

**CITY OF ESSEX JUNCTION  
CITY COUNCIL  
REGULAR MEETING  
DRAFT MINUTES OF MEETING  
January 28, 2026**

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

**ADMINISTRATION:** Regina Mahony, City Manager; Ricky Jones, Public Works Superintendent; Chelsea Mandigo, Water Quality Superintendent, Jess Morris, Finance Director.

**OTHERS PRESENT:** John Alden, Richard Hamlin, Reed Nye, Dennis Thibeault, Resa.

**1. CALL TO ORDER**

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

**2. AGENDA ADDITIONS/CHANGES**

None.

**3. APPROVE AGENDA**

None needed.

**4. PUBLIC TO BE HEARD**

a. Comments from Public

None.

**5. BUSINESS ITEMS**

a. Water Quality Superintendent Department Head Brief to Council

Water Quality Superintendent Mandigo spoke on this agenda item. She provided an update on progress made over the last year for the department. She spoke about two major capital projects that were completed this summer and expressed gratitude for the staff who handled those projects. She spoke about the launching of the stormwater utility over the past year and noted that the City hired a stormwater coordinator in August of 2025. She spoke about the purchasing of a camera for the vacuum truck and how it will be helpful for the wastewater plant going forward, in terms of discovering where groundwater is infiltrating the collection system. She said that looking forward, the biggest challenges for the wastewater departments will be to address issues with aging equipment and infrastructure. She noted that the City applied to renew its wastewater permit with the State and that they have requested an additional 100,000 gallons to the overall capacity amount. She said another challenge will be related to biosolids management, given that the beneficial reuse of biosolids at Whitcomb Farm will be sunseting due to stricter PFAS regulations. She said that for stormwater, the City needs to create a capital fund to address some of the City's aging infrastructure. She spoke about working with the Town of Essex to revise a shared agreement on shared collection lines.

Councilor Certa asked about the experimental project that the City was involved in that explored ways of removing phosphorus and whether that could also help remove PFAS. He also asked if the City could begin sending biosolids to Whitcomb Farms again if the PFAS are removed. Water Quality Superintendent Mandigo replied that the pilot program is a grant-funded project from the State that involved loading phosphorus removal technology into a mobile trailer, and that the trailer will now go to a facility in South Burlington to test whether the technology works. She noted that some of the research conducted in this project also indicated that it could remove PFAS, and that if it is successful and the biosolids meet regulations, they could begin land application again. She said that she will follow up with the University of Vermont professor who had been working on this research. Councilor Haney asked for more information on growth pressures related to housing needs and the limitations of the pump stations. Water Quality Superintendent Mandigo replied that half of the City's pump stations are between 30 and 40 years old and weren't initially designed to pump for higher density areas and that they cannot retrofit them but are now limited by the force main, which would

need to be replaced in order to increase capacity. She said that though the City wants development, it must be sure that it has adequate capacity in its water, wastewater, and stormwater infrastructure to support increased density.

b. Discussion and Consideration of Annual City Meeting Ballots

City Manager Mahony said that staff are recommending mailing postcards to residents so that they can request ballots in the mail, as opposed to universally mailing ballots to all residents. She noted that the school district is also intending to use this approach. Councilors agreed with this approach for the City's ballots.

c. Discussion and Consideration of the FY27 General Fund Budget and Warn Budget Public Hearing

City Manager Mahony began by noting that the Council last discussed the FY27 budget on January 14 and that there have been some minor changes between the budget at that time and the budget being brought to the City Council at tonight's meeting. She noted a slight adjustment of \$1,500 as a result of an increase in insurance rates from VLCT and a decrease in the county tax, which have offset each other. She also noted the enterprise funds with preliminary estimates of year-over-year changes. She noted a response to a question about stormwater, noting that a \$50,000 increase in the capital transfer for stormwater results in a roughly \$8 increase on the equivalent residential unit (stormwater rate). She also noted the inclusion of \$30,000 for consultant services for economic development and that that is in addition to the already-existing \$10,000 in the legislative budget (which could be used for engagement activities such as the one that Bridget Myers brought to the Council for its consideration). She noted that the Council must warn the public hearing for the budget tonight.

The Council discussed whether to include an additional \$30,000 in the budget for economic development consultant services. Councilor Miller expressed concerns about affordability, especially taken in tandem with a potential bond vote for a new public works facility. Councilor Certa said he is in favor of adding this \$30,000 to the budget, saying that the City needs to be proactive about increasing revenue and growing the grand list in order to take the burden off of residents in the upcoming years. Councilors Haney and Shelden expressed support for adding the funding in.

**Councilor Miller made a motion, seconded by Councilor Certa, that the City Council warn the public hearing for the proposed Fiscal Year 2027 General Fund and Capital Budget on February 11, 2026 at 6:30 P.M. The motion passed 5-0.**

d. Discussion and Consideration of the Public Works Facility Bond Vote

City Manager Mahony began by noting that the City Council last discussed this item at its November 12, 2025 meeting. She noted that since that time, a third concept plan and cost estimate for a new public works facility have been developed, for a total cost of \$13.5 million. She noted that the impact on an average home in the City for a 20-year bond term is approximately \$299 and for a 30-year bond term is approximately \$259. She noted that after discussions, next steps to move forward would be for the Council to adopt a resolution of necessity on February 25, 2026. She noted that the Council should think about allowing itself enough time to communicate this with the community, if it chooses to move forward with a resolution of necessity and ultimately placing the question on the ballot.

Rick Hamlin of Hamlin Engineering (and the City Engineer) noted that there were two previous versions of the design concept for a new public works facility. He noted that Version 1 retained some of the buildings and provided some infill, while Version 2 was a teardown of most of the buildings. He said that feedback from the Council during its last discussion of this item was a request to remove all existing buildings except for the salt shed and build all new buildings for the facility. He provided an orientation to the proposed design for Version 3 of the pre-conceptual plan, including office space for public works personnel, the main barn, vehicle storage, and a new building that would contain a wash bay, pipe-fitting, water equipment and meter testing equipment. He said that because the existing buildings would be leveled, the construction crew would need somewhere to work out of during the 18-24 months of construction, and they are proposing the new wash bay building in the corner to do that. He also noted that the vacuum sucker would need to be stored in a

heated environment, which would also be stored in that new wash bay building. He said that Public Works has also requested two more bays be added to the salt shed to increase storage and stockpiling abilities during salt shortages. He also noted that bins that store other materials would also now be covered, rather than exposed to the elements, in this new plan. He noted that the roofs of some of the buildings could have solar panels added to them, if the City wanted to pursue that (though this has not been reflected in current cost estimates).

Councilor Haney asked about the permitting needing for this construction. City Engineer Hamlin replied that they will need permitting from the City but also a wastewater permit, a construction general permit, and an operational stormwater permit. Councilor Certa asked about what is driving a higher pricetag on this version than for the cost of similarly-designed facilities for other municipalities. John Alden of Scott & Partners replied that he canvassed online for building material cost estimates and spoke with contractors who constructed similar facilities in Milton and St. Albans, and noted that the estimate for St. Albans began at \$216 per square foot and ended up around \$300 per square foot in their reporting once construction concluded. He noted that there are a number of factors that go into costs, including not just the building but the site work, infrastructure, and utilities. He said that currently, this proposal has a square footage pricetag of \$275 per square foot. Councilor Miller noted that recently constructed public works facilities for other municipalities include St. Albans, Georgia, Milton, East Montpelier, Berlin, and Swanton, and they have all been built out under construction management contracts. He noted that they have generally costed between \$250-\$300 per square foot, and that the contracts seem to run for around a year. Councilor Certa said that this seems in line with what is being presented and he is in support of it. Mr. Alden noted that the range of dollar costs is wide and that keeping costs contained throughout the project will be a challenge, so the City should make sure it picks the right process and that the construction management firm would be key in ensuring that costs are kept contained.

The following public comments were received:

- Resa asked about alternative solutions, if a bond vote fails. Councilor Miller said that it is the Council's job to advocate for a bond vote, and he sees the need for this new public works facility.

Councilor Shelden thanked Public Works for the work that they do. He said that it seems like the current Public Works facility needs another salt bay, and a smaller investment for quality of life improvements, but he said he does not see the need for a brand new facility. Other Councilors expressed support for putting this on the ballot for a bond vote.

e. Discussion and Consideration of Water Service Line Further Investigation and Loan Ballot Question  
City Manager Mahony noted that there was a bond question similar to this one in 2023, in order to comply with federal drinking water rules around identification of lead in service lines for drinking water. She noted that this original request entailed inventorying the service lines, which resulted in determining that the majority of the service lines are lead-free. She said that this next step requires validating a 15% sample size of the non-lead lines, which would require the City to dig and analyze the physical pipes themselves. She said that additionally, they are required to conduct further investigation into the remaining service lines that they were unable to determine as lead or non-lead during the initial phase. She noted that the City has until 2037 to complete this set of requirements. She said that Essex Junction is currently eligible for loan forgiveness under its Intended Use Plan, meaning that the first \$100,000 is forgiven and 50% of the remainder is forgiven. She said that given this eligibility, staff think it makes sense to continue to pursue this work, but that it would require taking on more debt and thus, the approval from residents through a ballot vote. City Council President Thibeault asked about the likelihood of regulations at the federal level changing and no longer requiring this work. City Manager Mahony replied that in her mind, the loan forgiveness (a known) outweighs the potential that requirements could change in the future (an unknown).

**Councilor Certa made a motion, seconded by Councilor Shelden, that the City Council ask the voters to authorize a planning loan through the Drinking Water State Revolving Fund for a project in the Water Enterprise to be used for service line material identification and non-lead service line validation**

as required by the federal drinking water regulations, in an amount not to exceed \$892,771 to be financed over a period not to exceed 10 years. The motion passed 5-0.

f. Discussion and Consideration of a Social Service Grant Program Ballot Question

City Manager Mahony began by noting that this was a program that the Village participated in while it was part of the Town but that since separation the City has not has this type of program. She said that she has been thinking about adding an activity around this discussion once reappraisal is completed, as they will have a better sense of how the City's finances stand and how much the Economic Development Fund is receiving. She noted that VLCT has put out guidance on Social Service Appropriations and said that the model policy recommends that each appropriation be a separate line item on the ballot that voters can weigh in on. She also added that if the City postpones their decision on this for a year, they could have a more thoughtful approach for the program and consider whether the program could be for one-time funding or annual operating funding for organizations, and whether they could incorporate participatory budgeting practices to put decision-making in the hands of residents.

Councilor Haney said she supports participatory budgeting but isn't sure what types of participatory budgeting the residents of Essex Junction are interested in (having a voice in grantmaking to nonprofits that help the community versus having a voice in the City's spending decisions on infrastructure and operations). She also expressed concern about the capacity to establish a participatory budgeting program versus the capacity needed to start a human services grant program. She said that the Town's model is very easy to replicate for the City, whereas starting a participatory budgeting program for granting would be a large undertaking. She also emphasized that the local nonprofits who would be eligible for this funding need it urgently. She said that this would also help contribute to the human services needs being felt across Chittenden County. Councilor Certa said he is struggling with how to help these nonprofits but not contribute to the tax burden on the residents of the City. He said he very much supports putting this on the ballot for the voters to decide. He said that if the voters are in favor of this program, they could set it up like the Town's program now and transition it into a participatory budgeting process in the future. Councilor Miller said he is supportive of these nonprofits and the work they do, but expressed grave concerns about affordability, given the other items that were included in the budget (such as potential bond votes) and trying to keep tax increases to residents to a minimum. Councilor Sheldon expressed support for putting this on the ballot and leveraging the Town's program structure and transitioning into participatory budgeting processes in the future. City Council President Thibeault agreed with Councilor Miller and said that this may not be the right year to come to the voters with this advisory ballot question ask, though she expressed support for the concept, the Town's program, and VLCT's model policy. She expressed concern that having both this and the bond vote for the public works facility on the ballot together may risk the failure of the bond vote, which is her priority of the two. Councilors discussed whether the social services grant program should be funded at 1% of the General Fund budget or through a 1-cent tax. Councilor Haney said a one-cent tax makes sense, and other Councilors concurred. Councilors also agreed to replicate the Town's program, policy, and process for now, if voters approve the program. Councilor Haney suggested producing an explanatory document on the proposed program.

**Councilor Haney made a motion, seconded by Councilor Sheldon, that the City Council ask the voters to authorize the development of a Social Services Funding Program and approve a one-cent tax to fund this program, to be considered at the annual meeting in 2027. The motion passed 5-0.**

6. **CONSENT ITEMS**

- a. Approve Meeting Minutes – January 14, 2026
- b. Approve Annual Highway Mileage Certificate

**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 encouraged residents to attend the City's open house on January 31. She said it is open between 11:30 and 2:00 P.M at Maple Street Park, and the City will have information on the ballot and ballot items, as well as a community lunch. Councilor Certa thanked Public Works for its work during the latest snowstorms to clear the roads and sidewalks to help keep the City running. Councilor Miller echoed these sentiments.

8. **READING FILE**

a. Planning Commission Minutes – January 15, 2026

9. **EXECUTIVE SESSION**

a. An Executive Session is not anticipated

10. **ADJOURN**

**Councilor Certa made a motion, seconded by Councilor Miller to adjourn the meeting. The motion passed 5-0 at 8:03 P.M.**

Respectfully Submitted,  
Amy Coonradt