CITY OF ESSEX JUNCTION
CITY COUNCIL
REGULAR MEETING
MINUTES OF MEETING
July 22, 2026

COUNCILORS PRESENT: Amber Thibeault, President; Tim Miller, Vice President; Bethany Clark, Clerk; Raj Chawla, Brian Shelden.
ADMINISTRATION: Regina Mahony, City Manager; Ricky Jones, Public Works Superintendent; Chelsea Mandigo, Water Quality Superintendent; Jess Morris, Finance Director; Chris Yuen, Community Development Director.

OTHERS PRESENT: Marcus Certa, Tim Charland, Eliana Fox, David Knox, Michael Miller, Reed Nye, Darren Schibler, Dennis Thibeault, Resa.

1. **CALL TO ORDER**
City Council President Thibeault called the meeting to order at 6:30 P.M.

2. **AGENDA ADDITIONS/CHANGES**
City Manager Mahony noted that the executive session for tonight should be removed, given that there are multiple applicants who will be interviewed at this meeting and the subsequent Council meeting.
3. **APPROVE AGENDA**
Councilor Shelden made a motion, seconded by Councilor Miller, to approve the agenda as amended (by removing the Executive Session). The motion passed 5-0.

4. **PUBLIC TO BE HEARD**
a. Comments from Public
Elena Bourne spoke as the director art First Roods Wild Roots in Essex, a nature-based early education program serving children six weeks to five years old, and she noted that they recently relocated from Jericho to Maple Street in Essex Junction, and opened last week to families. She thanked the community for helping to ensure the move was smooth, including zoning staff and the Police Department. She said that one of the values of the organization is community and she hopes that they can build strong relationships with residents and other community organizations.

5. **BUSINESS ITEMS**
a. *Interview and Consideration of Appointment to Police Community Advisory Board
The Council interviewed Tim Charland for an open position on the Police Community Advisory Committee. The applicants spoke about their relevant experience, involvement in the community, qualifications, and interest in participating on the Police Community Advisory Committee. Councilors asked the applicant questions related to whether the applicant would be interested in serving on other committees.

b. Public Works Department Head Brief to Council
Public Works Superintendent Jones began by speaking about activities for the Public Works Department over the last six months. He noted that they had an active winter season due to high snowfall and challenges related to salt shortages and equipment repairs. He noted that the Crescent Connector project is almost completed except for certain outstanding record drawings. He spoke about the water meter changeout program and that it is almost completed. He spoke about activities over the next six months, which include the Railroad Avenue waterline project, the Main Street sidewalk replacement project, the anticipated arrival of two new dump trucks, and procurement for a sidewalk plow machine. He also summarized the Public Works Department Spotlight, speaking about staff, the Department's mission, goals, and objectives, and spoke about their achievements. Councilor Chawla spoke about the reduced salt application over the winter, saying that it worked well for his neighborhood, and asked if the City is contemplating continuing reduced salt application in areas of the City where it makes sense to do so. Public Works Superintendent Jones replied that yes, they are looking into strategies for continuing reduced salt application. Councilor Miller asked if machinery breakdown and repair will continue to be a struggle, and Public Works Superintendent Jones

replied that they have two dump trucks coming online in the fall, that they are still awaiting two additional dump trucks (which will likely be a two-year wait), and that they are anticipating a new loader next July. He said that they are doing their best with the equipment they have, and obtaining the new dump trucks will help significantly. Councilor Clark asked if the salt shortage will continue to be an issue this next winter, and Public Works Superintendent Jones replied that it is difficult to predict, but that they learned last winter that they can operate safely with reduced salt, and that the new public works facility will add to the City's salt storage capacity.

c. Discussion and Consideration of Setting the FY27 Tax Rate
Finance Director Morris began by noting that the tax rate used a preliminary grand list estimate but that due to the reappraisal process, they do not yet have a finalized grand list. She noted that after consulting with the Assessor's Office and other stakeholder partners, the City is moving forward with the same plan, which is to set the tax rate on the preliminary grand list and re-evaluate once the grand list is finalized in the fall if an adjustment to the tax rate is needed. She noted that they are seeing a 75% increase in the grand list total, of $19.8 million compared to last year's $11.3 million. She noted that the budget passed on Budget Day raised $11,891,682 for property tax revenue for Fiscal Year 2027, and she noted tax stabilization agreements (with the Whitcomb Farm property), and veterans exemptions, which are both factored into the tax rate setting. She noted that taking this all together, the tax rate is currently 0.6007 per $100 of assessed value on a property, which is a 40% decrease over last year. She said that in addition to this, the education tax rates for the City have decreased significantly. She said that the City will be including an insert into tax bills this year to review the rate-setting process and the timeline. She noted the General Fund tax rate, the tax agreement rate (which covers veterans exemptions), the penny for economic development, and the penny for social services grants. She said that the new average value of a property in the City is $470,000, compared to the previous average of $280,000. She said the total City tax being assessed on a $470,000 property is just over $2,900 for the year, which does not include education taxes or any state credits that might be applied to certain properties. She reiterated that they will have more information as the City moves through the reappraisal process and that tax bills will be prepared in the next several weeks.

City Manager Mahony noted the charter requirement for the City that tax bills are produced and mailed by August 15, and that the first installment of tax bills in the City are due September 15. She said that given this inflexibility, they must use the June 24th preliminary grand list to get tax bills mailed out according to charter requirements. Councilor Shelden asked how much the grand list would decrease due to grievance requests, and City Manager Mahony noted that there are around 400 grievance requests for the City and Town but that she does not know how that will impact the grand list at this juncture. She said the next step in the reappraisal process is to file the preliminary grand list by July 29, but that the City may ask for an extension of that deadline due to unresolved grievances. Councilor Shelden asked about the process for adjusting the tax rate if that is required once the grand list is finalized after reappraisal completion. Finance Director Morris said that the City will prepare revise bills (either for the entire City or certain properties who are affected), and that there would need to be a significant change in the grand list value to change the tax rate. Councilor Chawla noted that the penny on the tax rate for economic development increased significantly, and also noted that this is up for reauthorization in March and that they could potentially decrease this. He also said he hopes they can revisit the social services fund, especially given the large tax increase that will be occurring for the City as a whole. City Manager Mahony noted that the economic rate is for a 3-year time period, and that the social services rate will be an annual ask. Councilor Chawla asked how much effort it would take to produce a preliminary breakdown of the new commercial versus residential tax breakdown, and Finance Director Morris replied that they will produce this and will also include it as part of the insert mailing with new tax bills. Councilor Clark asked if the City has determined how the Economic Development Fund and the Social Services Fund will be used, and City Manager Mahony replied that the Economic Development Fund for FY27 will be used to pay the local match for the Amtrak station and the Main Street park projects.

Councilor Chawla made a motion, seconded by Councilor Miller, that the City Council approve the FY27 general tax rate at 0.6007 cents and tax agreement rate at 0.0007 cents, and move that the City

Council cancel the special meeting for tax rate setting on Monday, August 3, 2026. The motion passed 5-0.

d. Discussion and Consideration on the West Street Force Main Project Including a Necessity Resolution for a Bond Vote, Contract Amendment for Design Services, Clean Water Revolving Loan Fund Application Amendment, and Sanitation Capital Plan Amendment

Water Quality Superintendent Mandigo began by noting that the West Street Pump Station is currently under design and it was discovered that the Force Main, which takes the wastewater from the station to the facility to be treated, is undersized for future growth and will need to be upsized. She said that a bond vote will be necessary to do this, because the Sanitation Fund cannot support the cost of that $2 million project. She said that at the prior City Council meeting there were questions about moving to a larger-sized pipe (the current ask is for a 10" pipe), and that a larger pipe will not substantially change the cost of the project and that there is still time to decide on a 10" or a 12" pipe.

Finance Director Morris spoke about bond capacity, noting that the City reached out to the Vermont Bond Bank to re-run a debt capacity analysis. She noted that this analysis is based on FY25 audited financial statements, but that additional debt of $3.8 million and $2 million for the pump station and force main project were factored in. She noted that the City doesn't currently have the capacity to incur additional debt payments, but that there is anticipated increased revenue not reflected in this analysis. She said that this would result in an increase to user fees of $73 per average rate payer. She noted that $48 of that is associated with the pump stations and $25 is related to the force main project. She noted that this $73 is on the full amount, but that the Town will be covering approximately 70% of this (pending actual measurements of output), so the ultimate impact to City ratepayers will be less than that. Councilor Chawla confirmed that these projects are occurring due to the age of current infrastructure and capacity issues. He said that because the capacity issue is due to increased development, he would like to see how the cost could be appropriately applied to developers instead of being borne solely by the community. Councilor Clark asked if there is an alternative plan if the bond vote fails, and City Manager Mahony replied that there is not currently an alternative, but if it fails, the City will figure out other possible avenues for funding. Water Quality Superintendent Mandigo noted that the pump station bond vote passed, but that there is still a $2 million need for the force main project. Councilor Clark said that public education will be very helpful and necessary, to explain why the force main is needed, that the City's portion of the $2 million will be around $600,000. Councilor Chawla noted that the portion of Pearl Street between Susie Wilson Road and West Street will likely be developed faster than the Town's portion, which could affect the ratio of the bond cost shared between the City and the Town. City Manager Mahony noted that the Town has some growth plans for the Susie Wilson corridor, but that it is difficult to predict at this juncture. Councilor Shelden added that as new development is built, there will also be additional revenue coming in from new residents.

The following public comments were received:

- Marcus Certa said that the City is pursuing this both for future development but also to ensure that it has excess capacity for its current need (given that it is already at capacity with this pump station). Water Quality Superintendent Mandigo replied that these projects are attempts to be proactive. M. Certa asked if the Town has agreed to move forward with this, and Water Quality Superintendent Mandigo replied that the Town is committed to this project.

Councilor Miller made motion, seconded by Councilor Shelden, to authorize the City Manager to sign the amendment to the Engineer Services Agreement to include the West Street Force Main Replacement Project; further, to have the City Council sign the application to the Clean Water State Revolving Fund for the West Street Force Main Replacement Project; further, to amend the Fiscal Year 2027 Sanitation Capital Fund to include the West St Force Main Replacement Project; further, that the City Council approve the Resolution of Necessity for the West Street Force Main Replacement Project as presented in the attached Resolution for an amount of $2,000,000. The motion passed 5-0.

e. Discussion and Consideration of Comprehensive Plan Update on Community Engagement and Input
Darren Schibler, Senior Planner & Project Manager with the Chittenden County Regional Planning Commission, began by noting that this is the first Comprehensive Plan update that Essex Junction will complete under its new City status. He provided an overview of the project timeline, noting that the planning process for updating the Comprehensive Plan began in early 2026, and that ultimate adoption of the plan is anticipated to occur in August of 2027. He noted that activities in the project timeline include reviewing existing plans, mapping and analysis, public engagement, policy updates and drafting the updated plan, and working sessions throughout with the Planning Commission. He spoke about public engagement activities, including review of prior engagement, the key themes and questions that have arisen from public engagement, the focus groups that have been convened, door-to-door business outreach, and web surveys on general themes, housing, and business.

D. Schibler provided detail on the approach for focus groups, as well as the topics discussed and feedback obtained from the housing-related focus group, energy and climate-related focus group, and the business owner outreach-related focus group. Councilor Shelden asked about participation in the housing focus group and whether it was skewed toward homeowners or renters, and D. Schibler replied that it was mostly homeowners, though there was some participation by renters. He noted that renters are generally more difficult to reach and engage with. He also noted that they tried to have the focus rooms in-person rather than online, which could have limited some of the participation. Councilor Clark encouraged an online option to further engage renters. D. Schibler said that there will be opportunities to discuss the housing issues at Planning Commission meetings (which have online options) and during broader public engagement with the draft plan.

D. Schibler then spoke about the plan drafting process, noting that the Planning Commission is holding monthly meetings to review new chapter material and review prior discussion on past chapter material, and that they meet with department heads, with other boards and committees, and conduct additional community outreach as needed. He asked if the City Council would like to be involved in the drafting process. City Council President Thibeault said it might be helpful for Councilors to attend Planning Commission meetings as members of the public, if they are interested in receiving updates. Councilor Chawla suggested that an executive summary to the City Council could be useful to keep the Council updated throughout the process. Councilor Clark said it would be good for the Council to become updated and involved when the project moves into the implementation phase. D. Schibler also noted that there will be discussions with the economic development consultant on the economic development content in the proposed updates.

f. Introduction of the Form-Based Code Proposed Amendments to the Land Development Code (a.k.a. Zoning Regulations)
Community Development Director Yuen noted that there is a set of land development code amendments working its way through the Planning Commission over the last six months. He noted that the biggest component of those amendments is to introduce form-based code. He noted that the impetus for the form-based code amendments comes largely from the Connect the Junction Transit Oriented Master Plan (which was adopted on December 17, 2025), and that these amendments are necessary to implement the Master Plan. He said that form-based code is meant to steer the direction of how new development can be made and what it will look like. He reminded the Council that the housing targets that came out of the housing needs assessment for Chittenden County is 32,000 new homes by 2050, with Essex Junction's target being 3,100 homes. He noted that a land capacity analysis was conducted that estimated that under existing zoning regulations along the Pearl Street corridor and in the City Center, there would be capacity to add around 1,144 new homes. He said that raising the height limit on buildings would add to that number. He noted that under the proposed zoning amendments, they would phase in the increased height limits in certain zoning districts.

Director Yuen provided a summary of the definition of form-based code, noting that conventional zoning regulates use (what activity is allowed on a property), and form-based code focus on the physical form of buildings and how they shape the public realm. He noted that the Development Review Board would shift their review from whether projects are designed to be harmonious with their surroundings to reviewing projects against clear, measurable, objective standards, which are easier to apply consistently and are more predictable and defensible against challenges. He noted that the DRB's discretion is narrowed, but it still exists through the ability to grant waivers. He then briefly described what the form-based code standards cover. These include building height and how it relates to street width, residential adjacency, how buildings sit on lots and meet the setback, façade composition, articulation, and materials, parking placement and screening, and landscaping (through a points-based system). He noted that this does not change approvals for permitted and conditional use (which are still governed by the use chart), historic resources (which fall under HRO District rules), site plan review (which will still apply), and that the existing Design Review overlay district will remain but will have the VC and TOD Districts carved out. He spoke in further detail about and provided examples for each of the standards included in the form-based code. He spoke about public outreach efforts for form-based code, including an insert into utility bills, a news release, a summary in the July community newsletter, and a segment in the Junction City News. He then spoke about next steps in the process, including that the Planning Commission is reviewing drafts of the amendments and anticipates public hearings beginning in September, that the consulting team is working on renderings to illustrate the street room ratio for a Park Street example, and that questions and feedback are welcome throughout the process.

Councilor Chawla spoke about the section of Pearl Street between Champlain Valley Expo and Pearl Street Park, saying that it does not seem as though the lots will be deep enough to accommodate a 9-story plus one bonus story. He said it would be helpful to see examples of what could be possible. He said that focusing renderings on Park Street is good, but that it would also be important to see how these form-based code standards could be applied to areas with more residential adjacency. He also spoke about how this connects with the Comprehensive Plan updates and other activities. He noted that the City does not have a municipal parking plan, and does not yet known if it will need a municipal parking garage or paid parking, and expressed concern that development may occur that requires more parking than the City currently has. He also expressed interest in revisiting the topic of a rental registry. He noted that the City is not actively enforcing some of its zoning requirements, and expressed concern about staff capacity and readiness to implement. He further asked about whether amenities such as rooftop gardens or other third spaces are included in the requirements for new development. Director Yuen replied that there are no specifics about amenity requirements that have been added with this revision, which has primarily focused on the size and shape of buildings. He noted that there is a unit composition requirement to ensure that there is a certain percentage of units that are 2 bedrooms or more. He agreed that it would be useful for the City to look into municipal parking and consolidated parking.

The following public comments were received:

- David Knox asked about corner lots and how façade requirements will be determined. Director Yuen replied that the street-room ratio would apply to both sides, but there is a minimum right-of-way width assumption.

g. Discussion and Consideration of Pearl Street Pedestrian Crossing Scoping Study – Final Report and Endorsement of Preferred Alternative

Eliana Fox, a Transportation Planner with the Chittenden County Regional Planning Commission, presented the scoping study related to the Pearl Street Pedestrian Crossing. She began by noting that the project scope is to assess the possibility of a crosswalk on Pearl Street west of the Champlain Valley Exposition, and that the scope of work for consultants included a review of traffic, pedestrian, and crash data, a site visit and field measurements, an online survey to understand community needs, identification and evaluation of potential crossing locations, conceptual plans, and cost estimates for two potential locations. She noted that the project came out of both the Connect the Junction TOD project as well as repeated community requests for safer crossings. She noted that the City Engineer evaluated these potential crossings in 2012 and concluded that the conditions didn't meet VTrans crosswalk guidance at the time. She noted that the distance between crossings currently for that portion of Pearl Street is approximately a half mile, that there are two Green Mountain Transit route stops, and residential areas, parks, and community gardens in the area. She noted that potential locations for crosswalks focused on areas around transit stops. She provided detail about the existing conditions on Pearl Street. She provided detail about public engagement to solicit feedback on this area and the project. She provided detail about pedestrian counts in the area included in the scoping study. She spoke about the criteria included in the VTrans crosswalk guidance, noting that it has a minimum crossing requirement of 20 pedestrians per hour. She noted the seven criteria used to evaluate potential new crosswalks, but noted that the criteria are used across the entire state and allows for some discretion for engineering. She reviewed the guidance and how the potential locations meet the criteria. She said that engineers believe that a crosswalk is a good approach due to access to transit, that pedestrian delay is risky, and that pedestrians need to traverse multiple lanes of traffic. She then provided an overview and provided details of the proposed alternatives, which include Alternative 1 (no build), Alternative 2 (crosswalk and RRFB at Willeys Corner), Alternative 3 (crosswalk and RRFB with Median at Willeys Court), Alternative 4 (crosswalk and RRFB near Complex 159), and Alternative 5 (crosswalk and RRFB with median near Complex 159). She noted that Alternatives 2-5 meet the purpose and need of the study by improving safety for pedestrians crossing Pearl Street so they can access transit, retail, places of employment, recreational areas, and other attractions. She noted that the median islands provide additional refuge for pedestrians but are costlier. She noted that the costs in the analysis are based on federal funding, and that if construction were to be done in-house, the costs would be lower. She noted that the report recommends Alternative 2, because it supports the City's long-term vision for pedestrian safety and connectivity, and meets the City's' TOD goals, and that it has lower costs and fewer operational impacts than other alternatives.

Councilor Shelden asked if there was consideration given to bump-outs, which could also be a traffic calming measure. Director Yuen noted that there are bike lanes on both sides of the road in that area, so bump outs aren't feasible, but having a median as proposed in two of the alternatives would be a traffic calming measure. He noted that medians pose feasibility challenges for winter operations, emergency access, and being able to reconfigure the road to accommodate the Champlain Valley Fair at CVE. Councilor Miller said that RRFBs already in place in other locations seem to work well. Councilor Chawla noted that in general, the City will need to figure out how to implement traffic calming measures and accommodating winter operations. He also suggested lowering the speed limit all throughout the West Street extension to 25 miles per hour. City Manager Mahony said that they would need to research what is required around lowering the speed limit. Councilor Chawla also said that the fair and other CVE events only occur for a limited number of days per year, and that they could explore alternatives to managing flow if one of the alternatives in this study are implemented. Councilor Clark said that fair traffic is one of her concerns, but said that she supports having a crosswalk in this location and that reducing the speed in that area would be a good proposal to look into.

Councilor Miller made a motion, seconded by Councilor Shelden, that the City Council accept the Pearl Street Pedestrian Crossing Scoping Study, endorse Alternative 2 as the preferred alternative for implementation, and add the project to the capital project list, with Alternatives 3, 4, and 5 to be considered at a future date based on pedestrian crossing volumes, a re-evaluation of operational impacts, and improvements to the adjacent railroad crossing. The motion passed 5-0.

6. **<u>CONSENT ITEMS</u>**

a. Approve Meeting Minutes – July 8, 2026
b. Acting as the Liquor Control Commission – Approve Liquor/Tobacco Licenses
c. Approve Amendment to Wastewater Capital Plan for Blowers and Clarifiers

Councilor Miller made a motion, seconded by Councilor Clark, to approve the consent agenda. The motion passed 5-0.

7. **<u>COUNCILOR COMMENTS & CITY MANAGER REPORT:</u>** Councilor Miller spoke about the great event to celebrate the Brownell Library 100th birthday party. Councilor Miller also noted that National Night Out is on Tuesday, Augst 4th at the high school from 5:00 to 7:00 P.M., and that Essex Police Department hosts this event. City Manager Mahony spoke about Tuesday summer performances at Maple Street

Park. She also noted that Brownell Library will host a Teen Sumer Reading Party on August 6 at 6:00 P.M., and a summer reading celebration on August 7th.

8. **READING FILE**

a. Check Warrant #24122 – July 10, 2026
b. June Financials
c. Coming Together – A Substance Use Addiction Summit
d. Planning Commission Minutes – July 2, 2026
e. Board of Civil Authority/Board of Abatement Minutes – July 6, 2026

9. **EXECUTIVE SESSION**

a. *An Executive Session may be needed to discuss the appointment of public officials **REMOVED FROM AGENDA**

No discussion. Item removed from agenda.

10. **ADJOURN**

Councilor Chawla made a motion, seconded by Councilor Miller, to adjourn the meeting. The motion passed 5-0 at 9:04 P.M.

Respectfully Submitted,
Amy Coonradt