

**CITY OF ESSEX JUNCTION
CITY COUNCIL
REGULAR MEETING
DRAFT MINUTES OF MEETING
January 21, 2026**

COUNCILORS PRESENT: Amber Thibeault, President; Marcus Certa, Vice President; Tim Miller, Clerk; Elaine Haney, Brian Shelden.

ADMINISTRATION: Regina Mahony, City Manager; Jess Morris, Finance Director; Chris Yuen, Community Development Director.

OTHERS PRESENT: Bethany Clark, Mariah Godleski, James Goudie, Bill Keyser, Elijah Massey, Aaron Stewart, Giles Willey, Resa.

1. CALL TO ORDER

City Council President Thibeault called the meeting to order at 6:30 P.M.

2. AGENDA ADDITIONS/CHANGES

None.

3. APPROVE AGENDA

None needed.

4. PUBLIC TO BE HEARD

a. Comments from Public

Resa spoke about agenda item #5f, saying that the best way to ensure a piece of mail is with the City on time is to drop it off at City Hall or in the City Hall drop box. She also suggested that the City establish relationships with local banks to allow residents to do direct deposits from their bank accounts into the City's account. Councilor Shelden suggested reaching out to her local bank to inquire, as the bank has an intermediary vendor that handles this type of transaction and could be able to accommodate an ACH transfer.

5. BUSINESS ITEMS

a. Fiscal Year 2025 Audit Presentation

Bill Keyser of Kittel, Branagan & Sargent presented on this item. He began by noting that the audit yielded a clean, unmodified opinion of the FY25 financials. He noted that because there was more than \$750,000 in federal expenditures, this triggered a single audit. He said that the major program was the Department of Transportation grant for the Crescent Connector work. He noted that only 20% of the grant funds had to be tested, given that the City has been deemed low-risk due to successful past audits. He also noted that this is the first year that the City has put internal controls into place, that his firm successfully tested those controls and have no recommendations to modify those controls. He noted that in terms of actual financials, the taxes receivable continue to grow year-over-year and that management has estimated an allowance for doubtful accounts on delinquent taxes of \$25,000, though his firm believes that this is a conservative estimate (given that those delinquencies could be sold in a tax sale). He noted overall gross tax delinquencies of \$207,000 in FY25, compared to \$180,000 in FY24. He noted that the City continues to be in a strong cash position, with cash balances on June 30, 2025 of \$16 million in the General Fund, and successful collection of utilities fees. He noted stronger collections of delinquent taxes in the first two months following the fiscal year than in previous years. He noted that the accounts receivable for capital projects is all grant revenues due from the Department of Transportation for completion of the Crescent Connector. He spoke briefly about fund balances. He noted that the unassigned fund balance stands at \$1,581,000, which is below the City's 15% maximum. He also noted that this is a reduction from the previous year, but that funds were set aside for the 2 Lincoln Street renovation, so this was anticipated. He noted that the City has a very low annual debt service. He noted that all funds in the proprietary fund (funded by rate-payers) financial statements had a positive increase in net position for 2025.

Councilors thanked City staff for their work to ensure that financials are reflected accurately and have resulted in a clean audit, and thanked Mr. Keyser and his firm for a very informative audit report. Councilor Certa

asked for an example of an immaterial or minor suggestion that they have made during this audit. Mr. Keyser replied that an instance could be regarding a check that doesn't meet the materiality threshold that should have been posted back to accounts payable, which would be flagged for staff but would not have risen to the level of a finding or material adjustment. Finance Director Morris noted that most of these adjustments have been related to fixed assets.

b. Update from the Planning Commission

Elijah Massey, Chair of the Essex Junction Planning Commission, spoke regarding this agenda item. He said that through 2025, the Planning Commission focused on a wide-ranging number of topics, from housing and transportation to infrastructure. He expressed appreciation for the shared dialogue and joint meetings held with the City Council over the last year. He noted activities over the past year related to Land Development Code amendments, the Connect the Junction Transit Oriented Development Master Plan, the Pearl Street Multimodal Improvements Scoping Study, engaging with the CCRPC around Act 181 to review and draft new regional maps for housing targets, working on the 802 Homes project for designing infill housing in municipalities, and more ad hoc work on multimodal improvement, the Main Street pocket park, and planning for a mural wall on the side of the Fire Station. He said that in the upcoming year, the Planning Commission anticipates updating the City's Comprehensive Plan and finalizing work around the Transit-Oriented Development Master Plan. He emphasized how much he and the rest of the Planning Commission appreciate the engagement they've had over the last year with the City Council.

Councilor Haney remarked on the Planning Commission's heavy workload and commended the Commission for its activity. She emphasized the importance of engaging early and often with the public for Comprehensive Plan updates and asked that every effort be made to explicitly tell the public that this is their opportunity to weigh in on how they want their neighborhoods and City to look in the future. Mr. Massey agreed and emphasized how focused the consultant (CCRPC) has been in identifying improvements and strategies for the public engagement component of the Comprehensive Plan update. Councilor Miller noted that there is an 802 Homes workshop at EJRP (75 Maple Street) on February 7, and encouraged residents to attend. Councilor Certa asked how the form-based code recommendations from the Transit-Oriented Development Master Plan will be phased for implementation, and Mr. Massey said they will keep the Council updated on how the recommendations unfold, but that they are not far enough along in the process to give a more detailed response yet.

c. Annual Tree Farm Management Group Presentation

James Goudie, Giles Willey, Maria Godleski, and Aaron Stewart served as representatives of the Tree Farm Board for this agenda item. Mr. Goudie began by noting that 2025 was a good year for the Tree Farm, with \$262,000 in income and \$221,000 in expenses, resulting in a \$41,000 in net profit. He noted that the Tree Farm had 3,482 user hours throughout the year, and that it continues to diversify the users of the space, with six different sports represented now. He spoke about improvements made over the last year to the property, including ongoing maintenance of the entrance road, fencing replacement, the replacement of one or two sets of goals, field improvements (which are the most extensive improvements that need to be made on a recurring basis each year), and that they leased a robot to line the fields, which saved on both paint costs and staff costs. He further noted the addition of field sponsors at the Tree Farm, and would like to increase the amount of field sponsors that are brought in. He spoke about goals for 2026, which include continued replacement of goals, identifying the fields that need to be rested or re-seeded, grading, re-establishing a connection with CTE to do some work on the tree line, and dust mitigation in the fields and parking lot. City Council President Thibeault asked why the revenue budget was decreased this year, and Mr. Willey said they like to err on the conservative side in terms of budget projections each year, but that they do not anticipate revenue loss. He said he is basing revenue projections on historical averages, not just on how 2025's revenue position ended. City Council President Thibeault suggested potentially receiving monthly financial information from the Tree Farm in the Council's reading file, for periodic updates. Councilor Miller expressed support for the field sponsorship activities and said that this is one way the public can easily support the Tree Farm.

d. Discussion and Consideration of CCRPC UPWP Applications and Match
Community Development Director Yuen spoke to this agenda item. He noted that this year's CCRPC UPWP application includes GIS services and short-term planning office support, professional equity policy advisor services, speed studies related to the new Traffic Calming Policy, turning movement counts at Five Corners intersection, and the Five Corners Traffic Operations Feasibility and Modeling Study. He welcomed any additional support for speed studies, given concerns about lack of capacity at the Police Department to take more of them on. City Manager Mahony said that this is an annual activity and is the City's opportunity to identify and put forth its needs and asks to CCRPC for extra support.

Councilor Miller made a motion, seconded by Councilor Certa, that the City Council authorize staff to submit the UPWP request applications as presented. The motion passed 5-0.

e. Discussion and Consideration of Warning the First and Second Public Hearings for the Proposed Charter Changes for Councilor Stipends and a Charter Review Committee

City Manager Mahony began by noting that the Governance Committee provided recommendations at the Council's December 10, 2025 meeting, and that potential language for moving these recommendations forward is before the Council tonight for their discussion and deliberation. She reminded the Council that because some of these are charter changes, there is a two-step public hearing process, and the Council can consider warning those public hearings tonight as well. She noted that these changes include changing Councilor stipends from \$2,500 to \$3,600 (Article 2 on the ballot), providing the Council President 25% higher compensation (Article 3), indexing the annual stipend adjustments to the Consumer Price Index (CPI) (Article 4), and requiring a comprehensive charter review every 12 years (Article 5). She noted that for Article 2, the Council can choose to pursue an advisory option or a charter change option to place on the ballot, which will need to be decided prior to proceeding.

Councilors discussed Article 2 and whether to pursue an advisory article or a charter change. Councilors agreed that an advisory article would be less confusing than the charter change option, and Councilors (other than Councilor Shelden) supported putting this article on the ballot. Councilor Shelden expressed concern that placing articles on the ballot discussing Councilor stipend increases isn't holding the Council to the same standards of frugality as other components of the City budget and would not support placing Article 2 on the ballot at all. Councilor Certa said he can understand Councilor Shelden's sentiments, but also said this article was borne out of a discussion by community members on the Governance Committee and he would like to respect their recommendations. Councilor Miller noted that Councilors are permitted to forgo compensation if they so choose, and that voters must approve the compensation as a separate line item in the budget every year. City Council President Thibeault said that this article would allow voters to weigh in on an issue identified and put forth as a recommendation by a public committee, and she would also like to respect that.

Councilors discussed Article 3 briefly, and all echoed similar opinions to how they felt about Article 2 (all Councilors other than Councilor Shelden supported placing Article 3 on the ballot).

Councilors briefly discussed Article 4 and Article 5. They expressed support for Option A for presenting Article 5 on the ballot.

Councilor Certa made a motion, seconded by Councilor Miller, that the City Council warn the first public hearing for the proposed charter changes for Councilor stipends (Articles 2-4) for February 25, 2026 at 6:30 P.M., and the second public hearing for the proposed charter changes for Councilor Stipends (Articles 2-4) for March 11, 2026 at 6:30 P.M. The motion passed 4-1 (Councilor Shelden dissenting).

Councilor Certa made a motion, seconded by Councilor Miller, that the City Council warn the first public hearing for the proposed charter change for a Charter Review Committee (Article 5) for February 25, 2026 at 6:30 P.M., and the second public hearing for the proposed charter changes for Charter Review Committee (Article 5) for March 11, 2026 at 6:30 P.M. The motion passed 5-0.

- f. Discussion and Consideration of Warning the First and Second Public Hearings for Time and Method of Delivery of Tax Payments (aka Postmarks)

City Manager Mahony said that this also relates to a discussion held at the Council's December 10, 2025 meeting. She said that the actual suggested language is presented here for the Council's consideration. She noted that if the Council is interested in clarifying the time and method of delivery in the charter they can do so, but there is also an option to ask this question as a non-charter-change question (because the charter is currently silent on the time and method of delivery). She said she would recommend putting it in the charter so that it is easier to track. She said that the article itself would clarify that the physical delivery or electronic payment needs to get to the tax collector by close of business on the two dates on which taxes are due every year. She said they are also recommending in the penalty section of the charter that detail is included to clarify the specific time and method of delivery so that it is clear when penalties would kick in.

The Councilor discussed the advantages and disadvantages of having the question as a charter change question or a non-charter-change question.

The following public comments were received:

- Resa said that having the article as a charter change feels like kicking the can down the road, given that the legislature may not take this charter change up until their next legislative session in 2027. She said that having the policy align with State statute feels cleaner than having it in the charter.

Councilor Shelden said that he would be in support of not putting this article on the ballot and reverting to State statute (which accepts postmarks as the deadline), but that if this were to go on the ballot he would be in favor of it appearing as a policy rather than charter change question. Councilor Miller expressed support for this question as a policy question on the ballot. Councilor Certa said that aligning with State statute is generally good practice but that the postal service is less consistent than it used to be and that residents can't count on a postage mark being put on their mail. He said he hopes that they can continue conversations about extending hours to help residents to have more accessibility when taxes are due. Councilor Haney agreed with Councilor Certa's concerns about the decreased reliability of the postal service. Councilor Shelden reiterated that he is trying to determine what solution works best and is the most flexible for residents and taxpayers.

Councilor Certa made a motion, seconded by Councilor Miller, that the City Council add to the ballot the non-charter policy question around the method of delivery of tax payments for the Annual City Meeting. The motion passed 4-1 (Councilor Shelden dissenting).

- g. *Discussion and Consideration of an Executive Session for Champlain Valley Exposition Contracts
Councilor Haney recused herself from this discussion to avoid the appearance of any conflict of interest, though she does not by definition have a conflict of interest.

6. CONSENT ITEMS

- a. Approve Appointment of Acting Administrative Officers

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

7. COUNCILOR COMMENTS & CITY MANAGER REPORT: None.

8. READING FILE

- a. December Financials
b. Chittenden County Annual Budget and Meeting Notice for January 21, 2026 at noon

9. EXECUTIVE SESSION

a. *An Executive Session may be needed to discuss Champlain Valley Exposition Contracts
Councilor Certa made a motion, seconded by Councilor Miller, that the City Council make the specific finding that premature disclosure of the contractual matters would place the city at a substantial disadvantage and that the City Council enter into executive session to discuss a contract, pursuant to 1 V.S.A. § 313(a)(1)(A) to include the City Council and City Manager. The motion passed 5-0.

Councilor Miller made a motion, seconded by Councilor Shelden, to exit executive session. The motion passed 4-0 at 8:52 P.M. (Councilor Haney absent for vote).

10. **ADJOURN**

Councilor Miller made a motion, seconded by Councilor Shelden to adjourn the meeting. The motion passed X-X at 8:53 P.M. (Councilor Haney absent for vote).

Respectfully Submitted,
Amy Coonradt