



**CITY OF ESSEX JUNCTION
CITY COUNCIL
SPECIAL MEETING AGENDA REVISED**

Online & 2 Lincoln St.
Essex Junction, VT 05452
Wednesday, December 13, 2023
8:30 AM – 4:30 PM

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

- **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** [8:30 AM]
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 of the proposed FY25 General Fund Budget
 - b. *Discussion and Consideration of an Executive Session to discuss pending or probable civil litigation
6. **READING FILE**
 - a. Council Member & Manager Comments
 - b. November Financial Report
 - c. Draft Budget Engagement Schedule
7. **EXECUTIVE SESSION**
 - a. *An executive session may be needed to discuss pending or probable civil litigation
8. **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.

CITY OF ESSEX JUNCTION
CITY COUNCIL MEETING MINUTES
BUDGET DAY
WEDNESDAY DECEMBER 13, 2023

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

ADMINISTRATION and STAFF: Regina Mahony, City Manager; Colleen Dwyer, HR Director; Chris Gaboriault, Fire Chief; Ron Hoague, Police Chief; Wendy Hysko, Library Director; Ricky Jones, Public Works Superintendent; Brad Luck, Recreation Director; Chelsea Mandigo, Water Quality Superintendent; Susan McNamara-Hill, Clerk/Treasurer; Jess Morris, Finance Director; Claudine Safar, City Attorney; Harlan Smith, Buildings Manager/Grounds & Facilities Director; Ashely Snellenberger, Communications & Strategic Initiatives Director.

OTHERS PRESENT: Greg Duggan, Town Manager; Carlton Houghton; Karen Lemnah, Town Assessor; Christine Packard, Library Trustee; River West

1. CALL TO ORDER

Mr. Chawla called the meeting of the City Council to order at 8:30 AM.

2. AGENDA ADDITIONS/ CHANGES

None.

3. APPROVE AGENDA

No changes, thus no approval required.

4. PUBLIC TO BE HEARD

a. Comments for Public on Items not on Agenda

Not held.

5. BUSINESS ITEMS

a. Discussion of the proposed FY25 General Fund Budget

General Fund Overview

Ms. Mahony gave a brief overview of the proposed budget, noting that key changes for each department are listed. The proposed budget represents a 7% increase from last year. She said the budget includes a 4.5% increase in salaries, which is lower than other surrounding municipalities. According to salary market research, some of the lower-level positions are underpaid compared to other communities. She expressed concern with the very low fund balance and said that this should be addressed over the course of the next few years. Ms. Mahony discussed potential rolling stock projects and the need to add additional funds for this purpose. The renovations of 2 Lincoln Street are approximately \$500,000 over budget. Funding for litigation needs to increase to meet expected needs. Mr. Certa suggested pausing work on the Main Street Park and using the funds for other purposes. Ms. Mahony said that some of these funds are from a state grant. Mr. Chawla suggested looking into the possibility of transferring these grant funds to the Amtrak project. Ms. Haney concurred, and asked if the water line on Railroad Street would need to be updated to allow for the new station. Ms. Morris said that this project is included in the Capital Budget.

50 **Revenue**

51 Ms. Mahony said that Community Development revenues are up significantly due to the projected rental
52 registry funds. Mr. Chawla suggested charging for the use of space in Lincoln Hall and Brownell Library to
53 create additional revenue.

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55 **Fire**

56 Ms. Mahony said that the major change is to pay firefighters for their training time, much of which is
57 required. The payrates vary based on years of service and certifications, starting at \$17.50 per hour. The
58 average estimated rate is \$21/hour. A 10% increase in call volume is expected, as calls have been
59 significantly increasing. Much of this is due to aiding EMS providers, especially for unresponsive
60 individuals or lift assistance. No medical reimbursement is provided for these calls. Mr. Brown questioned
61 the cited inflation rate, and asked Mr. Gaboriault about potential cuts. He said that inflation affects the type
62 of items that the Fire Department needs to purchase more than typical consumer purchases, but that he would
63 investigate potential cuts. He said that the paid training would assist with retention of current firefighters.
64 Mr. Gaboriault suggested hiring a consultant to begin the process of planning for a new station.

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66 **Police**

67 Ms. Mahony noted that the budget is lower than in the past, as unfilled vacancies are not kept in the salary
68 line. Mr. Duggan said that they have also changed the way that the Town has budgeted for health insurance,
69 which has resulted in savings. A records clerk/dispatcher has resigned, and this person has been replaced
70 with a records clerk position at a lower cost. Mr. Hoague said that the department has requested an increase
71 in legal, training, and a contract with community outreach, as well as replacing two vehicles. He is hoping
72 to replace these vehicles with hybrids if possible. He also requested that a contribution to the Community
73 Justice Center (CJC) be reflected in the budget, as well as capital improvements for communication purposes.
74 Mr. Duggan noted a .44% childcare tax on employers, which may be partially shared with employees. Mr.
75 Chawla asked about recent thefts, and Mr. Hoague said that most of these have been perpetuated by juveniles
76 under 16. A lack of juvenile detention has further perpetrated this. He encouraged all to lock their car doors
77 as most are crimes of opportunity. Mr. Hoague said that there are no changes in state funding for CJsCs,
78 however he noted that other towns in the area, such as Milton, are not paying their portion.

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80 **Assessing**

81 Mr. Duggan said that 10% of the cost of the GIS coordinator has been moved to this department to better
82 ensure its proper allocation. Mr. Brown asked that this be a part of a formal agreement, Mr. Chawla
83 concurred. Mr. Chawla asked Mr. Duggan to let the Council know if any other allocations are anticipated.
84 Ms. Lemnah said that the reappraisal has begun and has been going smoothly. It will be completed by June
85 of 2025.

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87 **Library**

88 Ms. Hysko discussed the library lockers which allow patrons to pick up books more easily, and during some
89 hours when the library is not open. She said that this has been very popular. Ms. Thibeault asked for
90 information on the number of patrons coming in at a specific time, Ms. Hysko said that the library is close
91 to pre-pandemic levels. Ms. Thibeault asked about the copier lease, Ms. Mahony said that the City as a
92 whole is looking for new lease options which may include the public copier at the library. Ms. Thibeault
93 asked why there is a separate line item for employee recognition when it is already included in the admin
94 budget. Ms. Hysko said that there is an employee and volunteer recognition party that had been funded by
95 donations in the past. Ms. Packard said that it has primarily been intended for volunteers. Ms. Haney asked
96 about the possibility for the Brownell Foundation to support the library's additional needs. Ms. Hysko said
97 that their fundraising abilities are limited, and that the organization is struggling.

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Ms. Haney asked for more information on the increasing needs of patrons. Ms. Hysko said that more and more patrons are looking for social services or are in some sort of distress. This requires more oversight, and there have been more altercations in the library. Brownell is working toward being welcoming to all who follows the rules. Ms. Hysko discussed the need for a free public phone. Mr. Certa identified the need for a more ideal hub and spoke model for assisting those in need, rather than the library being the only location for serving those in need. Ms. Hysko said that the state is failing to help these people, and that some of the patrons are building trust with library staff that can lead to the acceptance of other social services. Mr. Certa expressed concern that specific metrics of success were not noted with the library and said that he would like more clarity about when people are using the library. Mr. Certa asked about the cell phone stipend, Ms. Hysko said that this is helpful for filling staff absences, and that staff who receive this stipend are mostly available 24/7. She also said that the hours had been recently reoriented due to patron data. Mr. Chawla noted the larger than average increases, and that the budget is approaching 1.1 million. He asked where this budget could be cut and said that the last three years have had unsustainable increases. Ms. Hysko said that the library works hard to save money, however the new type of patrons and newer staff have created a very different environment than in the past. Ms. Haney asked if the increases for more staff are because of the new type of patrons, Ms. Hysko said yes. She said that the type of work is changing, and morale is low. Mr. Chawla said that, if these pressures are not going away, cuts will need to be made in other library services that serve non-houseless patrons. Ms. Hysko said that the library is not on the cutting edge and has been much more conservative with their services purchases. Ms. Haney said that the number of people who have significant needs is small, however they take up a lot of time. She said that it is essential to develop a stronger human services social net.

Buildings

Mr. Smith described the upcoming construction at Lincoln Hall and said that he believes that the project cost is almost back at budget and will not be starting before April. He described efforts to clear out the basement so that the renovation can occur and electrical updates. Mr. Brown asked Mr. Smith’s opinion on the Brownell entryway and roof. Mr. Smith said that the roof needs to be replaced and the entrance and ADA issues need to be addressed. Ms. Haney asked for information on the cost should the entrance repair be omitted, Mr. Smith said it would eliminate around 1/3 of the cost. The ideal type of roof and ADA access at Brownell was discussed. Mr. Smith noted the cost-savings benefits of doing all the buildings project to Brownell at the same time. Mr. Smith clarified what type of carpet is being replaced in the library.

Public Works

Ms. Mahony noted that the prices of public works products and equipment are going up substantially, and that it has been very difficult to order vehicles and their parts. Mr. Certa discussed utilizing Local Options Tax (LOT) funds and needing additional policies for utilizing such. Mr. Certa discussed the importance of publicizing the details of the work that Public Works does for the community to show how this impacts the quality of life for residents. Mr. Chawla said that this would be an important feature for all departments. Ms. Thibeault suggested cutting the amount of funds put towards the Tree Advisory Committee, as these funds are not always spent in full. Mr. Chawla suggested that the committees take advantage of City grant matching funds rather than their own budgets, which could cut down on budgetary requests. Ms. Thibeault suggested that the committees clearly outline why their fund allocations would be needed, rather than just a blanket issuance of a budget each year. Mr. Chawla expressed concern about the amount of lighting on Pearl Street, noting that it could possibly be lowered.

Wastewater/Stormwater

145 Ms. Mahony said that the City is considering a potential stormwater utility stream, and that stormwater
146 management is mostly dictated by the state. Should this happen, a new staff position for stormwater would
147 be needed. Mr. Certa asked for the reasoning behind creating a utility, Ms. Mahony said this will help to
148 manage costs. The City will be required to reduce phosphorus by 25% by 2030, and currently has no way to
149 raise capital to do such. This would involve a separate charge to every household; however, it may offset
150 some of the general fund spending. Ms. Mahony said that stormwater is seriously underfunded, and that it
151 will increase no matter if the utility is created or not. The sooner the utility is created, the sooner the general
152 fund tax savings are recognized. No vote is required to create a utility. Ms. Mandigo discussed the process
153 of setting utility rates.

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155 **Finance**

156 Ms. Morris said that last year's budget included a full-time position who was responsible for utility billing
157 as well as wastewater and public works support. The budget was reconfigured to add part-time positions for
158 billing, wastewater, and public works. A full-time position is now recommended for FY 25 and will now be
159 exclusively housed in finance. The Capital Committee anticipates cutting down to quarterly meetings, which
160 will reduce the committee costs. Mr. Brown said that it would be helpful to compare the size of each
161 department to that of surrounding municipalities. Ms. Mahony said that the City is in a good place with its
162 debt, which is positive news as there are future bond projects coming up. Ms. Morris said that she would list
163 transfers in one place, as well as listing out all the additional funds outside of the general fund. Ms. Thibeault
164 said that she felt that the Council should take out the full amount of capital transfers, as she believes not
165 doing such would eventually result in incurring more debt. All agreed.

166
167 **Information Technology**

168 Ms. Morris said that the City is locked in their IT contract for the next few years. After this point, a new
169 vendor can be selected, or an employee hired. The budget is up 48.8% this year. The fire department has
170 been brought into the City IT system however the library has not been. Mr. Chawla said that it is very
171 important to be under one umbrella, and that the use of Google tools needs to stop. Using Google tools could
172 put employees at risk as well. He suggested that going over to the same IT provider would also free up IT
173 hours from library staff. Ms. Haney said that it is important to learn more about the IT services that were
174 needed for the library that might be different from the City offices, and for library staff to be at the table for
175 this conversation. Ms. Mahony said that the meeting room technology needs to be improved, especially with
176 more virtual meetings. Ms. Morris discussed the replacement of technology devices with higher-quality
177 devices so that they need to be replaced less often. Ms. Mahony said that she would like to move all City
178 systems over to SharePoint software. Mr. Certa had requested that all committee members have an Essex
179 Junction e-mail address, however this was not included because of cost. Not doing such requires the use of
180 Google to share documents. The Council discussed the possibility of directly streaming meetings without
181 using Channel 17.

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183 Ms. Thibeault asked a general question about the cost difference between having a stipend v. purchasing
184 phones. Ms. Morris said that the stipend is whatever the City would pay for a cell phone. Mr. Certa said that
185 he would like to learn more about why this stipend is required. Ms. Mahony said that the three people at the
186 library who have the stipend are those who schedule coverage. The policy covers the entire cost of cell
187 phones, and the Council questioned whether this should be the case.

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189 **Community Development**

190 Ms. Mahony said that the major change is the institution of the rental registry, noting that this will incur
191 additional costs but provide additional revenue. She also said that some staff get a stipend to use their
192 personal vehicle, but that the purchase of a departmental vehicle has been discussed. Mr. Brown said that he

193 would like to see the rental registry function as an enterprise fund. Mr. Brown said that it would be good to
194 bring back community events, such as the Out and About event. Ms. Mahony said that Mr. Yuen would be
195 determining the capacity of the department once the rental registry has been established and future initiatives
196 will be informed by the Strategic Plan. Mr. Yuen said that he intends to utilize a cheaper software for the
197 rental registry to keep costs down to the city and landlords. Ms. Thibeault said that South Burlington
198 allocates rental fees based on the number of units and square footage. A digitization fee is also included.
199 Ms. Morris said that other communities attempt to estimate the total cost of collecting a permit and include
200 this in the fees charged. Ms. Haney said that the City had previously worked to eliminate other development-
201 related fees in the past, and said that she liked the idea of taking a second look at them. Mr. Brown said that
202 many other similar-sized towns get much more revenue from fees, rather than the general fund. Mr. Chawla
203 discussed leveraging the incoming development to pay for new amenities, such as parks. Ms. Mahony said
204 that Town Meeting TV will no longer record Planning Commission meetings due to the cost, however the
205 Development Review Board will be recorded. Mr. Chawla said that the City could do some of the recording
206 on their own and have Town Meeting TV post these recordings. Ms. Mahony suggested that this be discussed
207 with the Lincoln Hall renovations. Mr. Yuen said that work has started on the Amtrak project, however most
208 of the costs will be incurred after construction begins. Mr. Chawla reiterated his idea to shift funds for the
209 Main Street Park to the Amtrak project.

210 **Administration**

211 Ms. Mahony said that Essex Junction's CATMA membership is included in the budget. This is a program
212 which helps to incentivize alternative transport. Additional staff training and funds for communication are
213 included as well. Ms. Mahony said that the City is in negotiations with staff association. Mr. Certa asked
214 about worker safety efforts, and a desire for a metric of success. Ms. Dwyer said that "near miss" incidents
215 or accidents are fairly distributed between the wastewater, recreation, and public works departments and
216 described her work on the safety committee. Ms. Mahony said that funds were put in the budget for potential
217 strategic plan projects. Ms. Haney suggested that this be cut, and that it be a potential funding for a committee
218 in the future. The Council agreed. The Town Meeting TV funding will also be investigated. Mr. Certa said
219 that he opposes this, as he would like the community to be aware of the work being done and the members
220 of various boards to feel valued. Mr. Chawla said that more conversations need to occur regarding the board
221 member stipend, and why it is being accepted or rejected. Ms. Morris said that some people feel guilty for
222 taking it, and that the way it is presented could be changed.

223 **Essex Junction Recreation and Parks (EJRP)**

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225 Mr. Luck said that personnel costs are up 3%, and non-personnel costs are down 17%. Mr. Luck said that
226 most line items were budgeted using a two-year average. Ms. Mahony lauded the work of Buildings
227 Coordinator Harlan Smith, and Mr. Chawla asked for better allocation of his time spent in each department.
228 Mr. Certa said that he feels like it would be good to have a part-time position in this budget to open the Senior
229 Center so that there was no longer the need to rely on volunteers. Mr. Luck explained the current staffing
230 situation, noting that no staff are currently opening or closing the Center. Ms. Thibeault asked if sponsorships
231 have been sought out for large community events. Mr. Luck said that they are being sought out but that he
232 does not think that they could ever fully fund the larger events. Ms. Haney said that she would like to see an
233 estimate for repairing Memorial Park and replacing the concrete with marble. Mr. Luck described the need
234 to redo the Cascade Park playground and the pickleball/tennis courts. Mr. Luck said that the City has added
235 a significant number of responsibilities to EJRP, and that costs have gone up as a result of this. He said that
236 these were requests by the City, not EJRP. Mr. Luck outlined the budget, noting the differences between the
237 general fund and enterprise fund spending. Ms. Haney said that she feels that the community finds a
238 Recreation Advisory Board important, and that she would like to see it come to fruition.
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Clerk/Treasurer

Ms. Mahony said that this budget has been put in line with current actual spending. Ms. Thibeault said that South Burlington charges a digitization fee which may assist in recovering expenses. Ms. McNamara-Hill described the process of issuing resident-only parking permits. The possibility of processing passports was discussed as an additional source of revenue. Upcoming elections and the possibility of mailing ballots to all voters was discussed.

Economic Development

Ms. Mahony said that this has been cut by 27.8%. The matching grant funds have been cut as they have not been used in previous years. Ms. Haney suggested not spending the funds allocated for a community celebration in this fiscal year and saving it for future strategic planning events. Ms. Haney said that she believes that it is important for the community to know that the Council is realizing that expenses are going up, and thus expenses are being cut to make sure that the money is spent in alignment with community needs. Mr. Chawla said that he feels that it is important to fund non-profits, especially some of the organizations that help with the issues that Brownell is facing.

Health and Human Services

The Council discussed cemetery maintenance, and if the responsibility falls on the City or Cemetery Association. The Cemetery Association has been given funds for this purpose annually, however Ms. Mahony said that the amount does not cover their expenses. It is undetermined if the Cemetery Commission will be requesting these funds again for the upcoming fiscal year, but City maintenance in full is likely to be more expensive. The purpose of continuing to fund Greater Burlington Industrial Corporation was discussed, and Ms. Haney said that they are overly focused on Burlington. Mr. Chawla discussed the inadequate bussing in the City, and a desire for a stronger bus system.

Local Options Tax

Ms. Morris said that the City has a full year of revenue and has made a conservative projection for the next few years. A LOT revenue plan will be available shortly.

Council Discussion

The Council proposed to discuss current negotiations with the employee association later during Executive Session. Mr. Brown said that he would like to look at the number of services that the library has, noting that Brownell is open more hours than any other library in the state. He suggested that the library hours be reduced to 48 hours a week, which would still be above average. Mr. Certa suggested increasing the number of hours that the book lockers be open. The Council expressed a desire to see circulation and patron figures. Mr. Chawla said that Essex Junction does not have a tax base to support the current library. The challenges at the library were discussed, and a need to create a better space for unhoused individuals and allow the librarians to get back to their original jobs. The possibility of bringing additional services to Essex Junction, and the pros and cons of such, were discussed. The Council discussed the value of requesting that departments make small percentage cuts across the board.

b. Discussion and Consideration of an Executive Session to discuss pending or probable civil litigation

This was discussed during the Executive Session.

6. READING FILE

a. Council Member & Manager Comments: None.

- 289 **b. November Financial Report**
- 290 **c. Draft Budget Engagement Schedule**

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292 **7. EXECUTIVE SESSION**

293 **b. Executive Session for Pending or Probable Civil Litigation**

294 **AMBER THIBEAULT made a motion, seconded by MARCUS CERTA that the City Council make**
295 **the specific finding that general public knowledge of pending or probable civil litigation or prosecution**
296 **to which the public body is or may be a party would place the City at a substantial disadvantage.**
297 **Motion passed 5-0 at 12:17 PM.**

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299 **AMBER THIBEAULT made a motion, seconded by RAJ CHAWLA that the City Council enter into**
300 **Executive Session to discuss pending or probable civil litigation or prosecution to which the public**
301 **body is or may be a party pursuant to 1 V.S.A. § 313(a)(1)(E) to include the City Council, City**
302 **Manager, and Community Development Director. Motion passed 5-0.**

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304 **ELAINE HANEY made a motion, seconded by ANDREW BROWN to exit executive session. Motion**
305 **passed 5-0 at 12:43 PM.**

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307 **8. ADJOURN**

308 **ELAINE HANEY made a motion, seconded by MARCUS CERTA, to adjourn. Motion passed 5-0 at**
309 **4:32 PM.**

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311 **Respectfully Submitted,**
312 **Darby Mayville**
313 **Recording secretary**

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