

**VILLAGE OF ESSEX JUNCTION TRUSTEES
TOWN OF ESSEX SELECTBOARD
SUBCOMMITTEE ON GOVERNANCE - SPECIAL MEETING
June 13, 2019**

SUBCOMMITTEE MEMBERS: George Tyler, Chair; Andy Watts.

ADMINISTRATION: Evan Teich, Unified Manager; Greg Duggan, Deputy Manager; Ann Janda, Merger Project Manager.

OTHERS PRESENT: Elaine Haney, Margaret Smith, Irene Wrenner, Jessica Wisloski, Bruce Post, Betsy Dunn, Robert Bates, Bridget Meyer, Erin Fagnant, KSV; 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 7:00 p.m. A quorum of the Subcommittee was not present.

2. AGENDA ADDITIONS/CHANGES

There were no additions or changes to the agenda.

3. AGENDA APPROVAL

A motion was not made to approve the agenda as written due to lack of quorum.

4. PUBLIC TO BE HEARD

There were no comments from the public at this time.

5. BUSINESS ITEMS

a. Governance outreach project kickoff workshop with KSV

George Tyler provided an overview of the project kickoff workshop with KSV, a market research firm. He described the history, scope, and charge of the Subcommittee on Governance. The Subcommittee on Governance had previously researched forms of local government and developed a few basic structures that could be considered for merger of Town and Village governance structures. Because this would involve changing at least one charter, it would need to be voted on by residents. The Subcommittee on Governance would like to gather public input on the issues that voters feel are the most prominent or concerning in the context of consolidation, and has hired KSV to help field qualitative and quantitative surveys and hold focus groups. Mr. Tyler then invited members of the public to give comment.

Jessica Wisloski noted that a significant amount of prior work in this area had been done by a grassroots, community-led group (Budget to Ballot) which then formed the Essex Governance Group and produced a report with recommendations to improve civic engagement and governance in 2015.

Betsy Dunn asked the Subcommittee members to clarify whether it had decided on a single charter with an elected board or a voting district structure. Mr. Tyler noted that this is an exploratory phase and no decisions have yet been made on structure.

47
48 Margaret Smith stated that the population in the Town outside the Village is almost equal to that
49 of the Village, though the Village is much smaller in area. She stated that the Town outside the
50 Village is not equally represented in Board meetings, and that equal representation is essential to
51 this conversation.

52
53 Robert Bates described his involvement in the Budget to Ballot group and the recommendations
54 made by that group in its report. These included launching an effective communication program
55 to address issues of transparency and citizen awareness, empowering neighborhoods with
56 neighborhood assemblies, switching to an enhanced town meeting/Australian Ballot hybrid for
57 voting, and instituting same-day voting.

58
59 Mr. Tyler noted that the Subcommittee has looked at a number of governance models and ranked
60 them by criteria (including criteria outlined by Heart & Soul and the Essex Governance Group);
61 an example of this criteria is whether a particular governance model would make it easier or
62 more complicated to vote.

63
64 Irene Wrenner voiced her concern with wording in some of the KSV materials (for example,
65 using statements that include “Town versus Village”). She is concerned about a lack of
66 representation from the Town outside the Village, and that access is a prominent issue. Mr. Tyler
67 noted that one of the objectives of this kickoff meeting is to help make KSV aware of the context
68 and sensitivities in the community around certain issues and language.

69
70 KSV representatives Erin Fagnant, Director of Client Relationships, and Dave Treston, Head of
71 Research, described their purpose and scope of work as consultants. They will work to ensure
72 that they are gathering input from all parts and demographics of the community and collect data
73 to inform decision-making. They described the three phases of work, which are to: 1. Draft and
74 field a qualitative survey to residents to gather input on potential obstacles and issues (access,
75 voting, representation, identity, and others); 2. Use the survey to inform the direction of focus
76 groups, six of which will be held (two each for the Town outside the Village and the Village, and
77 two with mixed Town-outside-the-Village/Village participation); and 3. Use the feedback
78 gathered from the focus groups to inform a more narrowly-scoped, quantitative survey to
79 residents, and present the results of that to Essex.

80
81 Ms. Fagnant and Mr. Treston also described the objectives of tonight’s kickoff meeting, which
82 are to align on key components of the work, including reviewing the project timeline, target
83 research participants, survey distribution methods, research probes, and focus group logistics.

84
85 Ms. Wisloski asked if KSV has had previous experience working with governments to form new
86 governance structures. Ms. Fagnant outlined work with past clients, including work with New
87 York State to develop the state’s energy policy, in addition to working with other regulated
88 businesses.

89
90 *Survey/Focus Group Representation:*
91 Mr. Treston asked the Subcommittee to confirm the proposed representation on the focus groups,
92 which would be two groups of Village residents, two groups of Town outside the Village

93 residents, and two with mixed representation. He also requested information on the desired
94 demographics of the survey and focus groups, noting that demographics questions will be on
95 both the qualitative survey and the screener for the focus groups. He asked how specific a place
96 of residence question on the surveys should be. Mr. Watts noted that there are three voting
97 districts. Elaine Haney proposed grouping options into neighborhoods. Mr. Treston noted that
98 the survey could ask for addresses, but this might dissuade potential respondents from
99 participating. He suggested adding a map to the survey for respondents to click on their
100 neighborhood/area of residence. He then asked what exclusion criteria should be applied to the
101 surveys, and Subcommittee members agreed that the survey should exclude respondents who are
102 not of voting age as of November 2020, nonresidents, and residents who are on the Selectboard
103 or Trustees. The group noted that residents include homeowners and renters.

104

105 *Survey/Focus Group Screener Distribution:*

106 Mr. Treston discussed how links to surveys and screeners could be distributed. He suggested
107 online distribution channels (Town/Village websites, Front Porch Forum, social media outlets
108 such as Facebook and Twitter). Others suggested the Essex Reporter, posting on bulletin boards,
109 libraries, postcard mailings, fliers at grocery stores, and potentially including in upcoming water
110 or tax bills. Some expressed concern that rural residents are not as connected to either social
111 media or in-town social outlets, and asked that further consideration be given to how best to
112 reach them. Mr. Post suggested asking neighborhood watch groups to send to residents through
113 their distribution lists. Ms. Haney suggested asking the school district to include survey
114 information in one of its newsletters to parents (these are sent out even in summer months).

115

116 *Research Topics/Potential Questions:*

117 KSV consultants recommended that the initial, qualitative survey be open-ended to gather as
118 much community input as possible. The survey would gather demographic information, feedback
119 on awareness of past consolidation efforts, gauging the interest in consolidation, the level of
120 satisfaction with Town and Village services, perceived benefits/challenges of consolidation,
121 whether respondents have a desired consolidation model in mind, which services should be
122 combined or kept separated after consolidation, and any other non-consolidation-related issues.
123 The qualitative survey would be distributed to the entire community.

124

125 Subcommittee members discussed additional questions they would like in the survey. Mr. Tyler
126 would like to ask how familiar respondents are with the current structure of local government.
127 Mr. Watts would like to ask whether respondents are willing to pay more taxes for more services.
128 Mr. Watts further noted that each of the current proposed options for consolidation has many
129 potential versions. Mr. Tyler noted that one of the challenges to soliciting community feedback
130 will be addressing the nuances within each proposed option.

131

132 Mr. Teich suggested asking how respondents normally get local information and from where,
133 how much Town/Village identity means to respondents, what community connections
134 respondents have, and whether they think that consolidation would lead to an impact in quality of
135 life in terms of access to community amenities.

136

137 Mr. Duggan suggested that the survey could be used as a way to educate the public about the
138 merger. He suggested including a two-page infographic to give respondents background and

139 context. He also suggested including a follow-up question to perceived challenges, asking
140 respondents how they think any challenges that they noted could be overcome.

141
142 Public comments on the survey included frontloading the survey with broader questions and
143 narrowing the survey's focus in later questions, that an introduction and contextual information
144 would be good to accompany the survey, and including a question in the survey on whether
145 voters would like an Australian ballot for the budget vote. It was also suggested that voters may
146 not be familiar with governance structures, but that the survey may not reflect that. Ms. Haney
147 suggested asking whether respondents were aware that the Village and Town are separate
148 governments, with different tax structures. Depending on responses, further public education
149 about the issue may be needed prior to focus groups and quantitative survey development.

150
151 *Focus Groups:*

152 KSV described their proposed approach to focus group structure, purpose, content, and
153 facilitation. They will outline the three proposed governance structure options to focus group
154 members and ensure they understand the concepts in each, and will outline potential issues, such
155 as equity, identity, representation, and issues or topics based on responses from the qualitative
156 survey. The goal of the focus groups will be to understand what respondents see as their favorite
157 option and why, and what, if anything, they would modify about the option they like. Similar to
158 the first survey, the focus groups will be qualitative, and also have quantitative aspects.

159
160 Mr. Tyler noted that before the options are given to the focus groups, the Town and Village
161 boards will be able to give their input in phrasing and content of the options. He also noted that
162 the options will be accompanied by any pros and cons of implementing that option. Ms. Dunn
163 asked if options other than the three currently proposed options could come out of this process.
164 Mr. Tyler responded that yes, new options may emerge from the qualitative information-
165 gathering process. Ms. Wrenner stated that the options seem to only pertain to taxation. Mr.
166 Tyler clarified that the options don't only pertain to taxes, but also to voting districts, and to
167 addressing representational and political imbalances. Ms. Wisloski noted that much of the
168 discussion is around taxation, which implies property taxes. She further stated that 40% of the
169 Village and 30% of the Town outside the Village are renters and not property owners. Mr. Tyler
170 noted that the question at hand is to examine whether two chartered municipal corporations can
171 be integrated, and taxation is a large component in that.

172
173 *Triggers/Hot Button Issues:*

174 Mr. Treston asked if there are certain words and phrases that would cause people to respond to a
175 survey in a certain, nonconstructive way. He noted that the Essex Junction and Town Outside the
176 Village nomenclature are sensitive and sometimes confusing. He also asked the Subcommittee's
177 opinion on the terms merger vs consolidation, and wanting to understand what words would be
178 divisive and which would be constructive. Mr. Tyler noted that integration may be a better term
179 to use, but that the technical term is merger.

180
181 Mr. Duggan noted that this the goal of this process is to be forward-thinking, and developing the
182 best path forward instead of focusing on the issues that were negative in the past. He also noted
183 that a list of definitions of agreed-upon terms has already been developed by the Selectboard and
184 Trustees.

185
186 Mr. Treston asked if there are any local issues that are controversial that may surface through the
187 course of the focus group discussion. Mr. Tyler noted that development around the Five Corners
188 area in the Village has been controversial, but that the issue is independent from this discussion.
189 Mr. Watts also noted that there may be changes in where a person can discharge a firearm in the
190 Town, and that the two entities have different firearms ordinances. Mr. Bates noted that the most
191 prominent issues in the Essex Governance Group forum was a perceived lack of transparency,
192 and that decision-making did not take place in a transparent fashion. Ms. Haney noted that there
193 is a perception that Village residents are represented twice (in both Town and Village boards),
194 and that the at-large election process can make residents feel underrepresented.

195
196 *Focus Group Logistics:*

197 Mr. Treston stated that the focus groups required a space that could hold ten respondents, a
198 moderator, and several staff members. Mr. Teich offered a number of spaces to host the focus
199 groups, including the Village or Town offices, the Senior Center, the Essex Junction Recreation
200 and Parks offices, the fire stations, local hotels with conference centers, and the libraries.

201
202 Mr. Treston asked if there would be issues if the groups were recorded, and that they would
203 notify respondents in the screener and would have them sign releases at the actual focus group
204 event if the event were to be recorded. The Subcommittee agreed that a recording would be
205 reasonable, and that KSV would retain and own the recorded media.

206
207 *Schedule:*

208 Mr. Tyler stated that the Subcommittee would like to have a good sense of a preferred
209 governance structure by the end of calendar year 2019, and that they would like KSV's work
210 concluded in October. Mr. Treston outlined the proposed schedule of deliverables, noting that it
211 takes holidays and summer vacations into account, and aligns with the Subcommittee's desired
212 timeline. Generally, the first survey would be deployed in the beginning of July, focus groups
213 would be held mid-August, and the final survey would be fielded mid-September, with
214 presentation to Essex of the final results in mid-October. The surveys would be in the field for
215 more than two weeks, to ensure a statistically significant sample size. Mr. Tyler noted that the
216 public would have ample opportunity to engage in the process throughout, as results will be
217 brought to the Trustees and Selectboard for review when available.

218
219 **b. Approval of minutes: June 6, 2019**

220 A motion to approve the minutes of June 6, 2019 was tabled until a future meeting due to lack of
221 quorum.

222
223 **6. READING FILE:**

224
225 **7. ADJOURN:**

226
227 A motion to adjourn the Subcommittee on Governance meeting was not made due to lack of
228 quorum. Meeting adjourned at 9:45pm.

229
230

**SUBCOMMITTEE ON GOVERNANCE
FINAL**

June 13, 2019

231 Respectfully Submitted,
232 Amy Coonradt
233 Recording Secretary
234