

**CITY OF ESSEX JUNCTION
CITY COUNCIL
REGULAR MEETING
DRAFT MINUTES OF MEETING
January 14, 2026**

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

ADMINISTRATION: Regina Mahony, City Manager; Brad Luck, EJRP Director; Jess Morris, Finance Director.

OTHERS PRESENT: Luke Brockmeier, Karen Hergesheimer, Greg Morgan, Bridget Meyer, Dennis Thibeault, Jeanne, 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
None.

5. BUSINESS ITEMS

a. Discussion of Community Engagement Budget Ask
Bridget Meyer spoke on this agenda item. She noted that a small group of residents have formed a Community Connections team and is organizing a community dinner for the City at the Essex Westford High School on January 31, with activities for children from 4:00 onward and dinner from 5:30 to 7:00 P.M. She said that she would like the City to have more of these informal events where residents have the opportunity to get to know each other in a casual setting, and outlined a number of examples of community events that are inexpensive and would appeal to all age ranges. She noted other municipalities with downtown designations, such as the Vergennes Partnership and Montpelier Live, saying that they are great examples of community organization and economic development coalescing in the same activity. She noted that in addition to community events, the Community Connections team is working to put together a welcome brochure for all new Essex Junction residents, which would include municipal information and contacts, as well as information on pedestrian and bike paths and other City infrastructure.

Councilor Haney expressed support for organic, informal approaches to organizing community events. She asked Ms. Meyer if there is a dollar amount or funding ask associated with this proposal. Ms. Meyer replied that she has not put forth a proposed dollar amount, but has begun to engage with City staff on a limited basis to solicit their feedback. Councilor Miller expressed support for this type of community engagement and said that it will be important to have a process of accountability to ensure that taxpayer dollars are being spent appropriately in these efforts. Councilor Certa said he would like to better understand the asks, where they would fall in the budget, what staff time would be required to provide support for these events, and then use that to inform decisions about funding. City Manager Mahony said it would be helpful to know if the Council supports this concept of a more grassroots effort at community engagement, with some ability to stand it up and support it with a dollar amount. She said that staff can help determine how much capacity they have to support this effort. She said that this effort could be valuable and would address a number of the items listed in the City's strategic priorities. EJRP Director Luck said that this could be a great opportunity for the City to have more civic engagement, and could dovetail with Councilor Haney's proposal that the City

have a human services grants program. He said that having a fund available for community members to come together and weigh in on how to spend it is a prime example of participatory budgeting.

The following public comments were received:

- Resa said that this is a laudable proposal, but said there needs to be a process and structure in place to vet something like this, as it could establish a precedent for community members to come forward to the Council with funding requests of their own. She asked who is on the Community Connections team, and Ms. Meyer replied that the team includes Sue McCormick, Karen Dolan, Lori Houghton, Dennis Thibeault, Gabrielle Smith, and herself.
- Luke Brockmeier expressed support for a single standalone nonprofit (such as one that would be associated with a City's downtown designation) that isn't directly related to the City that engages in this type of community development, and that other community requests could be funneled through this organization. He said that producing and sending a welcome packet also helps the City quantify how many people are moving into Essex Junction every year.
- Greg Morgan spoke about the importance of structuring community events so that people are encouraged to talk to others they may not be seeing at other organizations or events.

b. Discussion and Consideration of the Proposed FY27 General Fund Budget

City Manager Mahony began by noting that this proposed FY27 General Fund budget is a reduction of approximately \$50,000 from the budget presented on Budget Day in December 2025, and noted the additions and reductions from the previous draft of the budget that resulted in the net \$50,000 decrease. She noted that there are several outstanding items not included in the budget, which will be incorporated when known. These include allocated postage expenses across departments, VLCT insurance rates, and County Tax amounts. She said that as it stands, the current FY27 budget proposal represents a 3.9% increase over FY26. She noted that Enterprise Funds (Water, Wastewater, Sanitation, and Stormwater) are in the early stages of being compiled and calculated, and have not been updated since Budget Day (and stand at a 9.2% increase from FY26 to FY27). She noted that there were specific questions about election costs, and noted that after researching further, City staff determined that the FY27 budget allocates enough to cover costs in the event that there are two annual meetings between the City and the School District. She also noted that there were specific questions about the Clerk's Office becoming a location for processing U.S. passports. She said that the revenue associated with this was not assumed in either the FY26 or FY27 budget. She noted that while the City has been conditionally approved to become a passport facility, it warrants further consideration by the Council, as it would limit the Clerk's Office's, ability to conduct other work at current capacity.

City Manager Mahony then spoke about additional budget items for consideration that haven't been brought forth yet. She noted that the first is the Community Connections Team request that Ms. Meyer spoke about earlier. She noted that another item is how the City can raise more revenue and encourage more economic development, and said that while the City is well on its way to growing its residential grand list, it is without an economic development strategy or committee for doing so for commercial or industrial properties. She suggested starting by putting \$30,000 in consultant funding in the FY27 budget to help establish a plan or strategy for revenue growth. She also noted that the City will be working with surrounding municipalities through CCRPC on the Economic Mobility & Opportunity work.

City Manager Mahony noted budget items that staff do not currently need direction on but that have come up for consideration for inclusion in the FY27 budget, including the Social Services Grant Program, the potential Public Works Facility bond vote, and potentially putting additional capital into the Stormwater fund.

The Council began by discussing Ms. Meyer's request to add funding to the budget for community events. Councilor Certa expressed support for the concept, but said he is unclear about which bucket of funding it should be allocated to. He asked whether it could be folded into the \$30,000 suggested by City Manager Mahony that would be earmarked for consultant support for an economic development strategy. Councilor

Haney asked whether it would be appropriate to use part of the funding set aside for community engagement special initiatives in the legislative department's portion of the budget. Other Councilors said that this could be a feasible approach.

Councilors then discussed other outstanding items for consideration in the FY27 General Fund budget. Councilor Haney spoke about several meetings she and other Councilors have had in the past with other municipalities on their approaches to economic development, including Hardwick and Montpelier, and how these approaches could be mirrored by Essex Junction. She also spoke about how the Champlain Valley Expo will be a significant player in the economic development conversation. She expressed support for having a consultant provide support in further strategic planning for economic development. Councilor Shelden asked about hiring for an internal staff position to help with economic development strategic planning, rather than hiring a consultant. City Manager Mahony replied that a staff member will likely be more necessary in the future, but would not recommend including a half-time position in the FY27 budget instead of contractor funding. Councilor Certa expressed support for an additional \$30,000 in the budget to pursue this economic development strategic support. Councilor Miller cautioned about adding further expenses to the budget, with an eye to keeping tax increases down. He noted that though the increase currently stands at around 4% over FY26, 2.8% of the total 4% is due to an increase in the costs of police services, which is not completely in Essex Junction's control. Finance Director Morris noted that adding \$30,000 to the budget for economic development support would put the FY27 increase at 4.1%, or \$118 per year on a \$280,000 assessed property.

Councilors discussed the Social Services Grant Program and whether to discuss it as its own business item on a future City Council agenda. Councilor Haney expressed support for continuing to discuss this item, and would like to see the City mirror the Town's approach to this type of grant process. Councilor Certa expressed support for discussing this at the Council's next meeting and for having the voters weigh in on whether they support this type of grant program for the City. Councilors Miller and Shelden agreed.

The following public comments were received:

- Greg Morgan spoke about his experience on the Town's Economic Development Committee and on past attempts to look at how to increase the grand list on the commercial/industrial sector through economic development. He spoke about the Town's experience hiring a consultant to conduct a study around economic development and how the deliverable was not ultimately very useful, but said that having a consultant who understands Vermont's situation and landscape would be critical for success.
- Resa thanked Councilor Miller for approaching the budget conversation with a focus on affordability for the taxpayers.
- Bridget Meyer said that there are people in the community who have the expertise and are willing to volunteer their time to help with the economic and community development conversations and urged the City and the Council to lean into that volunteer willingness and capacity to serve.

6. **CONSENT ITEMS**

- a. Approve Meeting Minutes: December 10, 2025; December 17, 2025

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

7. **COUNCILOR COMMENTS & CITY MANAGER REPORT:** City Manager Mahony thanked public works crews for trying to ensure that roads and sidewalks were as safe as possible during the deep freeze and ice of the past several weeks. City Council President Thibeault also thanked public works for their work this winter so far.

8. **READING FILE**

- a. Check Warrant #24102 – December 13, 2025; #24103 – January 9, 2026

- b. Regional Boards and Committees Memo
- c. Bike Walk Advisory Committee Minutes – December 11, 2025
- d. Tri-Town Joint Review Committee Minutes – December 15, 2025
- e. Brownell Library Trustee Minutes – December 16, 2025
- f. Police Community Advisory Board Minutes – December 16, 2025

9. **EXECUTIVE SESSION**

- a. None anticipated

10. **ADJOURN**

Councilor Certa made a motion, seconded by Councilor Haney to adjourn the meeting. The motion passed 5-0 at 8:00 P.M.

Respectfully Submitted,
Amy Coonradt