CITY OF ESSEX JUNCTION
GOVERNANCE COMMITTEE
REGULAR MEETING AGENDA

Online & 75 Maple St.
Essex Junction, VT 05452
Thursday, May 8, 2025
6:30 PM

This meeting will be in-person at Essex Junction Recreation and Parks located at 75 Maple Street and available remotely. Options to join the meeting remotely:

JOIN ONLINE: **Join the meeting now**

1. **WELCOME AND INTRODUCTIONS**   [6:30 PM]

2. **ADDITIONS OR AMENDMENTS TO AGENDA**

3. **PUBLIC TO BE HEARD**

4. **REVIEW & APPROVE MINUTES FROM LAST MEETING**

5. **DISCUSS GOVERNANCE CONSIDERATIONS TO EXPLORE**

    Additions based on City Councilor/Village Trustee survey results

6. **DISCUSS PLAN AND NEXT STEPS**

    Consideration and discussion of process for examining other communities

7. **ADJOURN**

    Attachments:
    - Draft Meeting Minutes April 24, 2025
    - City Councilor/Village Trustee Survey Results
    - Governance Considerations to Explore
    - Initial Thoughts/Ideas for Examining Other Communities
    - Community Comparisons

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 Chairperson, 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 Chairperson. Regarding remote 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 Governance Committee, 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 Essex Junction Recreation and Parks office at 802-878-1375 TTY: 7-1-1 or (800) 253-0191.

Governance Committee Meeting Minutes
April 24, 2025

Members present: Candace Morgan, Brian Sheldon, Marcus Certa, Gabrielle Smith, Marlon Verasamy, Steve Eustis, Deb McAdoo

Members absent: Elaine Haney, Thomas Coen

Staff present: Brad Luck

Steve opened the meeting at 6:32 p.m.

No change in the agenda.

No public were present to be heard today.

Motion to accept minutes - Gabrielle moved to approve minutes as is. Brian Shelden seconded, unanimously accepted.

Committee reviewed responses to the survey questions that were circulated ahead of the meeting.

Question 5: At-large elections or wards, or some combination?
- Discussion generally leaning towards keeping it as at-large. Some interest in evaluating a ward structure - some potential benefits to diversify the voices involved depending on how they could be structured/distributed.
- Brian brought up number of constituents a city councilor has (11,000) compared to to a Vermont State Rep (4,100 or 8,200 in a two-member district).
- What would wards solve?
- Discussion of wards probably made more sense when we were still attached to the town. Potentially beneficial for focused communication in areas, but still on balance at-large seems to be preference overall.

Question 6: Councilor compensation. Currently at $2,500/year.
- Should be some amount of compensation that covers child care, other logistics to cover the time of service.
- What are other communities doing? How to keep it updated overtime - indexing to inflation, etc.?

- Might be a good question to ask community if compensation amount is a barrier to serving - would additional $$ help incentivize participation? To cover child care and other things around amount of work needed at and ahead of meetings perhaps about $5,000?
- Same amount for all of council or should President receive a higher stipend?
- Consideration of a time study and calculation based on number of hours? Balance of money not being a motivator. Other way to compensation (i.e. discount on property taxes)?

Question 7: Neighborhood Assemblies.
- How do we define neighborhoods? What are we trying to solve for? Does it create arbitrary divisions?
- Community engagement? Or more official city business for review of zoning or similar decisions? Important to consider set-up, role, frequency, etc. if we do set something up so it doesn't just become something without follow through or engagement.
- Does it create a more accessible point of entry to city government outside of city council meetings? Both safety and language barriers of speaking at a bigger more formal meeting.
- What are we trying to address and once defined, are neighborhood assemblies the right solution?
- Broader discussion of community engagement and what that can look like - within scope of this group to be so specific about prescribing or considering what we should think about in this space.

Question 8: Voting date - March or April?
- Broad consensus about moving to March, understanding there are some considerations and process associated with aligning with school board (Spring 2027)
- Aligning with March Town Meeting Day vote will help with voter turnout.
- All largely in favor of making this move, but with school board in spring 2027

Discussion of Current/Former City Councilors
- Results were sent to group ahead of the meeting, will discuss further at next meeting.

Discuss Next Steps:
- Review of councilor feedback
- How do we plan to engage with the identified communities in Vermont?

Deb moved to adjourn at 8:01; Gabrielle seconded. Passed unanimously.

Meeting adjourned at 8:01 pm.

Respectfully submitted by Candace Morgan.

Anonymous survey results from 7 current/former City Councilors/Village Trustees that have served on the Council between 2010-present. The survey was sent to 9 individuals. Individual responses alternate between highlighted and unhighlighted.

1. Form of Government: Should we have a Council-Manager form of government as we do now, whereby the chief administrative officer is appointed? Should we have a Strong Mayor system like in Burlington where the chief administrative officer is an elected position? Should we have a Weak Mayor system whereby the elected leader of the council has some powers, but the role is mostly ceremonial, and the chief administrative officer is an appointed position? What is working well now?
Could a change to this aspect of our local government improve things and if so what change would you recommend?

We are a small municipality, less than 4 square miles, in my opinion, we do not need a mayor, nor do we need to change how the current council-manager form of government is working, and has worked, even before the town/village split. In a few words, if it's not broke, why try to fix it. I'd flip it around and ask, why isn't it working, and what is the driver to make the change.

Council-Manager has worked very well for us both as a village and as a city. Now that we're a city I think exploring the weak mayor model is worthwhile. A mayor could help with both communications and as an extension of the staff on certain issues, especially considering we are just barely staffed enough and do not have capacity to take anything else on. We are sorely in need of leadership on economic development and a mayor would be a logical and helpful resource on getting that work off the ground and establishing its importance.

Weak mayor is pointless and would function very closely to what the Council President does now. The only differences are breaking a tie for the council and that the resident vote on the person. Don't take the step to dip the toe into the water, either go full mayor or no mayor. Talk with Kristine Lott in Winooski, she'll tell you what it's like.

What works with the council manager form is the manager knows what they are doing. Let's be honest, could any of you really step into the role of the manager and know what you're doing on a day to day basis? There is a reason that Burlington, Newport, and Rutland have a strong administrative team, the mayor does not have the knowledge to run the day to day of the City, they rely on their finance, HR, community development, and other staff to make sure the policies they want to implement can actually happen.

The only positive to moving to a mayor of any kind is the VT Mayors group, but they are not a strong force in this state.

I believe the current system is working well and should remain in place. Our elected council members with input from community members are keenly aware of the needs of our city. They are best suited to make the decision of a manager who will work with them to address the needs of our city now and into the future.

The current form seems to work well. It doesn't loan itself to the type of staff turnover we see often times in a Mayoral system.

I think our current form of government has been effective as we've always had very strong managers. Our new planning personnel is also strong. Although I will continue to say that none of our personnel, while very strong, are extraverts spending time out and about in the community. I would be interesting in exploring a strong mayor form of government. Would this provide us more opportunities in development, in having our voice heard in state government, in having someone out in the public?

What is working well:
Our council-manager government is working very well and is an excellent fit for our community. We are very capably governed and I would hesitate to fix something that's not broken. The EJ Council/Trustees have a good track record of choosing qualified, effective managers, the present manager being a great example. A strong mayor system is absolutely unwarranted. Among other things, it risks putting someone with no grounding in municipal administration, finance, law, operations and planning in charge of our government.

Should we change it:
Creating a 'weak' mayor system would be problematic not only because it sounds awful (who wants to be known as a 'weak' mayor?) but it would also probably mean having the mayor elected separately from the city council, and thus the voters and not the council would decide who chairs the board, which is a terrible idea. We abolished that system years ago.

On the other hand, other than running the city council meetings, the council president's additional roles are not defined in the charter, such as working with the manager to set the agenda, overseeing the follow-through on council actions, and interfacing with media, developers, etc. Thus, it might be a reasonable idea to amend the charter to specifically spell out any additional responsibilities you want the council president to have besides being "… the head of the government for all ceremonial purposes." (What are "ceremonial purposes"? Parades? Funerals?) From my own experience I would suggest that the council president have clearly spelled out authority to: 1) work with the manager to set the agenda for upcoming board meetings; 2) work with the manager to monitor the status of city council actions; 3) work with the manager to respond to media inquiries and decide who, manager or

2. Council Composition: How many elected officials should we have (currently have 5)? Should the leader of the Council be elected by the Council or the people?

   What is working well now?

   Could a change to this aspect of our local government improve things and if so what change would you recommend?

I would leave the 5 councilors and have the leader elected by the council. The leader is exactly that, the person who the council feels can lead the group to get the job done and unify the team, it is not a political position. If the residents chose the council, there should be criteria in which the people are voting on that position.

Considering the sheer workload of the council, I think having 7 members would be really helpful. It seems easier in recent years to find candidates and having 7 members would more easily allow for ad hoc and standing committees. Local government is way more complex than it used to be and the responsibilities are more intense. Councilors need to know that they will be expected to work.

Classic public administration question with no right answer. Moving to the people means closer democratic anchors and may built trust with the community because they could be voted out easier. Downside is the public doesn't know what they don't know. Does the public really know who the best person is to run the City?

Essex Junction is a small city with a relatively small population. I don't see the need to expand the council beyond 5 members at this time nor into the foreseeable future.

5 is generally fine. The shortcoming of it however is 3 members makes a quorum and that sometimes proves difficult for general discussion. I think leaving the Council to determine who their leader should be is the best option.

I think 5 council members is enough. I am concerned that we still have council members who do not attend meetings in person. This needs to change. I also think we could have community subgroups that don't need a staff member to attend - that may open up the ability for additional residents to be

involved. My understanding is that due to lack of staff some suggested committees haven't been created. Maybe that's old news.

What is working well now:

The five member council is working very well and should not be changed.

Should we change it:

Council Size:

I apologize for giving a lengthy answer, but I think this is an important question:

• There's a flawed view that municipal elected boards are supposed to unfailingly represent the will of the people. Therefore, having more board members means having more robust representation from the community. This is absolutely wrong. Board members are elected and entrusted by the people to study and understand the operations and nuances of local government and armed with this knowledge, make informed decisions on the peoples' behalf. Elected officers need to have the backbone and the chops to sometimes make decisions that their constituents don't like. This is why local boards are called selectboards, councils, and trustees, and not representatives.

• There's no evidence that you'll get better municipal decisions from a seven-member board than a five-member board. It just takes longer to get things done.

• I've heard the argument that having more seats would provide more opportunities for community members to serve. Keep in mind that the role of local government is to serve the community and not to accommodate someone's personal life journey. The board structure that best fits the size of the community in the most effective and efficient way is what you're shooting for.

• We traditionally have very few competitive races for these seats. This year was a good example. We had two people running for one seat. If you had two additional seats, you'd probably have to be reaching out to get people to run. City councilors have a lot more legislative authority than other city boards and commissions, so you want these seats to remain competitive and have high value. People shouldn't be running for the city council on a whim.

• Last, in all the years that I served on the trustees/city council, I never once heard any constituent complain that they felt underrepresented or that their particular neighborhood or section of Essex Junction was unrepresented or being ignored. I've never heard any constituent call for a larger board. Don't fix something that's not broken.

Leader of the Council:

When I was first elected to the trustees, the president of the board was elected by the voters. I was surprised to discover that the "village president" had absolutely no additional legislative authority or responsibilities than anyone else. It only meant that if a sitting board member wanted to chair the

board when the current president stepped down, they had to give up their seat and run for president. It made no sense, and so we abolished it.

Reinstating the old system, which I sincerely hope you do not recommend, could mean that someone with no leadership experience or someone with an ax to grind or a particular issue to settle could be elected to lead and set the agenda for an experienced, dedicated city council. So don't go down that path. The city council is by far the best body to decide who among them has the energy and commitment to lead the board.

3. Councilor Term Lengths: What is the right number of years for a councilor term? Should they all be the same or different lengths?

   What is working well now?

   Could a change to this aspect of our local government improve things and if so what change would you recommend?

3-years is reasonable. There is a lot of work/money that goes into a campaign, even for city council, therefore, if the term is less, I think folks might be wary of spending that time and resources.

Three years seems fine, as does staggering them. Shorter or longer terms seems confusing to me and I don't recommend it.

3 years is good. Long enough to begin to know what is going on but short enough to still have a life if it's not your thing. Don't change this one.

The current process of offset three year terms has worked well. It allows community members enough time to become familiar with the elected council members and make an informed decision on whether to re-elect them. Lengthening terms to five years would stymie the process.

Three years feels like a good term. For someone new to politics, it takes a year to get their feet underneath them. I wouldn't advocate for terms any longer than three years.

The 3 year staggered terms work well - enough time to learn and get things done while not too long.

What is working well now and should we change it:

I think three-year, staggered terms are by far the best system. It provides a stable and consistent level of experience while allowing gradual change and opportunities for new perspectives. Great model, don't change it.

4. Councilor Term Limits: Should there be a maximum number of years or terms that a councilor may serve?

   What is working well now?

   Could a change to this aspect of our local government improve things and if so what change would you recommend?

==I don't think it's necessary to set term limits. We have attrition now, and having consistency on the council, isn't a bad thing.==

Having term limits like maybe no more than 3 or 4 terms seems like a good idea. I think it would make the public feel good. I would want some kind of language about it that allows for non-consecutive terms to accumulate to no more than the limit.

==Again, no right answer. George being around for as long as he was, I believe, was a great thing for the Village and City. There needs to be someone with history to know why things are the way they are. As municipal managers nationally and locally have shorter tenures the burden of "why do we do X that way" will fall on someone. I see a lot of value in no term limits. The public loves them though, except for when the elected official is doing great things. Imagine how much less federal assistance VT would have if Leahy had a term limit.==

I don't believe there should be term limits for council members. The current and past city council members have been able to work with residents to bring about a lot of positive changes to our community. Most significantly separation from the Town of Essex. Term limits could result in losing the knowledge and experience of one or two members of the board during a key negotiation process.

==We haven't run into this yet. This is a pretty thankless position. I would be surprised if people wanted to make a sustained run at it.==

Interesting question. I can see both sides but do believe that institutional knowledge is needed. So if we were going to limit I would say 4 terms.

==What is working well now:==
==Current system is fine.==

==Should we change it:==

I can't think of any reason for term limits. It's not like you've got hordes of people lining up to run for city council. If someone's doing a good job and wants to continue serving, why force them to leave?

5. Election of Officials: Should officials be elected at-large (without regard to residence location within the City), or through districts/wards, an overlay of wards within districts, or a hybrid of some at-large and some through districts/wards?
   What is working well now?
   Could a change to this aspect of our local government improve things and if so what change would you recommend?

Prefer to keep at-large. Again, we are less than 4-square miles, and I don't believe that having districts/wards is necessary.

At large. Adding wards and districts complicates everything and finding candidates in specific wards could be challenging. From an equity standpoint I understand this but from a practicality standpoint I believe it adds a lot of work to the clerk's office that frankly I don't think we're prepared to take on. I'd rather try out neighborhood assemblies for awhile to see how they work first.

EJ doesn't need wards. We are too small geographically. EJ needs neighborhood assemblies. Abdicate some basic planning responsibilities to the neighborhoods with a relatively small amount of money to help build a sense of community. It would also help with the pipeline of councilors, PC, DRB, and others.

Yes, electing members at large should remain in place. Geographically Essex Junction is a very small city, I don't see the need to divide a small city into tiny districts. It's already difficult enough to find people willing to dedicate the time and effort to run for office. Creating districts will further restrict the number of people who are able and willing to run for office.

This is a great question. Different neighborhoods have different needs but at the same time we're not a huge municipality. I'll be interested to see what the outcome of your discussion is on this as I don't wanna advocate one way or the other.

Now that we are our own city of approximately 10,000 people without a ton of space for continued growth, I like the elected at-large. It keeps the city together, rather than separating into smaller communities by artificial barriers.

What is Working Well Now and Should We Change it:

(Again, sorry for the long answer but it's important.)

The current at-large system is absolutely fine. There is no call for changing it. No one in the community has asked for it. No one has claimed that their neighborhood has been underrepresented.

If you haven't served on the city council, please look at the last five or ten city council agendas. How many issues do you see that have a "neighborhood" nuance – where people from one part of EJ might generally feel differently about something than their neighbors in another part of EJ? The answer is zero.

The difference between Essex Junction's neighborhoods is in average property values, not in racial/ethnic composition, or discernable political proclivities. We are a homogenous community with a strong sense of connection to each other. Cleaving this into wards/districts, besides being completely unnecessary, risks causing divisions, petty resentments, and politicizing things in a negative and unnecessary way.

In all the years I served, I never observed a trustee or councilor show bias or preference for their own neighborhood over another.

Burlington is a good example of what can go wrong when you do something like this. A little college town with 45K people has the same size council as Boston and Washington DC. Their eight wards and four districts have created politicized silos that compel council members to take politicized stances on every day, common sense municipal questions. At best, they should have a seven-member board with perhaps four wards. I don't know how they got themselves into this mess, but it's a massively inefficient and ponderous way to do things.

Wards and districts are for large cities with big, diverse populations and development levels. That's not Essex Junction. Maybe someday we'll find ourselves there, but this isn't a good idea for right now.

To repeat, I strongly urge you to look at actual agendas for the city council, keep in mind how difficult it already is to get people to serve in local government, and then ask yourself how chopping EJ up into voting wards and districts could possibly make things better.

6. Councilor Compensation: What is an appropriate amount to pay councilors annually for their service (currently $2,500/year)?

   What is working well now?

   Could a change to this aspect of our local government improve things and if so what change would you recommend?

I'd like our compensation to be in line with other SB's and CC's. I believe it is at this time.

The chair should get double what the rest of the council gets. It's an enormous amount of work, especially for someone who has a full time job. $5k for president, $3500 for vp, $2500 for the rest.

No right answer. The President should get more though given the number of hours it takes.

The current amount is fine. I don't see the need to raise it any higher.

If you'd ask me this question before I served, I would've said it's more than enough. Most days I feel like it's fair, but there are times when I shake my head. Perhaps there should be additional compensation for president and vice president?

Such a hard question. I think there should be a base pay - $2500 seems good to me - but with stipends if they pick up additional subcommittee work.

What is working well now:
I think the current compensation level is fine.

Should we change it:
Maybe a gradual increase from time to time, to keep up with inflation.

7. Neighborhood Assemblies: Should there be neighborhood assemblies?
   What is working well now?
   Could a change to this aspect of our local government improve things and if so what change would you recommend?

I've attended these in Burlington, and while it's helpful to have neighborhoods with specific interests gather, I think this can and is done informally, and does not need to be formalized.

This is an experiment worth exploring, especially since it was recommended by the EGG report and is (I believe) the only recommendation that hasn't been implemented yet. I think residents would appreciate the additional opportunity to have their voices heard, and it's a way for the council to connect with different areas of the community in ways we haven't before. It would require staff time but I think it's a good interim step we could take to learn more before committing to wards/districts.

Already answered this. Here it is again. EJ needs neighborhood assemblies. Abdicate some basic planning responsibilities to the neighborhoods with a relatively small amount of money to help build a sense of community. It would also help with the pipeline of councilors, PC, DRB, and others.

I feel the current system is working well. People who are passionate about an issue can reach out to the city council in person or online. I can imagine scenarios where neighborhood assemblies or districts could be viewed as divisive and pit one area of our city against another.

Not sure how this would work if we don't have wards. It would be interesting to test this idea but do feel like we give a lot of public to be heard time in our meetings today. If we had wards, then I could see neighborhood assemblies being critical to community engagement.

What is working well now:

We don't have neighborhood assemblies right now and I don't hear anyone asking for them, so I'd say things are working fine without them, right?

Should we change it:

I'm not strongly opposed to the idea, but I don't know what it brings to the table. Again, I can't stress enough how we struggle to get people to serve, so this seems that you'd be adding a whole new layer of positions for people to fill. Also keep in mind that any city-sanctioned committee or 'assembly' would need administrative support to organize and possibly attend evening meetings, keep minutes, etc. Do we have the staff capacity for that, and would it be worth the commitment of resources?

And what do these assemblies do? I assume they discuss local issues and perhaps come to some resolution or conclusion? Then what? Would the city council be legally bound to follow their advice? Not unless you want to radically alter the structure of city government. And so, these assemblies are going to go through a lot of meeting time and discussion to achieve what? I appreciate the idealism of wanting to engage the community and garner their input, but I suspect you'll get very low participation and a lot of frustration.

8. Voting Date: Should we vote on the budget and elect officials on Town Meeting Day? In April as it is now? Regardless, be on the same day as the school vote? What is working well now?

   Could a change to this aspect of our local government improve things and if so what change would you recommend?

I'm all in favor of switching to Town Meeting day in March as long as we can get the school board to do so as well, as I do not believe it's helpful to have multiple election days - it's confusing for folks, and costs more money.

We need to move it to Town Meeting Day in March. It makes sense to do that along with the school district. I am really hopeful we will accomplish this so that in 2027 we'll all vote on TMD in March.

Only move if the school district moves too. Keep the alignment to reduce voting. In my utopia, it would move to November to align with national elections to increase turnout.

I would like to see the elections held on Town Meeting Day.

The school board has indicated that they're ready to move their elections in 2027 for FY 28. We should follow this move as we currently vote in April so that our citizenry isn't going to the polls twice and it saves dollars as well

I think we should move to Town Meeting day.

What is working well now:

Seems to be working okay now. I appreciated not having to vote twice – once in March and then again in April. I also really liked the city's public-input budget meeting at CVE. It was well organized and fun. I strongly urge you to mention that in your final report.

Should we change it:

Our annual meeting/town meeting used to be a big deal, when we met as a community, debated the budget and then voted on it. But that went by the boards when we moved to Australian balloting.

With that said, I guess it would be nice to have city elections on the same day as other VT cities and towns, but right now it's much more practical to have them on the same day as the EWSD vote. If we moved city elections back to March, that would mean the city clerk must coordinate and manage two different elections very close together. This includes mailing out two tranches of ballots, which

costs many thousands of dollars and could be much more expensive if we have another pandemic-like event in which all ballots must be mailed. Right now, she can wrap all this work – which is quite substantial – into one consolidated effort, which is a good thing. Moving it back to March without changing the EWSD April vote would also mean a lot of additional work for volunteers at the polls.

Therefore, I suggest we keep ourselves aligned with the EWSD vote. I know they used to have a statutory reason for holding it in April, but I'm not sure they still do, so you might want to check with them and make a recommendation that applies to both the city and the EWSD.

9. What other thoughts, comments, or questions do you have? 4 responses

Thank you for the committee's work on this.

Good luck! I'm excited to see what comes out of this. I think it's an important look at the way we function.

Thanks for this work!

In summary, I urge you to resist the understandable temptation to recommend some innovative change in our government. As I suggested, if you're not familiar with city government, look at some city council agendas to see what kinds of things they actually deal with. How would imposing some new system – more council members, neighborhood assemblies, weak mayors, wards/districts – actually help them make better decisions? Look around Chittenden County, how many other towns our size have voting districts and neighborhood assemblies and mayors? Most towns have council-manager governments with five member boards because that's the most effective way of doing things for communities our size. Sometimes the most difficult but best course of action is to do nothing.

1. **Form of Government: Should we have a Council-Manager form of government as we do now, whereby the chief administrative officer is appointed? Should we have a Strong Mayor system like in Burlington where the chief administrative officer is an elected position? Should we have a Weak Mayor system whereby the elected leader of the council has some powers, but the role is mostly ceremonial, and the chief administrative officer is an appointed position?**

I don't know.

Seems like our current setup with a manager is working and we can remove a manager relatively quickly if needed. If gives us the opportunity to have a manager that is trained in running a municipality. For me a professional manager is going to be less political and well trained. A professional manager also allows for "average" people to be on the council. I think we need to encourage non-political, not super-connected people to be on the council.

I don't have an opinion on this yet. I am not inclined to a Strong Mayor system, but I could be convinced otherwise once we have done our research.

I first what to understand what challenges we are experiencing under our current form of government. If our current structure is working well to meet our needs, then do not think we should be looking for change for the sake of change itself. If there are current challenges, then I would want to uncover which alternative forms of government address those challenges and what drawbacks they have. Personally, having apolitical professional staff run the city makes sense to me, particularly for a city of our size.

What are the added benefits of changing to a different model than current?

Challenges of strong mayor system resulting in frequent major changes.

Does a mayor (strong or weak) align better and provide clarity given we are a city?

What are the cost implications of different models? Concerns of a strong mayor model adding additional paid political layer within government on top of existing professionals.

Concerned about power – ensuring it is limited and gives room for more voices.

Value expertise in the chief executive.

I don't have a strong opinion here except for this: CM seems to be working. I haven't heard any strong objections to CM except "we're a city, why don't we have a mayor?"

2. Council Composition: How many elected officials should we have (currently have 5)? Should the leader of the Council be elected by the Council or the people?

7. I don't know about the leadership role.

I haven't seen a reason (or anyone even hinting more is better) to have more than 5. It is easiest if the council chair is elected by the councilors as it prevents a lot of hassle with dealing with special elections if council challengers win or lots of political games if people need to resign their seats to run for head of council. We had a lot of problems with our previous system. Have there been any perceived problems with the current system?

I don't have an opinion yet on either question. I am open to expanding to 7, especially if we combine that increase with wards or other district form.

Five seems like a reasonable number given the size of our city. We want to keep an odd number so the alternative would be moving to 7. That of course makes decision making harder, increases some administrative expenses/burden, and needs to be sufficient interest from residents to serve in those new positions. Based on our peer cities, 5 seems reasonable. But again, would like to hear from folks on how our system is currently functioning, including from city councilors.

Is five equitable? How many people should one representative represent?

Having more councilors allows for larger sub-groups/committees without triggering a quorum.

Consideration of advantages/disadvantages to staggered terms and number of seats up for election at one time.

Is a smaller team (i.e. 5 vs. 7) more effective and/or efficient vs. larger?

Is a smaller number better i.e. 3 or 4?

More councilors = more voices

Would we have enough people running for elections?

Admittedly with little experience here, but, it seems like 5 is working? But I'm open to any odd number. If the president / mayor / chair is elected by the people, you'd have to give them more power in some way. Someone elected at-large by the people would want more power than someone only elected by a subset of the people. Otherwise, why would you run at-large? It's more work – both to run and to serve – and more expensive.

3. **Councilor Term Lengths: What is the right number of years for a councilor term? Should they all be the same or different lengths?**

3-4 years

It takes a year or two to really get your feet under you to know the councilor job well. Therefore 3 years seems like a good amount of time because of this learning curve.

Don't have an opinion yet

For equity, councilor terms should all be the same length. I've never heard of different term lengths for the same elected position before. 3 years seems like a reasonable time and is aligned with our peers. But again, would want to get feedback from stakeholders — is that currently working, what challenges does it create? Current terms are overlapping (i.e. council members are up for election at different times). In general, I think this is a good idea as is brings continuity to the council while also ensuring regular participation from the public on council members. It also provides some insulation from short term political winds since not all seats are up at any one point in time. Also follows models from other cities.

Concerns of large turnover in any one given year.

Consideration of time that it takes for councilors to learn the role – learning curve.

Is a shorter term more appealing/less of a commitment for some community members?

Three (3) years seems a good trade-off between commitment (longer would discourage people to stand up) and ability to gain experience before re-election (shorter would be continuously up for election). The important bit here, to me, is that they overlap. I don't think we should have the whole council be up at the same time like the State Legislature or US Congress. Too easy to lose institutional knowledge.

4. Councilor Term Limits: Should there be a maximum number of years or terms that a councilor may serve?

No.

I generally believe term limits makes sense to keep fresh viewpoints on the council. If we add term limits, we might want to consider a number of years break before someone could run again. In other words not a lifetime limit, but rather "streaks". Perhaps 5 years off after becoming term limited.

I'm not a fan of term limits in general. Could be convinced otherwise for City Council.

Term limits are helpful if there are substantial barriers to participation and entrenched incumbency. I don't see that as current issues. Council campaigns are relatively low-cost and short. Council members have voluntarily not run again. With a small city, instituting term limits can also have the adverse effect of limiting institutional knowledge and limiting the pool of qualified candidates. It does not seem like there is an overabundance of candidates at the moment (only 2 ran for the most recent open council seat).

Concern of aggregation of power

Is it a barrier for new participation if people don't want to run against incumbents?

Value of institutional knowledge vs. new voices. Stagnation vs. fresh perspective.

Are these being used in other communities? What is the experience?

Is there a better opportunity for a smoother transition if a term limited councilor knows they cannot run again?

> "When the playing field is leveled and the process is fair and open, it turns out we have term limits. They're called elections." –Aaron Sorkin, The West Wing S1E20
>
> No. I don't think that term limits accomplish what people think they do. People just run for other things, and you lose institutional knowledge as they do.
>
> https://www.ppic.org/wp-content/uploads/content/pubs/rb/RB_1104BCRB.pdf

5. **Election of Officials: Should officials be elected at-large (without regard to residence location within the City), or through districts/wards, an overlay of wards within districts, or a hybrid of some at-large and some through districts/wards?**

At Large.

I am feeling that the city is small enough and similar enough to not need wards. I was able to follow all the Front Porch Forums prior to consolidation to one. Frequently and over long periods of time, similar issues were brought up all over the city. Without wards we can have the best people on the council regardless of where they live. It also eliminates the need to rebalance every 10 years when new census data is available. The city is also not so big that it is difficult to reach all the citizens if campaigning at-large. If we were a merged Essex (which we aren't), wards would make more sense to me since there are 3 very different regions in Essex.

I am very interested in exploring this with the committee.

I think there is a benefit to simplicity for voters, especially in a small city like Essex Junction. If we were larger, then I do see a benefit of having ward specific councilors, but based on our city size this again can have the adverse effect of limiting the pool of qualified candidates. If we did want to consider this, should be done in tandem with increasing the council size (which doesn't seem like a current need). Would also want to better understand if some areas of the city feel under-represented on the council geographically. And then what are some options to address that (i.e. through better community engagement/outreach).

> I generally think that EJ is too small to justify wards, but I'm open to the idea.
>
> Two counter arguments:
> 1) an EJCC seat has more constituents (11,000) than a Vermont State Representative Seat (4,100 or 8,200 in a two-member district). Meaning it's more work (and more expensive) to run for an EJCC seat than a State Rep seat. Is that what we want?
> 2) if we go this route let's make sure that any wards we draw are legal (one person one vote), follow the Voting Rights Act of 1968, and are redistricted regularly and fairly.
>
> If we're considering wards seriously, let's start by breaking out some redistricting software to see what any legal wards would look like.
> I have done this for our House Seats, but it's been a while. I used Dave's Redistricting to look at Essex Town and Essex Junction when the legislature asked

the Essex BCA for feedback after the 2022 reapportionment. I learned some interesting things.

I think people are picturing drawing lines around, say, the South Summit neighborhood, Countryside, Rivendell, and the Fairgrounds / Grandview neighborhood and calling those the wards. However, those neighborhoods are *very* different in sizes. And they are hard to connect together: nobody lives in the CVE, Global Foundries, or the High School.
Point is: I don't think legal wards would look like what people think they would look like.

If we go the ward route, I would recommend using the Austin, TX, ward and redistricting ordinance as a model. (https://www.austintexas.gov/content/independent-citizens-redistricting-commission)

Happy to present on the Austin Redistricting Commission (and/or cut up some sample wards) if anyone is interested.

What would wards solve?
What is wrong with the current system and what would we gain from a change?
Concerns of challenges of finding candidates to run.

6. **Councilor Compensation: What is an appropriate amount to pay councilors annually for their service (currently $2,500/year)?**

I don't know.

$2,500 seems like a fair amount of compensation. What are the reasons to think it is not enough? That much can certainly pay for child care, pet care, and other financial constraints of the position. It is nice to get something for your time and this seems to accomplish that.

I would like to see the compensation increased. I see the concept of volunteering for a significant time commitment like this to be outdated and exclusionary. Most residents are either full or over-employed or retired. We need to make the City Council an option for those who cannot afford to commit to the time required for free, or who wouldn't do it for free for whatever reason. I like the range of $7,500 - $10,000, but that is a pretty undereducated guess.

I think we should definitely increase councilor compensation. It is a huge time commitment and the limited renumeration is a barrier for participation for many individuals. I'm not sure yet what is the right level that is both affordable, practical, and appropriate, but maybe close to $10k/year with built in annual inflationary increases? Would want to learn what peer cities are doing, but think in general pay across the board is too low if we want to broaden who is able to serve.

> Well, I didn't run for this seat for the money.
> What I would recommend, is, that whatever compensation we have be indexed for inflation. And/or for the midpoint of the merit increase staff gets.
> It's very easy to demonize politicians voting to raise their own salary. Therefore, unless we want to find out that we're not paying people enough to consider a run in (say) 2045, when $2,500 only buys a creemee :-) we should index it for inflation and forget about it.

Where are other communities at?

Does higher compensation draw or allow others to consider participating in this way?
Does a higher compensation make being a Councilor more accessible?
Is the current compensation a barrier to Council participation?
More generally, what are the barriers to participation (compensation, fear of attacks, etc.)?

How do you increase it over time? Automatic? Set period of time?

Can we track or get an estimate of number of hours that Councilors put in per month and assign an appropriate dollar amount to it?

Balance of money not being a motivator.

Other way of compensating? i.e. discount on property taxes

What are other communities doing?

Should the President of the Council receive a higher stipend?

7. Neighborhood Assemblies: Should there be neighborhood assemblies?

Yes. I am concerned about the attendance though.

I do not know enough about neighborhood assemblies. What are they trying to accomplish? What is the definition of a neighborhood? Is it better to just have city wide outreach, such as the annual meal meeting (January), and planning/zoning initiatives, celebrations (block party, etc.), etc.

I am very interested in exploring how this might work in EJ.

I think we definitely need some form of intentional community engagement strategy. I'm not sure that neighborhood assemblies are the answer (but they could be!) They strike me as a time- and resource-intensive approach and think other community engagement approaches could be more efficient at achieving the same results. But want to learn more.

I don't see exactly what these would accomplish. There's so little feedback given to the City now, adding a hierarchy seems like overkill. But, I'm listening.

What is a neighborhood?

What are we trying to accomplish? What issue are we trying to solve? Citizen access? Communication of City business? Increased opportunities for citizen input and engagement?

What role would we want them to play? Official City business/engagement/neighborhood relations?

Does this increase accessibility for residents – easier, more comfortable, more local point of access? Does this give people more of a voice?

Important to consider set-up, role, "power," responsibility, follow-through, meeting frequency? Is it the same for all or does each neighborhood define for themselves?

What are we trying to address and once defined, are neighborhood assemblies the right solution? Is there another solution or avenue for people to have _____ (if the blank is better access to local government, better input, easier engagement, less intimidated engagement, less formal opportunities to participate, greater comfort in engaging in dialogue about municipal business)?

Are there other affinity group options to satisfy the goal(s)? What do other communities do?

For non-English speakers – added challenges of language barriers, fear, safety.

8. **Voting Date: Should we vote on the budget and elect officials on Town Meeting Day? In April as it is now? Regardless, be on the same day as the school vote?**

Yes, move to Town Meeting Day.

I prefer to move both the school vote and city vote to Town Meeting Day. There is so much statewide hype and public interest in Town Meeting Day it would be great to take advantage of it.

Yes, move the vote to March Town meeting day, yes to voting on budget, elected officials and school vote on the same day.

We should definitely vote on budget, election officials, and the school budget all on the same day. Voter participation is already low — having separate dates creates greater barriers to participate and less incentive. We should consider moving all this to town meeting day in March to take advantage of statewide publicity of voting on town meeting day.

Yes, move to Town Meeting Day. This was part of my campaign platform, and I heard 0 objections and many supporters.

Value in aligning with broader Vermont voting. Hype/attention/interest about budgets and elections statewide in March.

School district expressed interest in moving to Town Meeting Day by spring 2027.

9. What other thoughts, comments, or questions do you have?

I have an open mind on things and look forward to debating the merits of the various proposals. I just listed my current insights based on my experience interacting with the city as a citizen, moderator, and member of the governing board. My general principals are to keep things as simple as possible, discourage politics and crony networks, and have as many average people involved in the governance, backed by a professional staff.

Excited to discuss, learn more, and meet with various stakeholders and officials from other cities!

Curious about other advisory/committee/etc. role for community members to engage other than Council but in a meaningful way that may address some barriers to being a councilor i.e. long-term lengths.

Engagement and communication

Initial Thoughts/Ideas For Examining Other Communities

- Examine 9 Vermont communities similar in square miles and/or population
- Break into groups of 3 committee members; each group researches 3 communities
- There are 4 weak mayors, 3 council-managers, and 2 strong mayors
- For each community, groups will:
    - Interview the chief administrative officer
    - Interview the head of the elected board
    - Survey the board members
    - Complete the info chart
- Timeline:
    - Between 5/8 - 5/22 - review & submit suggested interview & survey questions
    - 5/22 - review & finalize interview questions, survey questions, chart headings; meet with team to discuss process
    - Between 5/22 - 6/26 work with group on deliverables (no meeting 6/12)
    - 6/26 - group presentations & discussion

Average Population as a % & Square Miles % vs. City

#	Community	Form of Government	Election System	Number of Elected Officials	Leader of the Council Elected by	Term Length	Councilor Term Limits	Councilor Compensation	Neighborhood Assembly/ Other Advisory Group	Population	Square Miles	Population Per Councilor	FY26 Approved Budget	FY25 Tax Rate	Population as % of EJ	Square Miles as % of EJ	Average Population & Sq Miles %
1	Winooski	Weak Mayor	At-Large	5 (mayor+4)		Mayor (3yr), Councilors (2yr)				7,997	1.5	1,599			76%	32%	54%
2	St. Albans City	Weak Mayor	Wards (6)	7 (mayor+6)		Mayor (2yr), Councilors (3yr)				6,887	2.0	984			65%	43%	54%
3	Barre City	Weak Mayor	Wards	7 (mayor+6)		2yr				8,491	4.0	1,213			80%	84%	82%
4	City of Essex Junction	Council-Manager	At-Large	5	Council	3yr	None	$2,500	None	10,590	4.7	2,118	$12,419,241	0.9861	100%	100%	100%
5	Montpelier	Weak Mayor	Districts	7 (mayor+6)		2yr				8,074	10.3	1,153			76%	216%	146%
6	Rutland	Strong Mayor	At-Large	11		2yr				15,807	7.7	1,437			149%	162%	156%
7	Barre Town	Council-Manager	At-Large	5		3 (3yr), 2 (2yr)				7,923	30.7	1,585			75%	648%	361%
8	Williston	Council-Manager	At-Large	5		3 (3yr), 2 (2yr)				10,103	30.6	2,021			95%	645%	370%
9	Burlington	Strong Mayor	Districts & Wards	12		2yr				44,743	15.5	3,729			423%	327%	375%
10	Brattleboro	Council-Manager	At-Large	5		3 (3yr), 2 (1yr)				12,184	32.4	2,437			115%	684%	399%