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TOWN OF ESSEX SELECTBOARD VILLAGE OF ESSEX JUNCTION TRUSTEES JOINT MEETING MINUTES Thursday, August 20, 2020

- 5 **SELECTBOARD:** Elaine Haney, Chair; Vince Franco; Dawn Hill-Fleury; Patrick Murray; Andy Watts.
- **TRUSTEES:** Andrew Brown, President; Raj Chawla; Dan Kerin; Amber Thibeault; George Tyler.

ADMINISTRATION and STAFF: Evan Teich, Unified Manager; Sarah Macy, Finance Director; Susan McNamara Hill, Clerk/ Treasurer; Dan Richardson, Town Attorney.

OTHERS PRESENT: Bob Bancroft; Devin Bates; Kevin Collins; Tim Miller; Marybeth Redmond; Patty Larose Kent; Gregg Denton; Adam Kavanaugh; Lori Houghton; Annie Cooper; Tracy Delphia; Helen Diplock; Brad
 Kennison; Russell Mills; Roseanne Prestipino; Brian Shelden; Ken Signorello; Margaret Smith; Irene Wrenner;
 Lorraine Zaloom; Mike Nosak, Essex Reporter.

18 **1. CALL TO ORDER**

- Andrew Brown called the meeting of the Village of Essex Junction Board of Trustees to order to enter into
 joint business with the Essex Selectboard at 6:32 PM.
- Elaine Haney called the meeting of the Town of Essex Selectboard to order to enter into joint business
 with the Village of Essex Junction Board of Trustees at 6:32 PM.

25 2. AGENDA ADDITIONS/CHANGES

- There were no additions/changes to the Agenda. Mr. Teich noted that Mr. Richardson would be available for questions after 7:30 PM. Members agreed to the format changes proposed, which were to have a check in and public input at 8:30 PM and to allow discussion on business and non-business items at Public To Be Heard.
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31 3. PUBLIC TO BE HEARD

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Mr. Ken Signorello gave examples of communities in Maine that managed to stay separate, but have
 common services through inter-local agreements. He wondered if the proposed merged charter was the
 best the community could do given that this issue has failed since 1958. He believed that a vote in
 November would create months of heated debate and animosity that usually comes after each vote. He
 said they should set a higher bar for the charter.

39 4. BUSINESS ITEMS

- 40 Discuss and possible action to finalize the amended draft merger charter language
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- The issue is for the Trustees and the Selectboard (SB) to discuss and potentially take action to finalize theproposed merger charter language.
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- Ms. Haney asked the Trustees why they are asking the SB to take action on a merged charter for November.
- 47 Mr. Brown was in favor of placing a merged charter on the ballot in November because it was a mail-in
- 48 presidential election, which would result in a significant higher voter turn-out and an opportunity to hear
- 49 from as many people as possible. He also believed that merger was not something new, was older than he
- 50 was, and that the charter was a conversation that's been going on for a while and, with the 12-year phase tax
- 51 relief, it could be finalized.

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53	Mr. Kerin agreed with Mr. Brown and added that he also wanted to move forward with this issue for the
54	Village business owners who are not property owners, but pay taxes and don't get a vote.
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56	Mr. Tyler wanted to understand the intentions of the SB. He provided a recap on the merged process for the
57	past three years that included a unanimous vote last February by both boards in favor of an outline of a
58	merger plan. Word from the Government Operations Committee (GOC) was that the communities were on
59	the right track. He never heard during this process that any member did not agree with this direction. Then it
60	was put on hold to address the technical issues of a 3+3 representation model and because of Covid-19. He
61	then learned that the SB was considering two amendments to the Town Charter. Mr. Tyler listed the reasons
62	he was in favor of finalizing the merged charter and placing it on the November ballot.
63 64	1) It happens the work that the SD and Tructors have done for the last three years
64 65	 It honors the work that the SB and Trustees have done for the last three years. It gives the Trustees an opportunity to have a good conversation with Village residents regarding
66	representation, financing and a back-up plan.
67	3) It takes the pressure off the boards to meet jointly for the next several months.
68	57 It takes the pressure on the boards to meet jointly for the next several months.
69	He asked the SB members for a clear signal regarding their intentions for merger.
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71	Ms. Thibeault agreed that if not for Covid-19, the boards would be moving forward with a vote in November.
72	She looked forward to hearing the SB's thoughts on the work completed by the Trustees.
73	
74	Mr. Chawla was optomistic because the boards are so close to finalizing the merged charter. He looked
75	forward to their feedback.
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77	Ms. Haney appreciated the honesty from the Trustees and asked for input from the SB.
78	
79	Mr. Murray stated that while each board has the purview to act on their own, it doesn't make it easy on the
80	other board. He said that the vote should be delayed because, in his opinion, merger was the best option. He
81	also has heard from the Town, outside the Village (TOV), residents that they will not pass merger until they
82	get a definitive answer from the State regarding 3+3. He personally did not favor a 3+3 as he said it was
83 84	problematic.
85	Mr. Gonillo heard the same feedback from TOV residents. He was willing to move forward with the Trustees
86	on this issue, but wanted merger to pass. Therefore, he leaned toward getting confirmation of the 3=3 and
87	delaying the vote to ensure its success.
88	
89	Mr. Watts had wanted to slow down because there wasn't a good way to engage the public during Covid. He
90	also said cramming in meetings was not favorable to getting public input, which had been an established
91	keystone to this process. His biggest concern about placing the merged charter on the November ballot was
92	that it would severely limit public input. He had several comments on the proposal from the Trustees, but
93	there were two main issues that he would "die on the hill for." He opposed the 3+3+1 and section 307b, which
94	gives the right to the SB to critize Town employees.
95	
96	Ms. Hill-Fleury wanted everything lined up with the merged charter so there can be no more objections. She
97	didn't understand why this was being rushed and why there was a lack of support for the positive vote

98 regarding 3+3. She was opposed to a November timeframe because she wanted to get confirmation from the 99 GOC, financials from Ms. Macey and public input. 100 101 Ms. Haney agreed with her SB colleagues. She was concerned that if this merged charter passed in the Village, 102 it may need updating later, which could be inconvenient. confusing and costly. She stated that the SB is 103 compelled to pursue a citizen approved vote, which is why it sent a letter for confirmation to the GOC. She 104 explained that the decision-making process for the SB is deliberate and slow, but understood that Village 105 residents want change now. At the same time, she said it was in the best interest of the community to agree 106 together for a vote at Town Meeting and finish the work before the holidays. She asked the Village to stay at 107 the table and wait until March so both boards could put this on the ballot together. 108 109 Mr. Brown appreciated knowing that the SB wants to move forward with this issue. He preferred the Trustees 110 remain partners and stay at the table with the SB. He suggested agreeing on everything, but representation. 111 The Village could vote in November and then again as part of the Town in March without needing a special 112 vote. He agreed with Mr. Murray that there can be an uncomfortable feeling when one partner makes a 113 unilateral decision without the other because the Trustees have said that from previous meetings. Having a 114 vote in November would help the Trustees know if they are going in the right direction for its constituents. He 115 stated that he believes in merger and would prefer to do it together. 116 117 Mr. Chawla was dismayed to hear the concern in the comments from the SB regarding TOV residents without 118 a thought process for TIV residents. He pointed out that the Village is spreading out the tax increase in a 119 merged community for the TOV over 12 years to help provide relief to those taxpayers. He commented that 120 the 3+3 vote was strictly for the current Town charter, not the proposed merged charter. He said that if this 121 vote is put off until March, it puts off tax relief for Village residents, so that would need to be revisited. He is 122 struggling a little with putting this issue on the November ballot, but is hearing from his constituents that they 123 are ready to move forward now. 124 125 Mr. Tyler said that the boards could agree on section 307b and keep the representation different because 126 charters can be amended. He has learned from past votes, including the recreation vote, that no matter how 127 much education and public input, the merger vote could still be defeated. He stated that the Village wants a 128 back up plan if the merger vote fails in March, and he is anxious to have that conversation with Village 129 residents. 130

Mr. Gonillo appreciated the urgency from Village voters, which was why he wanted to slow down to ensure
that merger passes. It was confirmed for Mr. Gonillo that the Boards could not put this on the ballot without
representative language in the charter.

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135 Mr. Murray explained that he has heard from a lot of TOV residents, but not TIV residents on this issue. When 136 he speaks of the TOV it is not to discount the TIV. He added that he has seen so much widespread 137 misinformation on social media about the tax structure in the community and suggested creating a 5-minute 138 video showing how taxes currently work on the municipal side, including the income sensitivity formula. He 139 also noted that some people want to take advantage of this misunderstanding to shut down merger. Taxes will 140 go up for TOV residents in a merger because 42% of taxes are spent in places that don't impact the Village. 141 Some think it is related to Village infrastructure like the pool. This misunderstanding needs to be cleared up or 142 they will continue to see failed votes.

143

Mr. Teich clarified that Ms. Macey is currently tasked with financials for the cost of separation. Currently, the cost for a merged community for the TOV is about a \$26-\$30 increase per year on an average \$280,000 dollar home, over a 12-year span if nothing else changes in the financing of the joint communinity. Mr. Richardson, the Town Attorney, was available for questions.

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Ms. Haney suggested focusing first on the big issue of representation in the merged charter, and membersagreed.

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Mr. Watts heard from TOV residents that in order for them to support the merger, the Village needs to give something up. He wanted the Village to give up the 3+3+1 model and change it to 3+3. He stated that 61% of the community voted in favor of that representation model and unless it has 3+3 in it, he would not support it.

155 156

157 Mr. Murray would have a tough time putting anything else but 3+3 in the merged charter because of the 158 passed vote, even though he feels 3+3 is fundamentally a problem. He preferred to wait until they get an 159 answer from GOC before moving forward with this provision in the charter.

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161 Ms. Hill-Fleury asked Mr. Richardson, if the Village passes a merged charter with 3+3+1 and then the 162 Legislator approves 3+3, can the Village amend their charter? Mr. Richardson explained that the Village vote 163 for a merged charter doesn't matter if the Town isn't voting on it as well. He added that in theory, there is 164 room to propose minor changes to the GOC. If there was a major change that was not supported by popular 165 vote, it would be advised to hold a revote. In this scenario, it could be confusing and expensive. Therefore, he 166 recommended getting it right the first time. Mr. Richardon confirmed for Mr. Watts that the community can 167 complete the merger with one Town-wide vote, upon Legislative approval of the new charter and merger, and 168 then the old charters and entities would be dissolved.

169

With regard to Mr. Watt's comment about the Village needing to give up on the argument for 3+3+1, Mr.
Chawla pointed out that the TIV is already spreading out their tax relief over 12 years and is still paying capital
money to the TOV with no return. He was not sure what else there was to give up and wondered what the
TOV was giving up. Mr. Brown added that the Village is also giving up control of Brownell Library, its Ecomic
Development Committee, Community Development, Planning Commission Recreation Department and all of
their assets, including their Wastewater Treatment Plant.

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Mr. Watts disagreed with Mr. Chawla about capital being spent outside of the Village. He stated that the 2
cent tax collection (39%) in FYE 2021 goes to shared expenses on shared projects. 42% of the grand list is in
the Village, but in the Town Budget, 77% of it is shared services. He suggested this all be documented and
that the boards take the time to have this discussion.

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Mr. Tyler was opposed to 3+3 under present circumstances because it would be the Town gerrymandering the
Village. In a merged community, all the resources are shared. He asked Mr. Richardson for his opinion on how
the GOC would address the 3+3 representation model in a merger charter. Mr. Richardson said the GOC could
pass it, not pass it or adjust it. It wouldn't be passed without a lot of questions about good governance
because even-number boards are generally not favored. Mr. Tyler thought there was a strong chance the GOC
would adjust a 3+3 representation. He asked, if the Village accepted a 3+3 model in this merged charter,

- 188 would the SB agree to put it on the November ballot?
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Mr. Watts heard Mr. Richardson say that there is a stronger chance a 3+3 would be approved, rather than modified. Mr. Richardson explained that it would depend on who is on the GOC. At the same time, the Town will need to answer questions from the GOC and have a compelling case for 3+3. Mr. Tyler noted that the only argument for 3+3 he has heard is that it is easier to get elected in the Village than the town, which he believes is not true. He thought that the reality would be that the GOC would not accept a 3+3 model and wondered if someone could come up with a reason why having one single community-wide seat is a bad idea.

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197 Mr. Richardson explained to Mr. Brown that if it wants, the Legislature could decide to merge the Village and 198 the Town, and if it wants to take up two inconsistent merger plans and come up with their own, legally it 199 could. However practically, he is not aware of it doing that in modern times. Mr. Brown stated that the 3+3 200 vote passed in the Town, but not in the Village. He hoped the SB could see why the Trustees would have a 201 hard time not representing its constituents. If the Village passed a merged charter that was the same as the 202 Town's except the representation model, he thought there would be a strong argument for the State to break 203 the deadlock. Mr. Brown suggested moving on to discuss other parts of the charter and wondered if the SB 204 would be in favor of putting the agreed charters out to a vote.

Ms. Hill-Fleury said that the 3+3 issue was not the only disagreement, and as a result, she was not ready to put it out to a vote. She confirmed with Ms. Sopchak that she would be ok putting it to a vote if 3+3 was the only disagreement. Mr. Gonilla was fine with that as well. Mr. Watts was not in favor because of the lack of public input. Mr. Murray thought it would be odd for Village voters to get two questions, and he is not sure he would feel comfortable explaining it to voters.

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212 With regard to Adoption of Ordinances, Section 601, Mr. Tyler asked which method the SB preferred and what 213 the SB thought about language regarding the regulation of tobacco and cannibis. Ms. Haney explained that 214 the Town uses the process that is in the Town Charter, and she has not had time to read the State Statute. 215 With regard to the tobacco and cannibis ordinance, Ms. Haney said that it was a very large topic, and she was 216 not willing to sign off without reading it. Mr. Richardson reviewed the difference between the Town's process 217 for adopting ordinances and the State Statute. He explained that if an ordinance for tobacco is in the charter, 218 then the municipality would have the power to regulate it. The State is about to announce its marajuana 219 regulatory policy so what is adopted today may not reflect what the State decides. The State did approve the 220 tobacco language in the St. Johnsbury charter.

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With regard to the tobacco and cannibis ordinance, Mr. Chawla clarified that he used language from St.
Johnsbury, but also the joint report from the Vermont League of Cities and Towns and the Chittenden County
Regional Planning Commission.

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Mr. Richardson and Mr. Teich confirmed for Mr. Tyler that a general plan of merger needed to be final and
 published by September 3rd. The ballot question needs to be to Ms. McNamara-Hill by tomorrow so she could
 get it to the printers on time.

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Ms. Tracy Delphia had major concerns with placing the proposed merger charter on the ballot this
 November without a merged plan and any regard to the 3+3 vote. She did not like the idea of
 amending the charter later as it seemed like a "bait and switch" She stated that the only way to move
 past this issue is to have equal representation, and believed that it is disingenuous to say that the 3+3
 vote is only for the current charter.

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237 this was an ongoing problem for the TOV, and it wasn't fair. Ms. Sopchak explained that the Village 238 residents live in both communities so they get to vote twice. 239 240 Ms. Patty Larose-Kent stated that she first needed to see the data that showed what it would look like • 241 in a merged community and in a separated community. She thought equal representation of 3+3 was 242 simple math because there is equal population on both sides. She was in favor of 3+3 before a tax 243 shift. 244 245 Ms. Lorrain Zaloom didn't understand how 3+3 representation was gerrymandering and instead, • 246 thought that 3+3+1 was gerrymandering. It was clarified for Ms. Zaloom that the Village is paying 247 twice for capital budget items. Ms. Zaloom thought things were shared, and could understand why 248 the Village would be upset. Ms. Haney agreed that it was complicated issue to understand, but that 249 Ms. Zaloom was on the right track. 250 251 Mr. Sheldon asked about severability and if parts of governance plans could be removed by a court or 252 the GOC. He stated that he is not convinced that the GOC or the court would accept a passed merger 253 with a 3+3 model. 254 255 • Mr. Watts confirmed for Ms. Annie Cooper that the first date of a citizen-led charter change for 3+3 256 was around December 17, 2019. Ms. Cooper was happy about the engagment from the board 257 members. She asked the members to check in with themselves in case they could decide to move 258 forward together in November. 259 260 ٠ Ms. Wrenner was concerned about voter confusion and asked the members not to offer up two ballot 261 questions that point to two different charters. She stated that every time the Village asks to talk about 262 merger, the Town puts thousands of dollars towards attorney fees, staff time and surveys. On July 28th, 263 the SB agreed to prioritize reviewing each section of the merged charter and that is also something 264 the Town gives up. Meanwhile, other towns are moving forward with policing plans, climate change 265 plans, etc. She asked the members not to rush this for November because each section of the merged 266 charter hasn't been vetted or aligned. 267 268 Mr. Brown and Ms. Haney discussed whether the boards should continue discussion if they could not come to 269 consenses on the charter changes proposed by the Trustees. 270 271 Ms. Haney outlined the following three areas, other than the 3+3, that the SB wanted to address with the 272 Trustees: 273 1) alignment of ordinances 274 2) Meeting with the Planning Commisions 275 3) public input 276 277 Discuss and possible action to place Merger on November ballot. 5. 278 279 Ms. Haney was not ready to place this issue on the November ballot, but wanted to continue working with 280 the Trustees with enough time to address these issues and have public input. Mr. Brown thought the boards 281 could still put this issue on the November ballot and continue the work. Ms. Haney was concerned about

Ms. Margaret Smith asked whether the Village residents got to vote on an issue twice as she thought

sending a confusing message to the public. She hoped the Trustees would not place this issue on the

November ballot, but would set up meetings to continue the discussion with the SB so they could moveforward together.

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286 Mr. Tyler understood the reasons for the SB's decision, but stated that the Village wants to take advantage of 287 the November election. He said that there were still concerns about the SB's intentions for merger and that 288 the Village needed a back up plan. He wondered if the boards were going in different directions and 289 reiteracted that charters can be revised at any time.

290

Ms. Sopchak understood the sentiment and urgency from the Trustees, but reassured Mr. Tyler that the intentions of the SB were that they want merger to work. However, there are significant decisions that still need agreement. She pointed out that when the Trustees' letter arrived on Tuesday, the SB members spent a huge amount of time reviewing it and making comments. At the same time, she didn't think that they could come to agreement about placing this item on the November ballot.

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Mr. Kerin was frustrated with how long this conversation has been going on in the community. He said the
elephant in the room was taxation, not representation. He stated that the reason the Village votes twice is
because it is taxed twice. He reiterated that status quo is intolerable, which is why this issue keeps coming up.
He asked, how much public input did they need? Are we going to change something dramatically when
another public member brings something else up? He said the discussions could go on forever and that it was
ridiculous.

Ms. Sopchak hears the frustration in every Village voter. Budget discussions are coming up, and she said that
 there was a lot they could do with the Capital Budget for tax relief for Village residents now while they work
 on merger charter together all in time for Town Meeting day.

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308 Mr. Murray pointed out that if the two communities separate, the TOV will see a substantial increase in taxes, 309 which may not have been clear. He understood the Village voters are fed up and they don't have the money to 310 continue paying an inequatible bill. He asked the Trustees if their intent is to move forward with separation, 311 and if so, moving forward with the merger plan seemed irrelevant.

312

Mr. Brown clarified that, like the SB, the Trustees want a plan of merger. However, if merger should not pass,
the status quo is not tolerable. He wanted to place this issue on the November ballot as a bellweather for the
Trustees, but that he would wait until March before taking a different approach.

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Mr. Chawla was concerned about the SB making more changes to the merged charter, other than the 3+3. He
said that would be confusing and others would take advantage of that. Ms. Haney agreed that many of the
merged charter issues could get resolved quickly, but that there were some major areas that need discussion.

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Ms. Hill-Fluery asked if Mr. Brown knew that there would be a separate ballot from the presidential ballot,
and Mr. Brown understood. She said that there was no guarantee that the Trustees will get a high return back
on that second question.

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325 Mr. Tyler didn't think it was fruitful to keep discussing this issue and that the Trustees needed to make a326 decision.

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Ms. Haney received consensus from the SB members that they needed more time and could not place this
issue on the November ballot. She thanked the Trustees for respecting their process, but also understands the
urgency from the Village constituents.

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332DAWN HILL- FLEURY made a motion seconded by PAT MURRAY to adjourn for members who wanted to333leave. The motion passed 3-2 with dissenting votes from ANDY WATTS and ELAINE HANEY, at 9:13 PM.

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AMBER THIBEAULT made a motion seconded by DAN KERIN to approve the proposed merger of the Village
 of Essex Junction with the Town of Essex consistent with the plan of merger.

- 338 Mr. Richardson confirmed for Mr. Tyler that the rest of the charter needed to be completed by September339 3rd.
- 340

341 Mr. Chawla was concerned that the charter in March could be radically different than the one tonight, did not 342 want the Village to vote twice, and wanted more public input. Mr. Richardson clarified that they could change 343 the language to say "to a date certain," instead of "12 years." He agreed that the more opportunity for 344 obfuscation, the more the Trustees are opening themselves up for trouble. The Legislature is more likely to 345 pass a compromised document where there is intent from both communities to merge. If you change 346 ordinances and add different components, you haven't reached the idea of merger. The risk for the Village is 347 that it locks itself into one version of the charter, and if the Town's version is radically different, the Village 348 may have to revote and make adjustments in order to get to an agreement. Mr. Chawla was not in favor of a 349 revote or the risks discussed by Mr. Richardson. He also thought it may lead to more misinformation. 350

351 Mr. Richardson clarified for Mr. Kerin that having time to work out the details once it reaches the GOC352 depends on whether a detail is minor or major and who sits on the GOC.

353

Mr. Tyler agreed with Mr. Chawla that this is a big step with a lot of uncertainty. He asked Mr. Richardson if
there was anything that was glaringly wrong with putting the proposed merger to a vote in the Village for
November. Mr. Richardson replied that legally it is fine, but that there might be some strategic or political risks
by locking into this version. Mr. Brown said, if the vote fails, then the Trustees would know how the Village
residents feel about merger and would need to find out from them what direction to take.

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360 Mr Chawla received feedback that some village residents were not aware of the 12-year phase in proposal, 361 and if the SB insisted on 3+3, then there was room for negotiation about the length of tax relief to the TOV. He 362 didn't see any harm in waiting for Town Meeting so they could continue those discussions with the SB and get 363 more public input. Mr. Kerin said that the public has had opportunity to comment in a number of ways and 364 that this vote could give them an indication of how the Village feels about this merged charter proposal. He 365 wanted to take advantage of the current momentum and stated that there is no guarantee in March. Mr. Tyler 366 was surprised to have heard support for separation from some constituents. If the November vote is defeated 367 with a desire to separate, then he wants to honor the decision from the Village residents. Mr. Chawla 368 wondered if the data from Ms. Macey might lead Village residents to separate, which is just as difficult as 369 merger. He was in favor of getting that data and public input first. Mr. Brown pointed out that this issue has 370 been going on for 50 to 60 years and that there is nothing new in the merged charter proposal other than the 371 representaion model, 12-year phase in and the tobacco ordinance. He understood the vote locks them in to 372 this version, but it would be a bellweather for the community with Village residents voting in November and 373 then March. He wondered about adding another option to the ballot by asking. "Do you want to merge? Do 374 you want to separate? Then he commented that this would be counterintuitive to the process.

Ms. Cooper was nervous when she heard Mr. Richardson say that the Village could lose strategy, which she didn't think was a good idea. She stated that as she watched Mr. Watts and Ms. Haney vote against adjourning so they could stay at the meeting, it made her wonder what it would feel like to not be completely at the table in the conversation for a document that would go to the entirety of the community. The motion passed 4-1 with dissenting vote from RAJ CHAWLA. 6. **Reading File** a. Member comments Mr. Brown suggested requesting the comments on the merged charter from the SB, and members agreed. Mr. Teich thought it would be helpful if the SB approved sending those comments to the Trustees. Mr. Brown stated that this vote should not be viewed as the Trustees unilaterally taking action. That opinion would be misconstruing the truth, and he asked people to please tell the Trustees if anyone is putting out that kind of information. Members discussed the next dates to meet for work on the merger plan. Mr. Brown would poll the Trustees to find why days would work after September 25th. DAN KERIN made a motion, seconded by RAJ CHAWLA to adjourn at 9:54 PM. The motion passed 5-0. Respectfully Submitted, Saramichelle Stultz Recording Secretary