

**CITY OF ESSEX JUNCTION
CITY COUNCIL
REGULAR MEETING
MINUTES OF MEETING
JANUARY 10, 2024**

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

ADMINISTRATION: Regina Mahony, City Manager; Colleen Dwyer, Director of Human Resources; Ricky Jones, Public Works Superintendent; Ron Hoague, Chief of Police; Brad Luck, Director of Essex Junction Parks & Recreation; Susan McNamara-Hill, Clerk; Chelsea Mandigo, Water Quality Superintendent; Jess Morris, Finance Director; Harlan Smith, Grounds & Facilities Director; Ashley Snellenberger, Director of Communications & Strategic Initiatives; Chris Yuen, Community Development Director;

OTHERS PRESENT: Lauren Chicote, Clayton Clark, Annie Cooper, Craig Dwyer, Susan French, Michael Giguere, Jeanne Grant, Anthony Jackson-Miller, Deb McAdoo, Resa Mehren, John O'Brien, Christie Packard, Richard Smith, Sarah Spinette, Dennis Thibeault, George Tyler, Nick Warner.

1. CALL TO ORDER

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

2. AGENDA ADDITIONS/CHANGES

None.

3. APPROVE AGENDA

None needed.

4. PUBLIC TO BE HEARD

a. Comments from Public

Craig Dwyer spoke about the decision to stop fines for the livestock at 8 Taft Street but said that this is not reciprocal, as more livestock has been added and more structures have been built, despite the City's ordinances. He said that this situation is the direct result of the Council's inaction a year ago, which has led to a macro-level situation that has cost the taxpayers money and time, as well as costing residents of Taft Street their quality of life and decreases in their property values. He said that situations need to be addressed at a micro level before they become larger issues.

City Manager Mahony spoke about last night's storm. She noted that a number of trees were downed throughout the City and that public works is working on cleanup. She also noted about \$60,000 worth of damage to the Brownell Library roof. Director of Grounds and Facilities Smith noted a temporary fix to the library's roof, and that there is no water damage as far as he can tell. City Manager Mahony noted that claims have been filed with the City's insurance company.

5. BUSINESS ITEMS

a. Discussion with HR Director Colleen Dwyer

Director Dwyer began with a summary of activities for the last six months. She spoke about her personal growth as a new director of HR in the City, the complexity of being a "New City", challenges around maintaining a stable workforce (particularly due to the childcare crisis in the City, state, and country), open enrollment activities, and connecting with Champlain Medical Urgent Care on flu vaccination. She then spoke about looking ahead six months, saying that items on her radar include contract negotiation, the VLCT Welcoming and Engaging Communities Program, and obtaining more tools for staff via certain

trainings. She acknowledged the City's incredible workforce and the breadth and depth of services they provide.

Councilor Certa asked how Director Dwyer sees the City maintaining services given certain workforce challenges and turnover. Director Dwyer said that they need to ensure that they're providing a good work/life balance and competitive wage and benefits packages. She said that the City provides an excellent opportunity for professional growth, as well as a welcoming and positive work environment.

b. *Interview and Consider Appointments to the Bike/Walk Committee and the Community Advisory Board

The City Council interviewed Sarah Spinette, Michael Giguere and John O'Brien for a position on the Bike/Walk Committee. Each candidate introduced themselves and spoke about their interest in serving on the Bike/Walk Committee, each expressing interest in increasing the walkability and bikeability of the Essex Junction community.

The City Council interviewed Susan French for a position on the Community Advisory Committee. She introduced herself and spoke about her background and interest in serving on the Community Advisory Committee, saying that she has a good history and understanding of the Chittenden County community, and that this is a good opportunity to strengthen the relationship between the community and the police.

RAJ CHAWLA made a motion, seconded by ANDREW BROWN, to appoint Michael Giguere and John O'Brien to the Bike/Walk Advisory Committee for a three-year term. The motion passed 5-0.

RAJ CHAWLA made a motion, seconded by ANDREW BROWN, to appoint Michael Giguere and John O'Brien to the Bike/Walk Advisory Committee for a three-year term. The motion passed 4-1 (Councilor Haney dissenting).

c. Discussion & Consideration of Adoption of VT-Alert as a Public Notification System
City Manager Mahony began by introducing VT-Alert, which is a system that has been run at the State level and can also be used by municipalities to send emergency or public safety alerts to residents and visitors via email and text message. She noted that Police Chief Hoague has recommended that this service be used for the City of Essex Junction (as well as the Town of Essex), so that information can be provided in a streamlined, consistent, and timely manner. She noted that there is no cost outside of the training and getting the software set up by staff.

Councilor Chawla asked if this software could be used for internal communication as well, and Chief Hoague replied that yes, it can be used to send messages to specific groups it sets up, in addition to broader community-wide communication.

ANDREW BROWN made a motion, seconded by MARCUS CERTA, that the City Council approve the use of VT-Alerts System for the City of Essex Junction, and authorize the President of the Council to sign the attached MOU to move forward with the setup process. The motion passed 5-0.

d. Winooski Valley Park District Presentation & Discussion

Nick Warner, the Executive Director of the Winooski Valley Park District, began by welcoming the City to WVPD for Fiscal Year 25. He then provided an overview of WVPD, noting that it has three full-time staff and leverages an immense amount of volunteer time from its member municipalities. He spoke about recent challenges around flooding, which has taught WVPD about resilience, as well as the importance of the floodplain and shoreline that WVPD manages. He noted that the District's mission has

morphed from aesthetic recreational priorities to a focused ecological imperative to acquire and directly manage permanently-conserved lands. He spoke about upcoming capital projects and acquisitions, noting that the District is seeking \$31,472 from Essex Junction to help fund operations, adding that WVPD continues to seek new revenues that reduce reliance on such municipal shares. He noted that the District does not carry debt and has strong strategic partnerships with a number of local organizations, which helps with its overall sustainability.

Councilor Certa expressed concern about the amount of funding being asked of Essex Junction versus the amount of land within Essex Junction that WVPD stewards. Mr. Warner replied that they take equalized grand lists into account, which is a more progressive way of assessing this municipal share, though acknowledging there is no perfect way of assessing municipal shares of funding for the District.

Councilor Haney asked for more details around the recently-acquired property behind Global Foundries. Mr. Warner said that it is a 29-acre property and that they are working on securing public access and a trail system going down to the Winooski River.

George Tyler, the current City representative on the WVPD Board, provided more detail about the location of the recently acquired property and potential river access, emphasizing the importance of preserving this as a biologically rich and diverse ecosystem. He noted that wetland areas like these are able to absorb the overflow of rivers during flooding events.

Councilor Thibeault asked about whether an appointment or reappointment of a City representative to the Board is necessary. Mr. Warner replied that the term length is typically three years, but that municipalities can also choose shorter terms. City Manager Mahony said that she would look into when the current WVPD representative term expires.

e. Green Mountain Transit Presentation & Discussion

Clayton Clark, the General Manager of Green Mountain Transit, provided an overview of GMT, that it is one of the only transit organizations that spans urban and rural ridership. He provided a brief overview of volume of rides on certain routes that transit through Essex Junction. He then spoke about the annual assessment of Essex Junction's share of GMT's costs, which include a fixed route operating assessment, a capital match, and a paratransit assessment, for a total of \$249,615 for Fiscal Year 2025. He said that the fixed route assessment amount is a 2.6% increase from FY24's assessment. He spoke briefly about fiscal pressures, noting that there was a significant amount of Covid-19 relief funding that has been used over the last several years, and that GMT is looking at a \$3 million deficit to maintain the current level of service at the current funding levels. He said that GMT is seeking additional revenue sources and that they are not looking to municipalities to help fill that gap. He noted that fare resume on March 6, 2024, and that GMT's new system will be more robust and allow riders to either use cash, a monthly prepaid pass, or daily/monthly caps of \$4 and \$50 (respectively). He also noted that fares are halved for those with disabilities.

Councilor Chawla asked about potential additional stops at the University of Vermont Medical Center, noting a need for it by staff who rely on GMT for transportation. Mr. Clark replied that they are not looking to add additional times, but could look at changing the schedule to try and better accommodate peak demand. Councilor Chawla said that Chittenden County and the region as a whole are adding residents monthly, and that lack of public transportation is a massive barrier for many. Mr. Clark noted a challenge around federal funding, saying that they are receiving the maximum amount of federal funding they're able to receive. Councilor Chawla confirmed that if member municipalities don't fund their share, it won't place additional burden on other municipalities.

Councilor Certa asked for more details about route development and expansion, noting that the current schedules for GMT buses are not as convenient as it could be for most of its residents. He expressed concern that the current GMT model is stagnant. Mr. Clark replied that from a federal funding perspective, GMT's allocation is based on population, not on volume of ridership, which makes increasing routes difficult. He said that from his perspective, GMT could use a more entrepreneurial approach to diversify funding opportunities going forward. He said that seeking non-profit status will unlock a number of grant opportunities for GMT. He also noted the political difficulty of changing routes.

Councilor Certa noted concerns from constituents about accessing the senior transportation program application from SSTA. Mr. Clark said that he would look into this further if staff would send him more information, but also noted that the different public transportation options available to seniors have different requirements and can be difficult to navigate.

Councilor Haney urged GMT not to cut services for Routes 2 and 10. Mr. Clark replied that GMT is committed to working with municipalities early and often, if route changes are being contemplated. He also said that GMT works with municipalities to understand changes to utilization patterns along routes.

f. Discussion & Consideration of CCRPC UPWP Applications and match

City Manager Mahony noted that this is the annual solicitation put out by CCRPC to understand the projects that each municipality would like help with. She noted that the City's current projects (in descending order of priority) include GIS services, the Pearl Street short-term multimodal improvement scoping study, and a televising services (TV) condition assessment of select stormwater pipes. She said that the recommendation from staff is to submit these requests.

Councilor Haney asked how the Pearl Street project interfaces with the Town of Essex's work on improving flow for parts of Susie Wilson Road. Director Yuen replied that the Town is still determining whether traffic patterns of changed enough since Covid to warrant changes to Susie Wilson Road. He noted that the Pearl Street project would rely more on temporary traffic changes, and would not be an impediment to however the Town decides to proceed. Councilor Chawla also advocated for a crosswalk or two to accommodate the newly-permitted Pearl Street developments.

Councilor Thibeault asked whether the request for GIS support of CCRPC is in addition to the GIS support in the Town's budget. City Manager Mahony confirmed this, explaining that the GIS needs of the City are for more specific infrastructure initiatives and zoning mapping.

ELAINE HANEY made a motion, seconded by MARCUS CERTA, that the City Council authorize staff to submit the UPWP requests application for GIS Services, and Pearl St Short-Term Multimodal Improvements, and Phase 4 TV condition assessment of stormwater pipes. The motion passed 5-0.

g. Discussion of FY25 General Fund Budget and Budget Schedule

City Manager Mahony began by noting that materials for this discussion include a description of the changes that were discussed during Budget Day, which results in a 6.9% increase and a 7.7% tax rate increase. She said that materials also include responses to the Council's questions from Budget Day. She said that department heads have been asked to think of further reductions that may be feasible, and that she also has a list of potential cuts and their implications. She noted that at the Council's next meeting, it will have to vote on a budget to put forth for the community dinner on the 27th.

City Manager Mahony ran through a list of potential reductions to the budget based on the Budget Day discussion. She noted that for the Finance Department, there is a \$16,000 cost request for software,

which would increase real-time reporting and transparency in the City's finances. She noted that in the Streets Budget, the City can reduce paving and the costs of salt. She said that they are putting together a bid for a new dump truck which would use salt more efficiently. She noted that in the Administration Budget there were line items for increased community outreach and engagement, though they are currently placeholders. She also noted the new CATMA membership which isn't currently being used. She said that for the Fire Department, the wage increases covering the volunteer time could be delayed to January, though they have been wanting to make this change for some time. She said that in the building budgets, there are some possibilities to reduce costs for 2 Lincoln Street (though they are modest), reductions for Park Street School (also modest), reductions for maintenance costs for Maple Street, and additionally noted that there is a General Fund transfer of \$50,000 into the Building Maintenance Fund that could also be reduced or not transferred. She noted a potential reduction due to a personnel change. She said that the Library has been looking at implementing more part-time hours and some cost reductions for software. She said that overall, reductions will be challenging given the low unassigned fund balance.

Councilor Chawla expressed concern about nickel-and-diming the budget, but acknowledged that there are some items on that list that didn't seem problematic if they were reduced. City Manager Mahony said that from her perspective, the most feasible reductions would be related to personnel and 2 Lincoln Street costs. Councilor Chawla said he isn't entirely comfortable with reducing the strategic plan line items or items around communication. He said that he is reluctant to make modifications to capital contributions.

Councilor Certa said he is not in favor of delaying the start time for the Fire Department wages. He asked about the transfer to the capital budget. Councilor Thibeault spoke about the amount of money in the Capital Fund and the amount of significant capital work slated for FY25, expressing concern that if this transfer isn't made then the City will need to go out for a bond much more quickly than it previously anticipated to cover those costs. Director Morris added that the General Fund Capital Reserve is projected to be \$1 million short in FY30, based on current projections. She also noted the City's tendency and desire to pay cash, which avoids the need to pay interest that borrowing would entail. Councilor Certa asked about the staffing levels for the Library and asked whether there is less need than was previously anticipated. City Manager Mahony said that the FY24 amount of part time hours for the Library may have been high and that they could be reduced (though the Library staff is still reviewing this line item). Councilor Certa asked about the skill level needed to staff the various positions in the library. Brownell Trustee Chair Grant replied that the skill level needed across positions at the library is high, given the breadth of their skillsets and the unique role the library plays in the community. Councilor Certa agreed, saying that it is a difficult balance that the library must strike between the services it needs to provide and the services being asked of the library.

Councilor Certa spoke more broadly about right-sizing departments based on comparable departments in other municipalities, such as Brattleboro and Williston. Councilor Haney agreed, asking that Councilor Certa share the data that he has on these equivalent departments in other municipalities. Councilors discussed how prescriptive they should be with making funding recommendations related to the budget for various departments.

Councilor Brown asked how many of the positions that support the enterprise funds are funded through those enterprise funds.

Councilor Haney asked about the City's unrestricted fund balance target policy, noting that the balance is low. Director Morris noted that the City is at 7.8% and that it can be up to 15%. Councilor Chawla asked whether funding can be earmarked for the unassigned fund balance or whether it is composed of

carryover funding. City Manager Mahony replied that they generally don't earmark funding for the unassigned/unrestricted fund balance, but will try to increase it by holding vacancies (for example) and composing budgets that find savings. Director Morris noted that if a municipality falls below its unassigned fund balance target, best practice is to have a plan to bring the balance back up to the target level (which is up to 15%).

Councilors discussed the proposed budget cost reductions. They agreed to ask the community specifically about the Capital Fund transfer. They discussed the amount to allocate for the strategic plan implementation and other strategic visioning activities. The majority of Councilors agreed to leave this line at \$10,000, given that other line items accommodate some of these costs, but acknowledging that more funding will be needed for specific projects related to strategic planning in future. Councilors acknowledged the importance of a community meal, noting that its costs should be included in the budget (related to the proposed reduction in Economic Development and its impact on the Community Meal).

Councilors then discussed the proposed changes brought by City Manager Mahony earlier in the discussion. They discussed the proposed \$16,000 reduction that would delay Questica software implementation for the year and the implications for the City. Several department heads spoke about the importance of the software, and Councilors agreed to keep it. They agreed to keep paving and salt costs level-funded. The majority of Councilors agreed to keep CATMA costs in the budget. They agreed not to delay the wages for volunteer firefighters. They agreed to reduce costs for the 2 Lincoln Street building line item, but said they would keep funding in for the Park Street School and Maple Street. They discussed the proposed transfer of \$50,000 from the General Fund to the Building Maintenance Fund and agreed to leave this proposed transfer in place.

Councilor Haney asked about a status update on the grants that could be repurposed from Main Street Park. City Manager Mahony replied that they have been able to apply for a grant related to emerald ash borer beetle control, though some of the grants related to Main Street Park will be difficult to repurpose for the Amtrak Station as proposed (thought more in-depth conversations with the State are still pending).

Councilor Brown asked about EJRP staff and whether the administrative budget or the enterprise fund pays for those staff costs. Director Luck replied that there is not currently a process by which enterprise funds are transmitted to the General Fund, though they are reviewing this. He said that this type of transfer is more straightforward for other enterprise funds, though it is more complex for EJRP, and said that it may not be a feasible undertaking for the FY25 budget cycle.

Councilor Certa requesting an analysis of level-funding the Brownell Library budget at \$964,134 (FY24 funding), as well as a 2% increase over FY24's budget. Councilor Haney said that she would like this treatment for other departments, saying that she is not comfortable asking only one department to level fund for FY25. Councilor Certa suggesting seeing each department propose a budget with a 1% decrease. Councilor Chawla acknowledged the previous work conducted by staff and Councilors to find areas of savings already, since an obvious 1% savings isn't readily apparent. He acknowledged that one of the only areas of savings could potentially be the Brownell Library, but said that he would like to have that conversation with the community when they present the budget.

The following public comments were received:

- Richard Smith expressed concern about Essex Junction providing services for other communities on the back of Essex Junction taxpayers.

- Annie Cooper expressed confusion about the capital reserve. She asked whether the City can more progressively allocate stipend funds to various board and committee volunteers. She also supported transferring administrative costs from the General Fund to EJRP for EJRP positions.

6. **CONSENT AGENDA**

- a. Approve Meeting Minutes: December 13, 2023; December 20, 2023
- b. Approve Adding VMERS Defined Contribution Option-Revised
- c. Approve Copier Lease

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

7. **COUNCIL MEMBER COMMENTS & CITY MANAGER REPORT**

City Manager Mahony noted that charter changes were passed by the House Committee on Government and Military Affairs today. She also noted that Bernie Fleury will receive the 2023 Alfred A. Pelouin Award for Vermont at the New England Environmental Water Association next week, which is a high distinction.

Councilor Thibeault thanked Public Works for dealing with two storms in one week and keeping the community's roads safe and maintained throughout the storm events.

8. **READING FILE**

- a. Check Warrant #24028 (12/15/2023) & #24029 (12/29/2023)
- b. Board of Civil Authority Draft Minutes – 12/12/2023
- c. Development Review Board Draft Minutes – 12/19/2023
- d. Bike Walk Advisory Committee Draft Minutes – 12/18/2023
- e. Tree Advisory Committee Draft Minutes – 12/19/2023
- f. Police Community Advisory Board Minutes – 11/21/2023
- g. Senior Center January Newsletter

9. **EXECUTIVE SESSION**

- a. *An executive session may be needed to discuss an Appointment of a Public Official

MARCUS CERTA made a motion, seconded by ELAINE HANEY, that the City Council enter into executive session to discuss the appointment of public officials, pursuant to 1 V.S.A § 313(a)(3) to include the City Manager. The motion passed 5-0.

MARCUS CERTA made a motion, seconded by ANDREW BROWN to exit executive session. The motion passed 5-0 at 10:32 P.M.

10. **ADJOURN**

ANDREW BROWN made a motion, seconded by ELAINE HANEY, to adjourn the meeting. The motion passed 5-0 at 10:36 P.M.

Respectfully Submitted,
Amy Coonradt