of City Council meetings (including tonight's). He said that the City is actively
225 working with its attorney, the Vermont League of Cities and Towns, and the anti-defamation league to
226 determine what is and isn't permissible in terms of limiting speech at public forums.
227

228 8. **READING FILE**

- 229 a. Check Warrant #240398 3/22/2024
230 b. Planning Commission Minutes 3/7/2024
231 c. Bike Walk Advisory Committee Minutes 3/18/2024
232 d. Essex Restorative Justice Report
233

234 9. **EXECUTIVE SESSION**

235
236 10. **ADJOURN**
237

238 **Councilor Haney made a motion, seconded by Councilor Certa, to adjourn the meeting. The**
239 **motion passed 5-0 at 8:26 P.M.**
240

241 Respectfully Submitted,
242 Amy Coonradt