

VILLAGE OF ESSEX JUNCTION ANNUAL MEETING MINUTES

Essex Community Educational Center
Wednesday April 4, 2019

ESSEX JUNCTION BOARD OF TRUSTEES: George Tyler (Village President), Andrew Brown, Lori Houghton, Dan Kerin

STAFF PRESENT: Evan Teich, Unified Manager; Greg Duggan, Deputy Town Manager; Sarah Macy, Finance Director/ Assistant Village Manager; Tammy Getchell, Assistant to the Manager; Susan McNamara- Hill, Clerk; Chris Gaboriault, Fire Chief; Brad Luck, Recreation and Parks Director; Jim Jutras, Water Quality Superintendent; Rick Jones, Highway Superintendent; Wendy Hysko, Library Director

PUBLIC COMMENTORS: Kelly Adams; Sue Armond; Dorothy Bergendahl; Laura Buermann; Scott Freedman; Steven Gragg; Sue McCormick; Nick Meyer; Greg Morgan; Tim Miller; Bob O'Neil; Andy Paloukos; Mike Plageman; Cecilia Polansky; Brian Sheldon; Eve Stern; Mike Sullivan; Robert Walsh; Alison Wermer; John Wermer

MODERATOR: Steve Eustis

Moderator Steve Eustis led the assemblage in reciting the Pledge of Allegiance at 7:07 p.m., then introduced the Essex High School Chamber Choir, who performed the National Anthem and Vermont's state song, These Green Mountains.

Mr. Eustis invited the Village Trustees' President George Tyler to the podium. Mr. Tyler introduced Essex staff and Trustees who were seated at the head table, staff assembled in the auditorium, as well as Christine Packard, Chair of the Brownell Library Board; Dylan Giambatista, Essex Junction Representative; Amber Thibeault and Raj Chawla, candidates for the Board of Trustees; Andy Watts, of the Town Selectboard; and Elaine Haney, former Village Trustee and current Essex Selectboard Chair.

Ms. Haney said farewell statements as she ends her service as an Essex Junction Trustee. She explained stepping down from the Board of Trustees to focus on her recent appointment as Chair of the Town of Essex Selectboard. She thanked the residents for the opportunity to have served as a Trustee, and thanked the board members for their collegiality. She pledged her continued support of the Village, as Selectboard president.

Mr. Tyler recognized former Selectboard Chair Mr. Levy for his service in this role.

Mr. Eustis explained the Robert's Rules of Order for the meeting and requested that individuals with comments use the microphones and state their names for the record. The public had no questions regarding the general rules of this meeting.

At 7:23 pm Mr. Eustis called the meeting to order and read Article 1.

ARTICLE 1: Shall the voters act upon the report of the auditor?

MICHAEL PLAGEMAN made a motion, and BOB O'NEIL seconded, to approve Article 1.

Mr. Eustis opened public discussion on Article 1. Hearing no comments, he called a voice vote to accept the Article.

The motion passed unanimously; ARTICLE 1 ADOPTED.

Mr. Eustis read Article 2:

ARTICLE 2: Shall the voters approve an annual General Fund Budget in the amount of \$5,164,913 for fiscal year July 1, 2019 to June 30, 2020, \$3,556,422 of which is to be levied in taxes against the Village Grand List?

BOB O'NEIL made a motion, and ALISON WERMER seconded, to approve Article 2.

Mr. Eustis invited Mr. Tyler to the podium to share a budget overview:

- Mr. Tyler explained that, in crafting the Village of Essex Junction (Village) budget, the Trustees and staff considered how to bolster spending on capital projects (i.e. road paving), with a tolerable tax rate increase, while continuing to integrate Village and Town budgets. He pointed out that the Village's general fund increased by 4.24% and the tax appropriation increased by 2.81%. He provided a summary of budget increases, with salaries, benefits and capital spending as major drivers. Mr. Tyler shared a pie chart of total distribution of local property taxes from the schools (\$4,301), the Village of Essex junction (\$895) and the Town of Essex (\$1,442) on an average assessed home with the value of \$280,000. He also discussed a pie chart of how the Village of Essex Junction invests the \$895 raised by taxes into services delivered by the municipality. Mr. Tyler discussed the savings being found through consolidation and provided an overview of funding used in self-supporting projects (enterprise funds), such as the wastewater treatment plant, water, sanitation and recreation.

Mr. Eustis opened public comment on Article 2:

- Steven Gragg spoke about wanting future services in Essex Village to remain high quality. He expressed concern that the Village ends up at a disadvantage, even though they pay a premium for services, when Trustees discuss sharing and integrating funds between the Village and Essex Town. Mr. Tyler explained efficiencies created through staff-sharing and continued Village oversight of the Public Works budget and projects even though it is integrated with the town. Mr. Teich explained that the goal of ongoing discussions and planning is to maintain high level, coordinated services, not decrease quality.
- Tim Miller commented that the Essex Junction Recreation and Parks discussion about offering resident fees to non-residents seems misguided. Mr. Brown said that the 2020 budget does not assume that non-residents will pay resident fees. Joint meetings of the Trustees and Selectboard will be addressing this topic.

Hearing no other comments on Article 2, Mr. Eustis called a voice vote to accept the article.

The motion passed unanimously; ARTICLE 2 ADOPTED.

Mr. Eustis read Article 3:

ARTICLE 3: Shall the voters approve holding the 2020 Annual Meeting on Wednesday, April 1, 2020 to act upon any articles not involving voting by Australian ballot and to reconvene on Tuesday, April 14, 2020 to vote for the Village officers and transact any businesses involving voting by Australian ballot?

BOB O'NEIL made a motion, and ALISON WERMER seconded, to approve Article 3.

Mr. Eustis opened public discussion on Article 3. Hearing no comments, he called a voice vote to accept the article.

The motion passed unanimously; ARTICLE 3 ADOPTED.

Mr. Eustis read Article 4 and explained that no binding actions could be taken under this article. He also pointed out that Ballot Items in Article 5 will be voted on in polling locations.

ARTICLE 4: To transact any other business that may lawfully come before the meeting?

- Mr. Tyler requested, on behalf of the Library, that residents fill out and return a survey that will be used to help plan for the future of the library. He also announced, on behalf of Mr. Jutras, to take some free doggy bags from the hallway display table.
- Ms. Houghton addressed the assemblage in farewell because she did not seek re-election this year, after 8 years of service as a Trustee. She thanked the community, fellow Trustees and the staff for the opportunity to serve. She pledged her continued work on behalf of Essex, serving as a State Representative and received a standing ovation from those in attendance.
- Mr. Brown invited the community to consider moving in a new direction to fix Village infrastructure, including roads. He referenced a General Fund Capital Reserve Plan document to highlight a list of future projects in the amount of \$11,217,525. With the current funding formula, these projects will not begin until FYE26 and not be complete until FYE32. He showed slides about what has been done to strengthen capital project planning and funding; current projections and alternate options for decreasing the timeline for infrastructure improvements. He specifically discussed the options of taking out a bond, boosting the capital transfer and implementing a local option tax (LOT). He pointed out that of all three options, the LOT could be raised without increasing property taxes. He then invited questions or discussion prior to conducting a straw poll to determine which options voters may support.
 - Alison Wermer pointed out that, with a local options tax, 69% would be used locally, after the State of Vermont took a cut, and she wondered what part of this 69% would be used for Village projects vs. Town of Essex projects. Mr. Brown said this would still need to be determined.
 - Kelly Adams clarified, for the straw poll, that a person could vote for one or more than one of the options.
 - John Wermer pointed out that the Village should consider looking at how large events, like the Champlain Valley Exposition (CVE), operate to determine how they are taxed. Mr. Brown noted that a LOT Rooms and Meals tax would apply to food at the fair, but ticket sales are a question. Mr. Brown also clarified, by request of Mr. Wermer, that the Village did not consider a specific-purchase LOT for items such as sugary drinks, etc.
 - Cecilia Polansky thought the Village should consider thoughtfully planning and finding funds in General Fund revenues to be used for infrastructure. She pointed out that the General Fund has increased by \$1 million since 2016, including regular raises and great retirement benefits to staff but, by comparison, residents do not necessarily experience this.
 - Scott Freedman advocated for the LOT, noting that all the surrounding communities are already doing this and it seems that Essex is leaving money on the table by not as well.

- Andy Paloubus asked for clarification on a slide that stated \$1,326,952 could have been raised by a 1% Meals & rooms and Sales & Use tax in 2018. He wondered how this was calculated. Mr. Brown clarified that the figure was based on relevant sales reported to the State of Vermont from any business that identified as operating in the Town of Essex or Village of Essex Junction.
- Greg Morgan wondered how much money a LOT on Vermont's retail sale of cannabis would add to revenue that could be collected. Mr. Teich said the projections do not consider this because sales projections are uncertain. Mr. Morgan hopes that, in the future, Essex can tax what is grown and shipped out of the community.
- Robert Walsh wondered if there was a dollar amount paid per resident if a LOT were implemented and wondered what the disadvantage of a LOT would be. Mr. Brown explained that the Department of Taxes does not keep track of who is buying goods so this number is not available. Mr. Teich mentioned a risk that people choose to shop elsewhere, where there is no tax, but because other communities are already taxing, this is unlikely.
- Eden Stern said that she once lived where there was a LOT, and it did not sway shoppers away. She advocated for the LOT because anyone who is spending money in the Village or Town, not just residents, would help generate revenue.
- Nick Meyer encouraged the Trustees to consider if the LOT could be applied to the CVE differently. He wondered if the group's non-profit status should be changed. Mr. Meyer also asked if consolidation with the Town of Essex would affect a bond. Mr. Tyler explained that the costs associated with any bond taken out by the Village would stay with Village taxpayers after a consolidation.
- Laura Buermann requested that the Village Trustees find out what residents of neighboring municipalities think about their LOTs, to help determine how it would benefit Essex.
- Mr. Eustis conducted a Straw Poll of the four options for raising funds for capital projects, to determine popular directions:
 - No taxes- one person raised a hand
 - Taking out a Bond- about 10 % of the room raised their hands
 - Boost Capital Transfer from the budget by \$1 million- less than 10% of the room raised their hands
 - Implement a LOT- more than 90% of the room raised their hands.
- Mike Sullivan asked the Trustees about what may be done to address the conversion of single-family homes, in his neighborhood of Indian Acres, into multi-family homes. He said this is resulting in properties that are in disarray. Mr. Kerin explained that if a home is owner-occupied, renting out space as an accessory apartment is legal and enforcing ordinances about property maintenance may help. Mr. Teich said he could investigate occupant density of properties as well as what could be done if residences are non-owner occupied.
- Nick Meyer suggested that Essex consider implementing a rental registry program, like the ones in Burlington and Winooski, which document fee-based units to conduct safety standards inspections. He said this practice has seen positive results in cleaning up housing stock.

- Cecilia Polansky wondered if the Trustees could find a way to fix up and paint the train station. Mr. Tyler explained that this is a priority and there is a plan to fix it with no money yet found for the project. Ms. Houghton noted that the building is not owned by the Village.
- Mike Plageman encouraged the Trustees not to consider taxing marijuana sales in the community as a revenue source, but to leave legislation of these sales with the State of Vermont.
- Sue McCormack wondered why the Village sidewalks, this year and last year, have been very icy and hard to navigate. Mr. Teich and Mr. Tyler pointed out that the challenges to the sidewalks and roads correlate to extreme snowfall and difficult thaw and freeze temperatures.
- Dorothy Bergendahl, to audience applause, strongly encouraged the Trustees to look at the CVE again and pointed out their increased noise and operations. She also asserted that the Village should hire a new Senior Center Director, noting its 3-month vacancy.
- Mr. Sullivan pointed out that the 4-foot-wide snow plow used on 3-foot sidewalks poses a challenge for homeowners to fix their lawns in the spring.
- Tim Miller said that where he grew up, in New York, residents had to clear their own sidewalks. He encouraged residents of Essex to consider cleaning their own sidewalks because shoveling and taking care of their neighborhood is a good approach, instead of over relying on public works, who are already working constantly and doing an excellent job. He extended a thank you to Rick Jones, with applause from the room, for the great job he is doing and for taking time every spring to help fix people's lawns.
- Steven Gragg wondered, regarding Design 5 Corners planning, whether anyone had considered the sentimental value of the intersection or how emergency vehicle access would change with the redesign ideas. Mr. Tyler explained some of the redesign elements suggested in the engineering study. He said the study showed the overall wait time within the area of the intersection, with the proposed changes, would be down by 50%, and this would improve emergency vehicle access. He also noted that changing the intersection will improve pedestrian safety and that the community's identity could benefit from moving away from being known for its 5-way traffic jam.

Hearing no other comments, Mr. Eustis called a motion to adjourn.

BOB O'NEIL made a motion, and RICHARD SMITH seconded, to adjourn the meeting.

The motion to adjourn passed unanimously at 8:22 p.m.

Respectfully Submitted,

Cathy Ainsworth
Recording Secretary