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**CITY OF ESSEX JUNCTION
CITY COUNCIL
INFORMATIONAL HEARING
MINUTES OF MEETING
April 1, 2024**

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

ADMINISTRATION: Regina Mahony, City Manager; Steven Eustis, Moderator; Wendy Hysko, Library Director; Ricky Jones, Public Works Director; Brad Luck, EJRP Director; Susan McNamara-Hill, Clerk; Chelsea Mandigo, Water Quality Superintendent; Jess Morris, Financial Director; Ashley Snellenberger, Director of Communications & Strategic Initiatives; Chris Yuen, Community Development Director.

OTHERS PRESENT: Colleen Ballard, Michael Blood, Tam Case, Colleen D., MJ Engel, Sherry French, Karen Lemnah, Andy Suntup, James Waite.

1. **CALL TO ORDER**

Moderator Eustis called the meeting to order at 6:00 P.M. He began by noting that the City Council has had several meetings that were disrupted by anti-Semitic and racist hate speech, and that this type of speech is not tolerated and is condemned by the Council. He said that while it may not always be possible to prevent hate speech from occurring during public comments, the City Council will take measures to make it more difficult to express such views.

2. **WELCOME, INTRODUCTIONS, AND PROCEDURES OVERVIEW**

Mr. Eustis introduced Raj Chawla, the President of the City Council. Councilor Chawla introduced Councilors Brown, Certa, Haney, and Thibeault. He also introduced City Manager Mahony and department heads including HR Director Dwyer, Fire Chief Gaboriault, Police Chief Hoague, Library Director Hysko, Public Works Director Jones, Assessor Lemnah, EJRP Director Luck, Water Quality Superintendent Mandigo, Clerk McNamara-Hill, Finance Director Morris, Communications & Strategic Initiatives Director Snellenberger, and Community Development Director Yuen.

3. **PRESENTATION AND DISCUSSION ABOUT ARTICLE 1:** Shall the voters approve an annual General Fund budget in the amount of \$12,004,124 for Fiscal Year 2024, to June 30, 2025, \$11,110,346 of which is to be levied in taxes against the City Grand List?

Councilor Chawla noted that the FY25 proposed budget is only the City's second budget, and that the City is currently only 9 months into its first budget. He noted that primary expense increases in this proposed budget include salary and health insurance increases, Act 76 Childcare Tax, a movement from part-time to full-time for a Finance Billing Coordinator position, an increase in general liability, property, and casualty insurance, an increase to IT services, and a stormwater utility creation. He noted that it is a 5% increase over the FY24 budget, translating to an increase of \$170 per year in taxes on a \$280,000 value property. He noted that property tax revenue makes up 91% of the City's general fund revenues. He noted that Global Foundries contributes 6% of this total, the businesses in the City contribute 11%, and residential property taxes contribute 74%. He then provided a summary of the City's general fund expenditures for FY25, noting that large drivers include health and human services (primary Essex Rescue and Essex Police), which make up 25% of expenditures, streets, which makes up 13%, the recreation department, which makes up 9%, and Brownell Library, which makes up 8%.

4. **PRESENTATION AND DISCUSSION ABOUT ARTICLE 2:** Shall the voters of the City of Essex Junction set the property tax exemption for disabled veterans at Forty Thousand Dollars

(\$40,000.00) as allowed by 32 § 3802(11)(C), said exemption to remain in effect for future taxable years until amended or repealed by the voters?

Councilor Chawla noted that this exemption was in place when the Junction was part of the Town, and that it had been set at \$40,000. He said that with separation, voters need to approve raising this exemption from the State’s base of \$10,000 to \$40,000 once again. He said that this discount is a reduction in the assessed value, not on a tax bill. He said that veterans would need to apply for this program, and that it is an exemption that the community has been participating in for some time.

5. **PRESENTATION AND DISCUSSION ABOUT ARTICLE 3:** Shall the voters approve extending the one cent Capital Improvement tax (also known as Economic Development Tax), as established in 2016, to be reconsidered at annual meeting in 2027?

Councilor Chawla said that this was originally approved in 2016, and if extended, would be imposed through Fiscal Year 2026. He said that in the past, the fund has been used for public parking improvements, and that the City is currently planning on using funds as local match for train station improvements and Crescent Connector project amenities. He said that the impact on a \$280,000 home of this tax is \$28 per year.

6. **PRESENTATION AND DISCUSSION ABOUT ARTICLE 4:** Shall the voters approve holding the 2025 Annual Meeting on Tuesday, April 8, 2025, at which time the voters shall vote by Australian ballot for the election of officers, the voting on the City budget, and any other business included in the warning for the meeting?

Councilor Chawla noted that this is voted on every year. He said that that last year, the voters approved four charter changes, which included items related to City meetings and elections and that the City Council would set election dates for future years. He said that because these charter changes were approved after the warning of this ballot, voters will still need to decide on the date for voting for the 2025 Annual Meeting.

7. **PRESENTATION AND DISCUSSION ABOUT ARTICLE 5:** To elect City officers required by law including: Moderator (one-year term), two City Council members (three-year term), and two Library Trustees (one five-year term and one three-year term)?

Moderator Eustis noted that this is conducted by Australian Ballot, and that all residents on the voter rolls should have received a ballot in the mail, which they can return to the Clerk’s office or polling location, or via mail. He said that voters may also vote in person, which will occur on Tuesday, April 9, from 7:00 AM to 7:00 PM at the Champlain Valley Exposition space.

He noted that the options for moderator include himself or a write-in option, options for City Council’s two open positions include Jeetan Khadka, Timothy Miller, Jason Struthers, Amber Thibeault, and a write-in option, and options for Library Trustee positions include Karen Hergesheimer (three year term) or a write-in option, and a write-in option for the five year term position.

Communications & Strategic Director Snellenberger provided a brief update on the City’s strategic planning efforts and public engagement. She said that the second stakeholder survey is currently live and will be open until April 12 on the City’s website. She said that the final report will be presented to the City Council in late May.

Councilor Chawla recognized Councilor Brown’s years of service as a Village Trustee and City Councilor, and spoke about his achievements during his public service for Essex Junction. He expressed appreciation for Councilor Brown’s support and mentorship throughout his tenure, and said that he will be missed.

103 8. **PUBLIC TO BE HEARD**

104 Andy Suntup asked whether live informational meetings could begin again, given that they foster a sense
105 of community on some of its most important issues and decisions. Councilor Chawla agreed, saying that
106 the informational meeting occurred on January 10th and included a community brunch and presentation
107 on the draft Fiscal Year 2025 budget. He said that this provided an opportunity to receive feedback on
108 the budget from the public early on in the process and incorporate that feedback into the budget
109 development process. He said that the City is still trying to figure out how to offer these in-person
110 community opportunities to engagement and make improvements for future meetings.

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112 9. **READING FILE**

- 113 a. Annual Report Newsletter
- 114 b. Annual Report
- 115 c. Budget Discussion Video Memo

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117 10. **ADJOURN**

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119 **Councilor Thibeault made a motion, seconded by Councilor Chawla, to adjourn the meeting. The**
120 **motion passed 4-0 at 6:28 P.M.**

121
122 Respectfully Submitted,
123 Amy Coonradt