



**CITY OF ESSEX JUNCTION
CITY COUNCIL
REGULAR MEETING AGENDA**

Online & 2 Lincoln St.
Essex Junction, VT 05452
Wednesday, August 9, 2023
6:30 PM

E-mail: admin@essexjunction.org

www.essexjunction.org

Phone: (802) 878-6944

This meeting will be in-person at 2 Lincoln Street and available remotely. Options to watch or join the meeting remotely:

- **WATCH:** the meeting will be live streamed on [Town Meeting TV](#)
- **JOIN ONLINE:** [Join Zoom Meeting](#)
- **JOIN CALLING:** (toll free audio only): (888) 788-0099 | Meeting ID: 944 6429 7825; Passcode: 635787

1. **CALL TO ORDER** [6:30 PM]
2. **AGENDA ADDITIONS/CHANGES**
3. **APPROVE AGENDA**
4. **PUBLIC TO BE HEARD**
 - a. Comments from Public on Items Not on Agenda
5. **BUSINESS ITEMS**
 - a. Discussion and Consideration of Strategic Plan Consultant Selection
 - b. Discussion of the Council Communication Policy & Strategies
 - c. Discussion and Consideration of Front Porch Forum Neighborhoods
6. **CONSENT ITEMS**
 - a. Approve Check Warrants #24001 (070723); #24002 (072823)
 - b. Approve Minutes: July 26, 2023
 - c. Approve Champlain Water District MOU
7. **READING FILE**
 - a. Council Member & Manager Comments
 - b. July 2023 Financial Reports
 - c. Delinquent Tax Memo
 - d. Park Street School Update
 - e. FY23 Restorative Justice Report
 - f. Development Review Board Minutes: July 20, 2023
8. **EXECUTIVE SESSION** – none anticipated
9. **ADJOURN**

Members of the public are encouraged to speak during the Public to Be Heard agenda item, during a Public Hearing, or, when recognized by the President, during consideration of a specific agenda item. The public will not be permitted to participate when a motion is being discussed except when specifically requested by the President. Regarding zoom participants, if individuals interrupt, they will be muted; and if they interrupt a second time they will be removed. This agenda is available in alternative formats upon request. Meetings of the City Council, like all programs and activities of the City of Essex Junction, are accessible to people with disabilities. For information on accessibility or this agenda, call the City Manager's office at 802-878-6944 TTY: 7-1-1 or (800) 253-0191.

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**CITY OF ESSEX JUNCTION
CITY COUNCIL
REGULAR MEETING
MINUTES OF MEETING
August 9, 2023**

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

ADMINISTRATION: Regina Mahony, City Manager; Jess Morris, Finance Director; Ashley Snellenberger, Communications & Strategic Initiatives Director.

OTHERS PRESENT: Alise Certa, Heidi Clark, Resa Mehren, Bridget Meyer, Tim Miller.

1. **CALL TO ORDER**

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

2. **AGENDA ADDITIONS/CHANGES**

Councilor Certa requested that the minutes from the last meeting be placed on the business agenda as item #5d. Councilor Chawla requested that the Block Party be placed on the consent agenda as item #6d.

3. **APPROVE AGENDA**

ELAINE HANEY made a motion, seconded by MARCUS CERTA, to approve the agenda as amended. The motion passed 5-0.

4. **PUBLIC TO BE HEARD**

a. Comments from public on items not on the agenda

Bridget Meyer spoke about the condition of the train and bus station in Essex Junction and asked for information about the expenditure of any funds that have been allocated for the station. She additionally asked for a status update on the pocket park on Main Street. She further noted that there had been a broken window on 8 Railroad Avenue for over a year and said that the City and community should pay attention to the condition of the downtown. City Manager Mahony noted that there had been an initial design completed for the Amtrak Station renovation project, noting that this project would install a new roof and sides to that building. She noted that there have been staff shortages that have delayed this project, particularly the lack of a City Planner. She noted that the City received a grant for the Main Street pocket park and will have it for two construction seasons. She said that by late fall, they should be ready to put together a construction bid to have a contractor lined up for the 2024 construction season. She said that she would look into the broken window issue further and would review ordinances to see if there are any that apply to broken windows. Ms. Meyer expressed disappointment that the City is prioritizing a City Planner over code enforcement staff, saying that code enforcement is greatly needed in Essex Junction.

5. **BUSINESS ITEMS**

a. Discussion and Consideration of Strategic Plan Consultant Selection

Director Snellenberger noted that the City had put out a Request for Proposals (RFP) for a consultant to assist with the development of a Community Vision and Strategic Action Plan for the City. She noted that the City had received five bids from consultant groups. She spoke about the selection committee that was put together to meet and evaluate the bids, noting that they selected two finalist bids for interviews, which occurred on August 2. She noted that as a result of those interviews, the selection committee recommended Future iQ as the successful bidder to help the City move forward with its Community Vision and Strategic Action Plan. She said that Future iQ's proposal aligned more with the RFP and could provide staff with additional support and that the selection committee liked their proposed

54 approach to this scope of work. She noted that the bid also came with several proposed additional
55 options, which the selection committee believed could enhance the project. She said that the selection
56 committee is also recommending increasing the budget for this project to \$42,500 to take advantage of
57 some of these options. She recommended taking \$12,500 out of the \$40,000 allocation for rebranding
58 and putting it toward this contract.
59

60 Councilor Haney asked about the difference in price between the Creative Discourse Group and Future
61 iQ's bids. Director Snellenberger replied that Creative Discourse Group's proposed budget for all four
62 phases (which included visioning and an action plan) came in at \$52,785, which was more than Future
63 iQ's bid. Councilor Haney expressed concern about the lack of content around engaging with
64 marginalized community members. Director Snellenberger noted that the selection committee also
65 noted that lack of detail from proposals and asked about it during the interview process. She noted that
66 Future iQ spoke to their efforts around engagement with marginalized and diverse communities and
67 stakeholders. Councilor Haney said that the consultant should be focused on a variety of methods for
68 engaging the community and for thinking strategically. She also said it is important for the consultants
69 to engage with the City Council and its various boards and committees as part of this work. She also
70 expressed concern about the potential lack of understanding on the part of Future iQ around the urban
71 and rural interplay in the Junction.
72

73 Councilor Certa acknowledged Creative Discourse Group's great work on Heart & Soul but said that
74 their approach to this RFP seemed misaligned with the scope of work and that Future iQ's focus on
75 engagement brought them to the top of the list. He also spoke about Future iQ's focus on providing
76 support to staff on this body of work. Director Snellenberger noted that the references received on Future
77 iQ's prior work were also quite high-quality.
78

79 Councilor Chawla asked about the staff recommendation to reallocate funding from the rebranding
80 efforts for this scope of work. City Manager Mahony replied that staff have implemented rebranding
81 activities that should work in the short term and will continue this work and that reallocating funding to
82 this important piece of work is prudent.
83

84 Councilor Thibeault asked how much work the consultant anticipates conducting remotely versus in
85 person in Essex Junction. Councilor Certa replied that it seemed based on the City's desire and need
86 for in-person engagement, so it sounded like the consultant is able to be flexible in this area.
87

88 Councilor Brown spoke about the inclusion of members of several boards and committees in the RFP
89 review process and selection committee, in addition to the staff and Councilors who participated, and
90 thanked staff for making this a more inclusive process than it has been in the past. Councilor Certa
91 noted that the breadth of knowledge and experience among the selection committee was extremely
92 valuable.
93

94 Bridget Meyer spoke about previous efforts on strategic planning and community engagement in the
95 Junction. She said that engaging with as many individuals as possible in the community will be
96 tantamount to the success of this current strategic planning and visioning process. She additionally said
97 that she would like the end product of this to be a living document that is referred back to often by the
98 City.
99

100 **ANDREW BROWN made a motion, seconded by MARCUS CERTA, that the City Council increase**
101 **the budget of the Community Vision and Strategic Action Plan project to \$42,500 with additional**
102 **funds coming from the rebranding effort in the LOT fund and for the City Manager to initiate a**
103 **contract with Future iQ. The motion passed 5-0.**

104
105 b. Discussion of the Council Communication Policy & Strategies

106 City Manager Mahony began by noting that after the Council's orientation session in May, it identified
107 two older policies that it would like to revise—the Communications Policy and the Meetings Policy. She
108 said that the initial draft of the revised Communications Policy is ready for an initial discussion by the
109 Council. She noted that this policy defines the roles of various staff, Councilors, and committee members
110 and how they communicate with the public about City issues. Councilor Haney noted that this policy
111 should be thought of more as a set of guidelines than a policy with a punitive component imposed by
112 the City. Councilor Chawla noted that the policy could be modified in the future as the City embarks on
113 more strategic communication with the public and broader efforts around community engagement. The
114 Council spoke about email communications and how the general public may not be aware of the
115 nuances around email communication with the Council and adhering to Open Meeting Law. The Council
116 discussed making amendments around copying the City Council President on email responses to
117 questions and decided to strike that language from the policy.
118

119 Resa Mehren noted that there are no requirements in the policy around response times for
120 communicating with various municipal and elected officials. She also noted how quickly the Council
121 brought forth an agenda item relating to a topic that was broached during public comment at its last
122 meeting. Councilor Chawla replied that he generally holds himself to a 24-48-hour timeframe for
123 responding to constituent inquiries. He also spoke about how items make it onto the agenda for the
124 Council and that the Front Porch Forum topic happened to fit within the theme of other agenda items for
125 tonight, which was generally coincidental. He noted that there will be further discussions of meeting
126 procedure and agenda-setting policy over the next several months.
127

128 **ELAINE HANEY made a motion, seconded by ANDREW BROWN, that the Council adopt the**
129 **revised Communication Policy as amended. The motion passed 5-0.**
130

131 City Manager Mahony noted that though the strategic planning process will improve communication and
132 engagement with the community, the City will be well-suited to define the level of engagement needed
133 based on the type of project, process, or policy being worked on. She noted a number of ideas she has
134 heard around engagement since the beginning of her tenure here, and Councilor Chawla noted that the
135 purpose of tonight's discussion is to determine if there are ideas that are missing and whether some of
136 the ideas could be built on to strengthen engagement with the community.
137

138 Director Snellenberger noted that research around how the Essex Junction community would like to
139 communicate is lacking and thinks this is a crucial step prior to developing and honing various
140 communication tactics. Councilor Certa noted that two critical components to effective communication
141 between the City and the public are both the public's knowledge and awareness of what is happening
142 in the community and the public's accessibility to the government. He said that he would like to see
143 some short-term opportunities for the Council to engage the community in addition to employing longer-
144 term tactics. Director Snellenberger suggested articulating some six-month goals and then fleshing out
145 longer-term goals.
146

147 Councilor Haney said that they should be thinking about how the government communicates and how
148 the Council communicates. She said that there isn't a standard communication protocol across staff
149 around how information is communicated to the public, which could be useful for the City to implement.
150 She said that the City already communicates well in a number of areas, such as Front Porch Forum,
151 Facebook, its website, and the Essex Reporter, but it could stand to enhance its communication in these
152 areas. She said that one short-term communication tactic could be the "Coffee with a Councilor" event.
153 She also emphasized that now is the time to form neighborhood assemblies.

154
155 Alise Certa said it is important to clearly define the goals around communication and engagement since
156 it will help inform strategic planning but will also help the City measure success around communication.
157 She additionally suggested that a survey could be valuable for gathering feedback from the public
158 quickly.

159
160 Director Snellenberger will put together a draft of communication goals for the Council’s consideration
161 and discussion at one of its upcoming meetings. City Manager Mahony said that they would also take a
162 look at the standardized communication protocol, as well as begin to refine the list of ideas around
163 communication and engagement tactics.

164
165 c. Discussion and Consideration of Front Porch Forum Neighborhoods

166 Director Snellenberger noted that at its July 26, 2023, meeting, the City Council was asked by a member
167 of the public to consider contacting Front Porch Forum to discuss changing the Essex Junction Forums
168 to one neighborhood instead of four (which are currently Five Corners South, Five Corners North,
169 Countryside, and Fairview Farms). She noted that the City has 17 custom access accounts for non-
170 commercial community engagement and pays \$2,808.00 for them. She said that changing the number
171 of neighborhood forums should have no bearing on this cost.

172
173 Councilor Haney noted that many communities typically see about 80% of FPF posts coming from
174 residents and 20% from the government, but that Essex Junction is unique in that number is flipped—
175 the City uses FPF like a City newsletter to engage with the public.

176
177 Councilor Chawla noted that the neighborhood forums, as delineated, don’t represent the City or its
178 neighborhoods and said it could be worth asking FPF how they determined those neighborhood areas
179 and whether they would change it. He pointed out that users are able to cross-post to other
180 neighborhoods.

181
182 Councilor Brown noted that FPF is a private company, and the City and Council don’t have much
183 authority or leverage to push FPF to change their neighborhood delineations, though he is open to
184 engaging with FPF to make this request.

185
186 City Manager Mahony said that it may be worth it to engage in FPF on this, though it is not a time-
187 sensitive issue.

188
189 Resa Mehren spoke about how some neighborhood forums are very specific to that area and may not
190 be of interest to the other neighborhood forums for the community.

191
192 Bridget Meyer said that her street has two communication forums that are not FPF (in addition to FPF),
193 including a Facebook page and an email list. She said that some people see FPF as more formal than
194 those other forms of communication.

195
196 d. Approve Minutes: July 26, 2023

197
198 **ANDREW BROWN made a motion, seconded by MARCUS CERTA, to approve the July 26, 2023**
199 **minutes with the following amendments:**

- 200 • **Line 191: Correct spelling of Marcus Certa’s name in the motion.**

201
202 **The motion passed 5-0.**

203

204 6. **CONSENT AGENDA**

- 205 a. Approve Check Warrants #24001 (07/07/23); #24002 (07/28/23)
206 b. Approve Minutes: July 26, 2023, **now Business Item #5d**
207 c. Approve Champlain Water District MOU
208 d. Acorn Circle Block Party *newly added*
209

210 **ELAINE HANEY made a motion, seconded by MARCUS CERTA, to approve the consent agenda**
211 **as amended. The motion passed 5-0.**
212

213 7. **READING FILE**

- 214 a. Council & Manager member comments: City Manager Mahony noted that the heavy amount of rain
215 had delayed the Brickyard Project but acknowledged that the City is relatively lucky in terms of the
216 damage it has seen from this summer's rains. Councilor Thibeault said that she would like the
217 Council to discuss the City's delinquent tax sale policy at a future meeting. Councilor Brown asked
218 whether staff who do not live in Essex Junction were impacted by flooding and are facing difficulties
219 related to that. City Manager Mahony spoke about staff who had to take an ATV to a relative's house
220 to procure another vehicle to be able to come to work and spoke about that staff's dedication.
221 b. July 2023 Financial Reports
222 c. Delinquent Tax Memo
223 d. Park Street School Update
224 e. FY23 Restorative Justice Report
225 f. Development Review Board Minutes: July 20, 2023
226

227 8. **EXECUTIVE SESSION**

- 228 a. None anticipated
229

230 9. **ADJOURN**

231
232 **ANDREW BROWN made a motion, seconded by RAJ CHAWLA, to adjourn the meeting. The**
233 **motion passed 5-0 at 8:46 P.M.**
234

235 Respectfully Submitted,
236 Amy Coonradt