

**VILLAGE OF ESSEX JUNCTION TRUSTEES
TOWN OF ESSEX SELECTBOARD
SUBCOMMITTEE ON GOVERNANCE - SPECIAL MEETING
July 18, 2019**

SUBCOMMITTEE MEMBERS: George Tyler, Chair; Max Levy, Vice Chair; Raj Chawla; Andrew Watts;

ADMINISTRATION: Evan Teich, Unified Manager; Ann Janda, Project Manager

OTHERS PRESENT: Margaret Smith, Irene Wrenner, Iris Banks, Kevin Collins, Bridget Meyer, Dave Treston (KSV)

1. CALL TO ORDER

George Tyler called the meeting of the Village of Essex Junction Trustees and Town of Essex Selectboard Subcommittee on Governance (hereafter referred to as “Subcommittee on Governance”) to order at 6:58 p.m.

2. AGENDA ADDITIONS/CHANGES

There were no additions or changes to the agenda.

3. AGENDA APPROVAL

No vote was taken because the agenda was not modified.

4. PUBLIC TO BE HEARD

None at this time.

5. BUSINESS ITEMS

a. Review results of first survey about governance change

Dave Treston of KSV Marketing provided a summary of initial qualitative survey results, first detailing the characteristics of the sample of respondents. There were 690 respondents to the survey, which was deemed to be a good turnout and a large enough sample size to instill a level of confidence about survey results. There was a decent spread across demographics for respondents, in terms of age, income, districts, and residence. He noted that the survey skewed slightly toward Town-outside-the-Village residents when compared to census data. He also noted that there was less representation in the survey from the 18-34 age demographic, which was anticipated. Finally, he noted that voting district tended to be the strongest influencing factor for many survey responses, and that it was a stronger predictor than age, income, or housing type.

Mr. Treston then walked through the key findings of the survey. He first noted that the survey was composed of open-ended and qualitative questions. Open-ended questions were analyzed by identifying and quantifying key common themes of concern and interest to respondents. The survey indicated that while the merger ranked in the top four perceived issues for all three voting districts, it intersected with the other top issues for respondents, which included taxes, economic development and attracting businesses, and traffic/infrastructure issues. The merger had both positive and negative associations for respondents. Other key findings include:

- 47 - Approximately 75% of respondents were moderately aware of the merger conversation
48 (and this was one of the few questions in which age was a factor in determining
49 responses);
- 50 - 70% of respondents stated that they were moderately familiar with the structure of the
51 local government, and more than a third stated that they were extremely familiar with it;
- 52 - 70% of respondents were at least somewhat in favor of a merger, and 50% of respondents
53 were very in favor of moving forward with a merger;
 - 54 o There was a slight skew in favorability for upper income respondents;
 - 55 o District 8-1 was most likely to be in favor of a merger and District 8-3 was most
56 likely to not be in favor of a merger;
- 57 - Top perceived challenges to a merger included tax equity and concerns about
58 representation. When broken out by voting district, this was a top concern for Districts 8-
59 1 and 8-3. Other challenges were spread across an array of different issues and themes.
- 60 - Top perceived benefits to a merger included realizing cost efficiencies and eliminating
61 redundancies, simplification, unification, tax equity, a united community, and more
62 cohesion in long-term goals.
- 63 - 80% of respondents stated that shared services benefit the community, and that services
64 should be combined, though Village residents were slightly more likely to prefer that the
65 fire department, libraries, and parks & recreation department remain separate.
- 66 - 42% of respondents were not sure about what an ideal merger would look like, and the
67 top concrete suggestion was that all services and offices be combined. There was no real
68 consensus in terms of a suggested solution.

69
70 Mr. Treston then outlined the following takeaways and recommendations, based on the results of
71 the survey:

- 72 - Future phases of research should include probes on different types of governance models
73 and the importance of identity, as representation, tax equity, and identity were the key
74 survey themes.
- 75 - Future phases of research should include more concrete examples of potential governing
76 models, more information on current state in terms of what services have already been
77 combined and what is being proposed, and examples of potential benefits and perceived
78 challenges.
- 79 - Focus groups should include a mix of participants from Districts 8-1 and 8-3, as there
80 were notable differences between these two groups in the survey.
- 81 - Future phases of research should include more concrete examples of potential governing
82 models, more information on current state in terms of what services have already been
83 combined and what is being proposed, and examples of potential benefits and perceived
84 challenges.
- 85 - Residents requested open, transparent discussions, to ensure that they feel that they have
86 ownership of this process, and should be kept abreast of the merger discussion.
- 87 - Some residents also wanted to see potential savings projections or financial modeling to
88 leverage when making decisions.
- 89 - Future research should also probe for preferences on timeline for execution of merger, as
90 the issue arose regarding how quickly or slowly a merger should occur.
- 91 - The merger options be examined through a cultural lens as it moves forward, since the
92 cultural difference was a persistent theme in survey.

93

94 Mr. Chawla asked if survey results could be broken out by voting districts, and Mr. Treston
95 agreed to send tabulations of final survey results to subcommittee members.

96

97 Mr. Tyler noted that the survey highlighted issues where respondents were making statements
98 based on misunderstandings, and that the survey can help identify those issues to target for
99 further education of the public. He noted that the merger website could provide additional in-
100 depth information on those issues to address misunderstandings.

101

102 Ms. Banks questioned what respondents meant when they state that one of their concerns is
103 representation and lack thereof.

104

105 Ms. Meyer commented that a fact sheet and potentially video and visuals would be extremely
106 helpful resources for focus groups, to inform them about governance, how the Town and Village
107 are operated currently, and changes that could be made. She also noted that her impression is that
108 the general public does not understand the issues at play in this discussion, and effort will need to
109 be made to inform them.

110

111 Ms. Wrenner noted that a current fear is that a merger would eliminate jobs, which could
112 potentially be based on the previous attempt at a Town and Village merger, years ago. She also
113 asked Mr. Treston if the survey tracked contact information of respondents. Mr. Treston replied
114 that the survey asked for email addresses if respondents wanted to be informed about future
115 merger-related news, but not everyone gave an email address. Ms. Wrenner also stated that the
116 naming once a merger takes place will be an important issue. Mr. Treston agreed and stated that
117 it will be a good issue to probe on, in the context of identity.

118

119 Ms. Smith asked if the Town and Village planning commissions would merge. Subcommittee
120 members replied that yes, they will merge.

121

122 Mr. Collins noted that he thought the survey and its results were very illuminating, and it further
123 emphasizes the need to educate the public in certain key areas and issues around the merger
124 conversation.

125

126 **b. Discussion of process for analyzing KSV qualitative survey**

127

128 The subcommittee discussed process for analyzing the survey and next steps for presenting the
129 results of the survey to the Town Selectboard and Village Trustees. The survey analysis from
130 KSV will be included in the reading file at the next Joint Selectboard/Trustees meeting to give
131 members the opportunity to review and formulate questions. Mr. Chawla suggested discussing
132 these results at a Joint Selectboard/Trustees meeting in the future, when there is more time to
133 devote to this as an agenda item. Mr. Levy noted that this survey will serve as the baseline and
134 status quo to which results from future research phases can be compared. In addition, Mr. Teich
135 noted that Mr. Treston should attend the next joint meeting or a special meeting to discuss the
136 survey in depth. He further noted that it will be important to outline the process going forward
137 for the Selectboard/Trustees.

138

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139 Next steps:

- 140 - Mr. Tyler requested that each subcommittee member review the survey results and
- 141 individually submit their written responses and thoughts to him, for discussion at the next
- 142 Subcommittee meeting on Friday, July 26th.
- 143 - Mr. Treston and KSV will draft and bring a proposed discussion guide for the focus
- 144 groups to the next Subcommittee meeting on July 26th, at which time feedback from
- 145 subcommittee members' comments on the survey can be incorporated.
- 146 - Ms. Janda and Regional Planning Commission staff will draft a two-page summary of
- 147 historical context, current state, anticipated actions and timelines for governance
- 148 change/merger, and a list of common definitions.
- 149 - Town and Village staff will continue inventorying a list of topics for an FAQ page, and
- 150 will incorporate questions from survey.
- 151 - Mr. Treston will distribute full list of open-ended responses from the survey to the
- 152 subcommittee for their review, redacting any personal information or email addresses.

153

154 **c. Approve focus group screener**

155 Mr. Tyler led a review of the focus group screening questionnaire with the subcommittee. The

156 following modifications were made:

- 157 - Language in S2 modified to strike “within the last ten years” and replace with “Have you
- 158 ever served...”
- 159 - A question around voting districts will be added to the screener, based on districts being a
- 160 large factor in responses to qualitative survey
- 161 - Language in Q8 will be modified to quantify each option, and will add “or watch public
- 162 meetings on television” after “how often do you attend public meetings”
- 163 - Language in Q18 will be added to indicate that responses are part of publicly funded
- 164 research and are subject to public records requests.

165

166 **d. Discussion of FAQs about governance change—Ann Janda**

167 Ms. Janda provided a status update on drafting FAQs related to governance change and

168 reviewed the current draft of FAQs which will be posted on the merger website. Mr. Watts

169 suggested rewording the currently recommended options in question 1 to refer to a charter

170 and special districts, but not specifying the number of special districts. Mr. Chawla noted that

171 the FAQs are a great educational opportunity, and also suggested creating a new question #2

172 to give a description of current status and additionally including a graphic of the timeline for

173 governance change/merger, and that the current question #2 would become question #3. Mr.

174 Levy suggested modifying language in the question about culture from “how to best retain

175 culture” to “how to best address culture.” The subcommittee will use this FAQ as a running

176 list of questions, and all will send any additional questions to Mr. Teich. Mr. Chawla

177 suggested using the KSV qualitative survey to begin to categorize different questions within

178 the FAQ document.

179

180 Ms. Janda will modify the FAQ document with the discussed changes and will post on

181 Greater Essex.

182

183 **e. Discussion of elevator speech about governance change**

184 This agenda item is tabled until the next meeting of the Governance Subcommittee.

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185 **f. Approval of minutes:**

186

187 *June 20, 2019:*

188 **ANDREW WATTS made a motion, and MAX LEVY seconded, to approve the**
189 **Subcommittee on Governance meeting minutes from June 20, 2019 without Subcommittee**
190 **corrections. Motion passed 4-0.**

191

192 **6. READING FILE:**

193

194 **7. ADJOURN:**

195

196 **MAX LEVY made a motion, and ANDREW WATTS seconded, to adjourn the meeting.**
197 **Motion passed 4-0. The meeting adjourned at 9:48 p.m.**

198

199

200 Respectfully Submitted,

201 Amy Coonradt

202 Recording Secretary

203

204

205

206 Approved this 26TH day of JULY, 2019

207

208 **(see minutes of this day for corrections, if any)**