

1 **VILLAGE OF ESSEX JUNCTION/TOWN OF ESSEX SELECTBOARD**
2 **SUBCOMMITTEE ON GOVERNANCE**
3 **SPECIAL MEETING**
4 **MAY 23, 2019**

5
6 **Governance Subcommittee Members:** George Tyler, Chair; Max Levy; Raj Chawla, Andy
7 Watts.

8 **ADMINISTRATION:** Evan Teich, Unified Manager; Greg Duggan, Deputy Manager.

9 **OTHERS PRESENT:** Barbara Higgins, Margaret Smith, Irene Wrenner.

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11 **1. CALL TO ORDER**

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13 Mr. Tyler called the meeting to order at 7:03 p.m.

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15 **2. AGENDA ADDITIONS/CHANGES**

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17 There were no changes to the Agenda. Members agreed that discussion should occur when they
18 reach the items in the Reading File.

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20 **4. PUBLIC TO BE HEARD**

21
22 Ms. Barbara Higgins, who is a member of the Economic Development Commission (EDC) but
23 was speaking as a resident, encouraged the Governance Subcommittee (GS) to discuss the
24 impact of consolidation decisions and their positive and negative impacts on economic
25 development from a business and housing perspective. Mr. Tyler appreciated this comment and
26 asked for more specifics. One example Ms. Higgins gave was that, from a property tax
27 perspective, any increases would have an impact on businesses, and she was concerned how that
28 might have an effect on attracting new businesses to Essex. Mr. Tyler agreed with Ms. Higgins
29 that this topic needed to be discussed. Mr. Levy suggested that Ms. Higgins ask the EDC to
30 gather information about how taxes affect businesses today and how it would look for businesses
31 in a consolidated community, and Ms. Higgins agreed.

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33 **5. BUSINESS ITEMS**

34 **a. Review of potential focus group providers (staff)**

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36 Mr. Duggan introduced the issue of informing the GS about projected costs and availability of
37 market research professionals to organize focus groups around governance proposals. In
38 speaking to market research professionals, staff believes there should be six to 10 focus groups
39 with six to 10 people per group. Mr. Duggan's memorandum, dated May 23, 2019, includes a list
40 of firms that are interested in conducting focus groups, surveys or both. With regard to the
41 process, one option could be a larger, kick-off focus group to gather input and shape the
42 questions for the smaller focus groups. The focus groups could include target demographics as
43 well as any other residents who wish to participate and are available at different times. Staff and
44 elected officials would find participants, provide meeting space, provide incentives and
45 background material about the governance change project. Market research professionals also

46 suggested that a community-wide survey, conducted prior to the focus groups, could provide
47 feedback that focus groups could explore in more depth.

48

49 Mr. Duggan explained that if members hire a market research professional, preliminary costs
50 would range from \$1,500 to \$3,000 per focus group, plus an additional cost for a report. With an
51 incentive cost of \$50 per person, the total cost is estimated at a low of \$10,800 for six groups of
52 six people to \$35,000 for 10 groups of 10 people. Combined with one or two surveys, the entire
53 public engagement effort is likely to cost \$25,000 to \$50,000, depending on the extent of the
54 work. Mr. Duggan added that an alternate route could be to use staff or volunteers to conduct
55 focus groups and to create a survey in-house or to hire an intern at a low cost. This would lower
56 the cost, but would take the process out of the hands of a third-party and potentially lose the
57 perception of impartiality.

58

59 Members discussed the direction they would like to take on this issue. Mr. Tyler thought their
60 past discussions leaned towards having focus groups first because they might identify issues that
61 need to be included in the survey. Mr. Levy felt it was important to hone in on important issues
62 raised by the community first, and Mr. Chawla agreed. Mr. Levy was in favor of hiring a
63 research professional and wondered if they would be the ones to recommend a process to follow.
64 Mr. Tyler agreed that a third party keeps the project objective. Mr. Chawla added that he felt the
65 project was too much work for the staff to take on at this time. Members discussed how to get the
66 “pulse” of the community through a survey or two. Mr. Watts felt the results of the meeting on
67 March 24, 2018 and the 2017 survey conducted by the Trustees should be considered during this
68 process. He noted that there were overwhelmingly positive responses on the survey, but negative
69 written comments. Mr. Chawla thought that a professional could correlate the results so the
70 information could be more accurate and useful. The members agreed to hire a marketing research
71 professional to conduct both the survey and focus groups.

72

73 Members discussed a budget of no more than \$40,000 for this project, and after some
74 deliberation, decided to present this update and recommendation to the Trustees and Selectboard
75 (SB) on the joint meeting Tuesday, May 28th for their authorization. The Unified Manager has
76 the authority to spend up to \$40,000 without requiring a lengthy bid process. It was also decided
77 to make a decision of which professional to hire, based on the staff’s recommendation, at the
78 next GS meeting on June 3.

79

80 Ms. Higgins urged the GS to educate the public about any joint proposals before sending out the
81 survey in order for the survey to be of any value. Mr. Tyler stated that topics for questions have
82 been identified, such as the Council/Manager form of government, whether to have voting
83 districts or not, whether to have a phase-in for any tax increases and feelings about identity. Mr.
84 Chawla noted that there is still a lot of confusion going on about understanding the current status
85 quo. Mr. Teich stated that if the public answers that it does not understand the question, then
86 there is more work to do. Mr. Chawla suggested an ongoing website tied into the survey for
87 answering questions. He suggested using Facebook, Front Porch Forum and letters to the editor
88 to get out the information. Ms. Higgins agreed that was important, however she pointed out that,
89 in the end, people will make a decision based on their pocketbook. Mr. Tyler thought those
90 questions could be presented to the focus groups, such as, Do you support merger? Do you
91 support merger if your taxes will be increased by a certain number and what increase would be

92 palatable? Mr. Chawla wanted to know the value on that money for residents and what it means
93 to them. Mr. Teich added the question, What is important to you as one community and what are
94 you willing to pay for that? Mr. Teich also recommended asking these questions to the many
95 volunteers in the community, and members agreed.

96
97 Mr. Levy was in favor of in-kind incentives for focus group participants, such as Indian Brook
98 passes or a recreation program, and members agreed. Members also agreed to hold the focus
99 groups at comfortable locations with coffee and pastries.

100

101 b. Identify people, groups, and priority questions for focus groups

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103 The GS talked about people and groups to include in focus groups about governance change, and
104 to identify priority questions for those focus groups. In the memorandum dated May 23, 2019
105 from Greg Duggan to the GS and the Unified Manager, Mr. Duggan provide a potential list of
106 people and groups. Members discussed the list and added the following:

107

108 Business owners, realtors, developers, leaders in the community, such as coaches, Rotary
109 members, PTO officers and neighborhood watch leaders. Mr. Duggan confirmed that once
110 identified, a direct invite will get sent with the hope of getting people involved. Members agreed
111 to include business owners who do not reside in Essex as a group to invite. Mr. Chawla would
112 like to see as many different voices as possible included.

113

114 c. Discussion of process and questions for community survey

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116 The GS discussed a community survey around governance change. Mr. Watts wondered about
117 including questions on representation, program/asset access and higher taxes to limit access. Mr.
118 Teich recommended letting the research professional decide on those questions. He thought the
119 focus groups could answer questions, such as, Do you understand why merger and What
120 questions would you like answered before you would say yes to a merger? Mr. Levy stated that
121 the reason for a merged community needs to be really clear and people need to know how things
122 will be better and how it will impact their lives other than efficiencies and even if there is no tax
123 impact. Mr. Chawla wanted to identify the value people see, before addressing taxes. He wants
124 to know how people define their community and whether they see it as an investment for a better
125 future. Mr. Tyler wanted to get the pulse of the community and what the first thing is that comes
126 to their mind with regard to this issue. Members discussed how the vote on this issue would be
127 different than in 2006 because it would take place at the same time as the presidential election, so
128 there would be a good turnout. Any questions members want to include for focus groups and the
129 survey should be emailed to staff. Staff will begin work on the “why” for the governance project
130 for further discussion with the members in the future.

131

132 d. Approval of Minutes: May 13, 2019

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134 **MAX LEVY MOVED AND ANDREW WATTS SECONDED A MOTION TO APPROVE**
135 **THE MINUTES OF MAY 13, 2019 AS PRESENTED. THE MOTION PASSED 4-0.**

136

137 **6. READING FILE**

138 a. Responses from Dan Richardson re: governance questions

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140 Members deliberated briefly on the responses from Mr. Dan Richardson, Attorney. Mr. Tyler
141 was surprised that with a charter change, it could take a year or more to get passed through the
142 Legislature. Mr. Watts noted that if the public is interested in representative districts, it is good
143 for people to know that boundaries of districts can change every five years. Mr. Teich was
144 interested in knowing what the public wants for the libraries. The attorney explained that the
145 libraries cannot create themselves or dissolve themselves.

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147 b. Differences in water/sewer rates for Village of Essex Junction and Town of Essex

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149 Members deliberated briefly on this issue. Mr. Duggan stated that the issue is very complicated.
150 The Town, outside the Village (TOV), has more pumping stations and charges for depreciation,
151 whereas the Village charges for capital. The TOV also has bonds that do not apply to the Town
152 inside the Village (TIV). There can be separate water districts or utilities based on the services
153 that are being provided. Consolidation of public works could change the structure. If merger
154 happens, a single legislative body can act as Water Commission for both districts.

155

156 **7. ADJOURN**

157

158 Mr. Watts and Mr. Teich are not able to attend the June 6th GS meeting.

159

160 **MAX LEVY MOVED AND RAJ CHAWLA SECONDED A MOTION TO ADJOURN AT**
161 **8:32 P.M. THE MOTION PASSED 4-0.**