

Form-Based Code and 2026 Land Development Code Amendments

Public Engagement Summary

Prepared for the City Council meeting of September 23, 2026. Comments received as of September 17, 2026.

This document summarizes public outreach and comment on the proposed form-based code. It covers the engagement conducted for the Connect the Junction TOD Master Plan in 2025, which is where the building height limits were set, and the outreach conducted on the draft code itself between March and September 2026.

Written comments are reproduced verbatim. Names, email addresses, street addresses, and other personal identifying information have been removed. Comments received by email in response to direct outreach, and comments received by telephone, are summarized rather than reproduced, and are identified as such. Comments are presented in the order received.

Engagement on Building Heights, 2025

The height limits in these amendments were set by the City Council in December 2025, when it adopted the Connect the Junction TOD Master Plan. Engagement on that plan ran from June through October 2025 and is documented in the Summer Engagement Summary Report prepared by Framework in October 2025. More than 400 people participated across organized events, an online open house, an online survey, stakeholder focus groups, a walking tour, and direct conversations with property owners, producing over 100 written comments and 569 sticker votes.

Responses on height

Height drew the most comment, and responses differed depending on how people were reached. Asked whether they supported increased height along the Pearl Street corridor as a way to address the housing shortage, 94 percent of in-person respondents said yes, 61 of 65 responses. Among online respondents, 47 percent said yes, 39 percent said no, and 14 percent were neutral, out of 51 responses. On maximum height, 87 percent of in-person respondents favored eight to ten stories in both the Village Center and the TOD district. Among online respondents, roughly half favored keeping the existing five-story limit in the Village Center or reducing it to four.



Above: August 2025 outreach at Maple Street Park

Patterns in the in-person outreach

Staff and the consultant recorded two patterns in the in-person outreach. Children and teenagers at the Maple Street Park event consistently selected higher preferred height limits than their parents, including within the same families. The two Pearl Street ice cream socials, held in front of apartment buildings and attended mostly by renters, produced generally supportive comments on height and density where well designed. These were observations from staff notes rather than survey findings. Demographic information was not collected consistently at in-person events, so support for height cannot be cross-tabulated against age or tenure.

Limits of the data

Neither set of numbers is a representative survey. Participation in both was self-selected, in different ways. The online tools reached people motivated enough to seek them out, and drew primarily homeowners and long-term residents. None of the online respondents who mapped their homes lived within the study area. The in-person events reached people who were already out at a fireworks display, a swimming pool, or a street festival, which is a broader cross section but still not a random sample. Staff and consultants were present at those events to explain how the standards would work, and the consultant noted that this may have affected responses.

The Council's decision

The Planning Commission and City Council considered three height options in 2025. The Council selected the nine-story limit, with a tenth story available only for affordable housing, in December 2025 as part of the Connect the Junction Plan.

Media coverage

The proposal drew local news coverage at several points during 2025. The Essex Reporter covered the draft plan and the request for public input on July 15, 2025, under the headline "Connect the Junction master plan: City of Essex Junction wants to hear from you." ABC22/Fox44 covered the proposal in November 2025 as "Essex Junction considers housing changes, Five Corners projects." The Council's December 2025 vote was covered by The Essex Reporter as "Essex Junction to allow nine-story housing, council adopts Connect the Junction Master Plan," and by the Vermont Daily Chronicle as "Essex Junction City Council votes for increased building heights." The plan also drew

extended discussion on Reddit. This coverage was not City outreach, but it indicates how widely the height proposal was known before the Council acted.

Outreach on the Draft Code, 2026

The form-based code implements the Connect the Junction TOD Master Plan, which the City Council adopted in December 2025 following the process described above. Outreach on the draft code itself ran from March 2026 through the Planning Commission's public hearing on September 3, 2026. The Commission reviewed the draft at its meetings of March 31, May 7, June 4, July 2, July 8, and August 11, 2026, each of which was a warned public meeting.

The City reached residents through the following.

- **A utility bill insert** mailed in July 2026, and mentions in the monthly newsletter.
- **A form-based code page on the City website**, launched in July 2026, carrying the full draft amendments and supporting materials.
- **A frequently asked questions page** responding to the themes raised in written comments: building height, housing need and capacity, infrastructure and property taxes, schools, commercial viability, green space, historic preservation, and Main Street and Five Corners.
- **News releases and accompanying social media posts**, including a release announcing the Planning Commission hearing issued on August 28, 2026.
- **An episode of Junction City News** on the proposal, aired July 20, 2026.
- **A staff presentation to the City Council** on July 22, 2026.
- **Direct outreach to property owners and housing developers** beginning in early July 2026, with follow-up in early August. This outreach and the responses received are described below.
- **A public information display at National Night Out** on August 4, 2026, described at the end of this summary.
- **The legal notice of the Planning Commission's public hearing**, published and posted on August 19, 2026.

Two conceptual renderings were posted to the City website, one showing the street room standard applied to Park Street and one showing an eastbound view of Pearl Street near the Spark Hotel. Written comments asked to see what maximum build-out would look like, and the renderings respond to that request. Each shows a building at the upper end of what the standards and the site geometry would allow on that block. They illustrate how the standards work and are not proposed projects. The Park Street rendering was posted in August 2026 and the Pearl Street rendering by early September.

Written Comments Received

Comment 1, received July 8, 2026

Subject: Design of new building replacing Lincoln Inn

Feedback, as requested by "Form-Based Code" email:

I would love to see three changes when the Lincoln Inn is torn down. I do not support planning an identical building across the street:

1. More green up front. There is too much concrete. There must be more imagination regarding some sort of green space in front of the building. There seems to be room to pull the building away from the road. I also see residents having trouble walking their dogs, so their dogs urinate on the concrete areas (sometimes).
2. The model of small stores/restaurants on the first floor has history now. Would y'all agree it's a mixed review? Perhaps Essex Junction can design for a larger space on the bottom, attracting an organization that needs a larger space?
3. Is there a way to capture a bit of the building's history?

Thanks for asking for feedback,

[Name and address removed]

Comment 2, received July 9, 2026

Subject: Comments: new rules / new buildings

Greeting EJPC members -

I'm writing to provide comments on the New Rules that are being proposed for New Buildings.

1. It's not clear by the example provided in the mailed flier where in the Village there could be 9 or 10 story buildings based on the example provided (see included image). The buildings in this image appear to be 6 stories tall (with a set back 7th story). The street appears to be four lanes for vehicles, plus two lanes for bikes, plus sidewalks. It's not clear to me where in the proposed zones the streets have a "W" this large and as such it is not clear to me where in the Village buildings will be allowed to be H = 6 stories (let alone > 6).

A much more useful presentation of the proposal, I believe, would be to provide a 3D rendering of the impacted zones in the Village showing new buildings constructed to their maximum "H" based on the local "W". This would allow Villagers to more properly assess the impact of the proposal.

2. How much capacity will be added under this maximum buildout scenario? What data indicates that this much new housing is needed? What is the current residential occupancy rate in the Village and surrounding area? What will be the impact of this population growth on Village/town/district resources?

3. What is the current vacancy rate of store fronts in the Village and surrounding areas. The latter seems relevant as new construction in the Village center seems to have difficulty attracting/sustaining businesses, thus additional spaces could be underutilized as well.

4. When will be the meeting to discuss this proposition?

[Name and address removed]

Comment 3, received July 10, 2026

Subject: Input on Connect the Junction

I'm writing to provide input on the New Rules that are being proposed for New Buildings.

1. The example provided in the flyer is very deceiving. The buildings in the image appear to be 6 stories tall (with a set back 7th story). The street appears to be 4 lanes for vehicles, plus two lanes for bikes, plus sidewalks on both sides. The flyer strongly implies that for any building in the proposed zone, the H (height) of the building will equal the W (width) of the street, including bike lanes and possibly sidewalks; however, there is currently no place in the proposed zones where the building in this image with a W large enough to support a H>6 stories would fit, much less anywhere that would support the 9 or 10 story buildings that the zoning changes are proposing. Yet this proposed H change, plus real estate listings claiming that certain lots being offered for sale are zoned for 10 stories, makes me believe that zoning permits are going to be issued up to the maximum height regardless of the width of the street.

A much more useful presentation of the proposal is to provide a 3D rendering of the proposed zones in the Village showing new buildings that would be constructed to their maximum "H" based on the local "W". This would allow Villagers to more properly assess the impact of the proposal.

2. What data indicates that this much new housing is needed? What is the current residential occupancy rate in the Village and surrounding area? How much capacity will be added under maximum buildout? What will be the impact of this population growth on Village/town/district resources and assuming that it will be significant, will the developers be responsible for paying the full amount of the infrastructure improvements needed to support their projects? Are schools being included in the planning process so that they will be able to accommodate the increased population? What will be the impact of this population growth on traffic?

3. What is the current vacancy rate of store fronts in the Village and surrounding areas? The latter seems relevant as new construction in the City Center seems to have difficulty attracting and retaining businesses. Why would you assume that it would be different for any additional buildings?

4. Where are these new walkable spaces mentioned in the flyer? I've heard repeated talk of turning a portion of Main Street at 5 Corners into a walk street. The impact on the surrounding neighborhoods as traffic is re-routed to accommodate this would be significant. And also, what about the Main Street block between Railroad Ave. and 5 Corners is there that makes anyone think that it would and should become a vibrant walk street?

5. When will there be more meetings to discuss this proposition?

[Name and address removed]

Comment 4, received July 14, 2026

Subject: Form Based Code Map marking

Hello,

I was looking at the website about the proposed form based code. The site is well laid out and easy to navigate and very clear... Thank you! I did have a question about the map shown here:

[web page link]

What do the thick red lines indicate?

Thanks,

[Name removed]

Direct Outreach to Property Owners and Developers

In early July, staff emailed property owners and housing developers active in or near the Village Center and Transit Oriented Development districts. The email summarized the proposed changes to height, design standards, and unit mix, attached a clean copy of the proposed Village Center and TOD sections, and linked to the full draft and the City web pages. Staff followed up in early August with recipients who had not responded, and encouraged them to share comments with the Planning Commission whether positive, neutral, or negative. Two email addresses were undeliverable.

The following responses were received.

Stepback requirements

One developer active in the City Center wrote that the proposed standards were workable overall, and that stepbacks are a good idea, but raised one concern. In his view a stepback should only be required at greater heights, and buildings under about seven stories should not need one. He noted that 17 Park Street is roughly 55 feet tall and is not too high in his judgment, asked what the right-of-way width is at Five Corners, and acknowledged that where the line is drawn is partly a matter of preference.

Staff responded that the Park Street right-of-way is approximately 66 feet in front of the Lincoln Inn property, and that a building constructed to the lot line there could reach roughly six stories before a stepback would be required under the 1:1 street room ratio. That is the condition illustrated in the Park Street rendering posted on the City website.

No concerns identified

A property management company with holdings on Pearl Street reviewed the proposal and reported that they did not see anything that would affect their existing buildings. Staff replied that existing buildings can continue to operate as they are, and that the proposed standards would apply to future development or redevelopment. Staff also noted that the proposed unit mix requirement would apply to their future projects, and that one recently approved project would not have met the 25 percent two-bedroom minimum had it been reviewed under the proposed standards.

Acknowledged, no comment submitted

One developer confirmed he would review the draft. No comments were received as of the date of this summary.

Comment Received by Telephone

One resident called the Community Development Director in late August to discuss the proposal. The following reflects staff's notes of that conversation and is not a transcript. Staff encouraged the caller to submit written comments to the Planning Commission or to speak at the public hearing.

The caller raised the following concerns:

- Whether additional housing is needed, given that Vermont's population has declined in recent years.
- That taller buildings would change the scale of Essex Junction and reduce quality of life. He described the community's current size as something residents value, and said the proposal would bring a big-city scale to the Village.
- That new growth would create infrastructure demands, and that the cost of meeting them would fall on existing residents through higher property taxes.
- Traffic impacts.
- That buildings at the maximum permitted height would be among the tallest in Vermont.

September 3, 2026 Planning Commission Public Hearing

The Planning Commission held its public hearing on the amendments on September 3, 2026. Five members of the public spoke. The draft minutes are the official record. The following summarizes the comments received.

- *Height and community scale.* One resident said high-rise buildings are a threat to the Vermont way of life, that the proposed limits could produce some of the tallest buildings in the state, and that taller buildings block sunlight. He questioned the survey finding that most residents are amenable to buildings at this height. He described Essex Junction as a community of single-family homes and said what is needed is more starter homes. A resident of a neighborhood adjacent to Pearl Street said he understands the pressure to produce housing and tax revenue, but that nine or ten stories is too high for Pearl Street, and suggested five to six stories as a livable scale for that corridor. A third resident agreed that livability has to be weighed alongside housing demand. The chair of the Tree Advisory Committee also said ten stories is too high.
- *Affordability.* A resident who teaches in the public schools said she pays more than half her income in rent, and that raising the height limit does not by itself produce affordable housing. She said affordable housing should be required before the tenth story is granted, and asked how the Commission is addressing affordability for seniors and young families.
- *Infrastructure, taxes and emergency response.* Commenters said the infrastructure costs of new growth would fall on existing taxpayers through higher property taxes, and questioned whether the fire department is equipped to protect buildings of this size. A commissioner responded that the Fire Department was consulted during drafting and can serve buildings of this height with its current apparatus.
- *Air quality near highways.* One resident said housing within 500 to 1,000 feet of a highway is not recommended and housing within 500 feet is a health hazard. He cited studies on air quality near highways and described housing within 1,000 feet of Route 15 or Route 2A as a health risk.
- *Landscaping and street trees.* The chair of the Tree Advisory Committee asked for more detail on the proposed landscaping standards and raised the need for street trees in new development. He asked about setback variation within the City Center, which in his view could reduce pedestrian friendliness and the room available to plant street trees.

- **Enforcement.** One resident said the City should ensure developers continue to meet Code standards after a building is constructed, and suggested fines for noncompliance.
- **Housing targets.** A resident asked what the consequences are if the City does not meet its housing targets. Staff responded that the targets do not carry an enforcement mechanism, but that municipalities need to demonstrate they are working toward them.
- **Fences on corner lots.** A resident raised an unrelated enforcement matter involving a fence on a corner lot. The Commission discussed the corner lot setback and fence provisions and added the subject to its list of items for possible future amendment. No change was made to the draft, because a substantive change would have required re-warning the hearing.

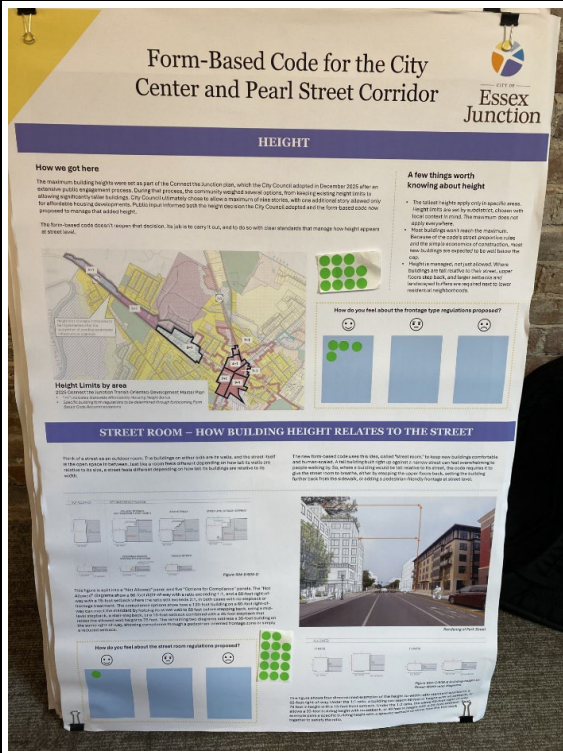
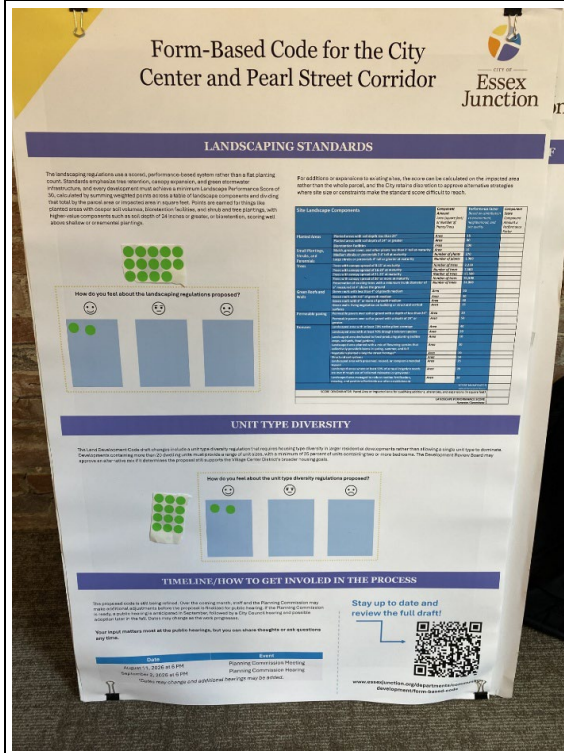
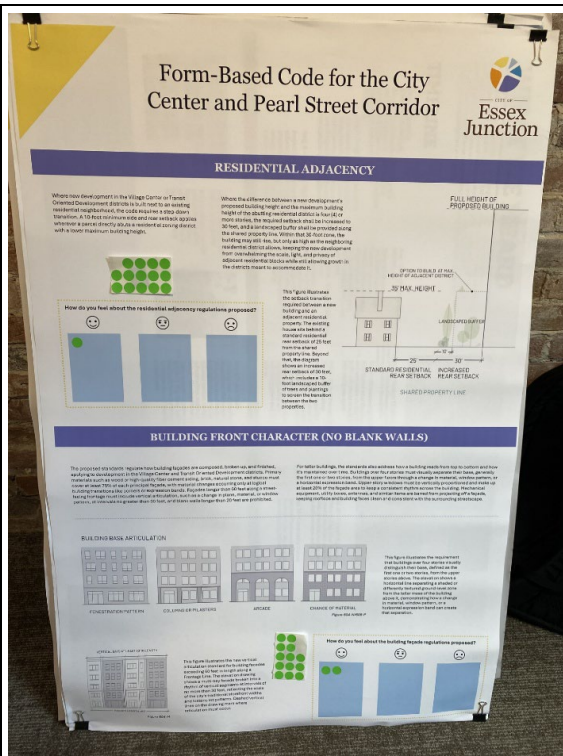
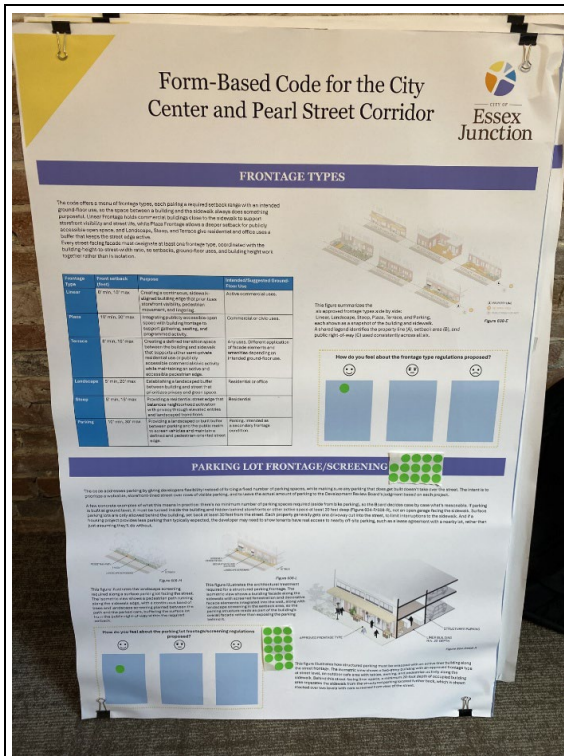
Commission discussion and action. The Commission discussed whether to reopen the height limits in light of the testimony. One commissioner said the City will not meet its housing targets without the additional height. Another noted that the street room standard will limit where ten stories is achievable, and that allowing a height does not mean it will be built. Commissioners asked for continued public input and for a more proactive discussion of what the Commission wants to see in specific parts of the downtown core. The Commission voted 5-0 to close the public hearing, and 5-0 to approve the revised § 4441(c) report and submit it, with the amendments, to the City Council.

Comment on the form-based code itself, from March 2026 through the date of this summary, consists of the four written comments, one telephone call, and five speakers at the public hearing described above, along with the informal responses collected at National Night Out. Comment has run strongly against increased height. The 2025 engagement described earlier reached a substantially larger number of participants.

National Night Out

Planning Commission volunteers staffed a public information display on the form-based code at National Night Out on Tuesday, August 4, 2026, at the Essex High School grounds. Participants were invited to indicate their reaction to the proposed standards on a set of poster boards covering height, street room, frontage types, and parking screening. Responses from those who chose to participate were positive. Photographs of the display boards are included below.

This was an informal activity at a community event. It was not a survey of residents, and the number of responses was small.



Upcoming Outreach

Community Development staff will table at Meet Me on Main on Saturday, September 19, 2026, using the same display boards presented at National Night Out. That event falls after the deadline for this packet.