

**VILLAGE OF ESSEX JUNCTION
ANNUAL MEETING MINUTES
April 3, 2013**

Moderator Steve Eustis welcomed the assemblage to the 121th Annual Meeting of the Village of Essex Junction and announced the meeting is being televised live on Channel 17 for the first time. The Essex Junction High School Chamber Choir sang the Star Spangled Banner and other arrangements. The assemblage recited the Pledge of Allegiance. Village President, George Tyler, introduced members of the Board of Trustees (Dan Kerin, Andrew Brown, Elaine Sopchak, Lori Houghton) and members of the Village administration (Village Co-Manager & Village Finance/MIS Director, Lauren Morrisseau, Village Co-Manager & Village Clerk, Susan McNamara-Hill; Village Development Director, Robin Pierce; Administrative Assistant to the Village Manager, Patty Benoit; Assistant Zoning Administrator, Terry Hass; Economic Development/Community Relations Assistant, Darby Brazoski; Public Works Supervisor, Rick Jones; Water Quality Supervisor, Jim Jutras; Village Engineer, Rick Hamlin; Village Attorney, Dave Barra; Essex Junction Fire Chief, Chris Gaboriault; Brownell Library Director, Penny Pillsbury; Brownell Library Board Chairwoman, Christine Packard; Marianne Riordan, Recording Secretary).

ANNOUNCEMENTS/RECOGNITIONS

Thanks and appreciation was extended to Patty Benoit and staff/volunteers for facilitating the community dinner.

Lauren Morrisseau and Susan McNamara-Hill were recognized for taking on the role of co-managers following the resignation of the village manager last year and doing an outstanding job. James Jutras, Water Quality Superintendent, was recognized for the high water quality delivered to village homes.

State representatives, Tim Jerman and Linda Waite-Simpson, and Essex Selectboard members, Irene Wrenner and Mike Plageman, were recognized.

The public was asked to complete the survey on the village that was provided to them.

Moderator Eustis called the meeting to order at 7:05 PM and explained the procedure to be followed.

ARTICLE 1: Shall the voters act upon the report of the auditor?

MOTION by Chuck Barry, SECOND by Linda Waite-Simpson, to approve Article 1 as read.

DISCUSSION: None.

VOTING: unanimous; motion carried. Article 1 is adopted.

ARTICLE 2: Shall the voters approve the annual General Fund budget in the amount of \$3,344,713 for fiscal year July 1, 2013 to June 30, 2014 of which \$2,806,463 is to be levied in taxes against the Village Grand List?

MOTION by Chuck Barry, SECOND by Mary Jo Engel, to approve Article 2 as read.

DISCUSSION: A presentation on the FY14 budget was given. Village President George Tyler remarked the budget is a level program budget with no new jumps in services or additions, but costs have gone up. Department Heads were asked to

submit a budget with no more than a 3% increase. Budgets with no greater than a 2.7% increase were submitted. This is the last year of the IBM machinery and equipment payment to the village. The Trustees unanimously supported the budget which sets up the village well for the coming year. The voters are also urged to support the budget.

PUBLIC COMMENTS

- George Dunbar, III commended the Trustees and staff on the rate of increase in the budget. Mr. Dunbar recalled last year there were alterations to the budget that occurred two months after the budget was adopted and before the new fiscal year began which did not change the bottom line, but the public did not have input on the changes. There is concern if the proposed budget has controversial programs that changes will be made at the start of the fiscal year and the public will not have the opportunity to comment. George Tyler explained the alteration in last year's budget was to change a part time position to a full time position as recommended by the former Village Manager to sustain momentum in the work being done by the employee. The Trustees felt the recommendation was reasonable. A similar situation is not anticipated this year, but the situation with the Village Manager position is fluid at this point in time. Cost savings not increases are expected on the action taken with the Village Manager position. Village Attorney, Dave Barra, explained Sections 611-613 of the village charter allow the Trustees to alter the specifics of the budget during the year after the annual budget has been approved by the voters.
- Claire Wilcox noted at the Essex town meeting the voters approved adding \$50,000 to help fund the village fire truck, and suggested the village budget be reduced by the same amount.

MOTION by Claire Wilcox to reduce the village budget by \$50,000. The motion did not have a second and failed.

CONTINUED DISCUSSION ON ORIGINAL MOTION: There were no further comments.

VOTING: majority of ayes; motion carried. Article 2 is adopted.

ARTICLE 3: Shall the voters increase the “not to exceed” balance of the General Fund Capital Reserve Fund to \$750,000 in recognition of the increased costs of capital projects since the fund's inception in 1993?

MOTION by Robin Moore, **SECOND** by Chuck Barry, to approve Article 3 as read.

DISCUSSION: Trustee Dan Kerin explained the purpose for the increase in the Capital Reserve Fund from \$500,000 to \$750,000 is because the fund has not been increased for the past 20 years and the village is facing several large infrastructure projects (streets, sidewalks). Increasing the fund will allow projects to be completed in a shorter timeframe.

PUBLIC COMMENTS

- George Dunbar, III referred to the Capital Reserve Fund in the annual report (Page 69) noting inflows and outflows barely crest the \$500,000 mark so unless expenditures are decreased or contribution to the fund is increased dramatically the need to increase the amount is not apparent. Lauren Morrisseau, Village Finance Director, explained the \$500,000 limit will be exceeded in FY14 and there is a project slated for FY15 at a cost of \$677,000 so staff felt it prudent to recommend an increase to \$750,000 to cover the

projects. George Dunbar, III suggested staying within the \$500,000 limit by pulling projects into FY14. President Tyler explained \$400,000 from the approved budget would be moved into the Capital Reserve Fund to be used for capital projects such as street repairs and sidewalks. There is a \$500,000 maximum limit on the fund and the request is to increase that limit to \$750,000 because there are projects to be done with significant cost (for example, reconstruction of Briar Lane will cost \$1 million). The increase will not impact taxes, but rather is movement of money within the approved budget.

- Sarah Michelle Stultz asked about the age of the village water and sewer lines and if transferring the funds would be helpful. Jim Jutras stated the age of the lines varies throughout the community. The village is an active participant in assessing the quality of the lines per the national rating system and has a grade of 1-3 indicating good operating capacity for the next 10-15 years. The water and sewer departments have separate capital reserves dedicated to the water supply and sewer system.

There were no further comments.

VOTING: majority of ayes; motion carried. Article 3 is adopted.

ARTICLE 4: Shall the voters approve a donation of up to \$20,000 from the Land Acquisition Fund to Vermont Land Trust to be used for the Whitcomb Farm Conservation Project pending approval of the Trustees?

MOTION by Deb Wright, **SECOND** by Sarah Stultz, to approve Article 4 as read.

DISCUSSION: Trustee Elaine Sopchak explained the \$20,000 will be used by Vermont Land Trust to purchase an easement on the Whitcomb Farm to keep the farm in agricultural use in perpetuity. The Whitcomb family will still own the property and pay taxes to the village. Vermont Land Trust is raising \$100,000 locally and is requesting a contribution of up to \$20,000 from the village. The Trustees last year moved \$220,000 from the Land Acquisition Fund to the Capital Reserve Fund. There is \$100,000 remaining in the Land Acquisition Fund.

PUBLIC COMMENTS

- Chuck Barry asked if the entire farm will be conserved. Trustee Sopchak stated there is an area for farm buildings and a solar array that is not part of the conservation project. The solar array is to provide power to the farm buildings on the property.
- John McCann noted the 23 acres excluded from the conservation easement is premium land while the land going into conservation appears to be floodplain. Trustee Sopchak clarified the 23 acre area not included in the conservation easement is where the farm's solar panel array will be located. The conservation easement will keep the balance of the farm property, a third of which is not in the floodplain, in agricultural use in perpetuity and help keep storm water runoff from the village out of the river. The portion of the farm not included in the easement will remain private property (owned by the Whitcomb family) and the village cannot dictate how the land will be used. The Whitcomb Farm has chosen to install a solar array on 23 acres.
- Sarah Strum asked what happens if Vermont Land Trust cannot raise \$100,000, but the village has approved donating \$20,000. Trustee Sopchak said the money will not be spent until the closing on the property. Vermont

Land Trust is responsible for raising the bulk of the \$100,000 required and if the money is not raised then no funds will be spent.

- Nick Meyer spoke in full support of the Vermont Land Trust project that will preserve for future generations a large contiguous land parcel in the village with the best soils in the state.
- Deb Wright, Hayden Street, expressed appreciation to the Whitcomb family for allowing people to walk their dogs on the property and enjoy the open space. Vermont Land Trust needs help in preserving farmland and open land in Vermont which benefits all directly and indirectly.
- George Dunbar, III asked if the farm is compelled to allow public access to the land if the money is appropriated. Mr. Dunbar also asked if the solar panels were reviewed by the village planning commission. Trustee Sopchak said the solar panel array has not been reviewed by the planning commission. Regarding public access to the land, a condition of use of village money is that the land is open to the public for recreation use in the broadest sense.

The assemblage voted unanimously to allow Allen Karnatz with Vermont Land Trust to speak about the conservation project.

- Mr. Karnatz explained the work with the Whitcomb family for the past year and a half on the terms of the easement and allowing public access for recreational use. The easement does not prohibit the Whitcomb family from posting the land, but the family has been generous over the years with regard to public access to the land and this is anticipated to continue.

CONTINUED DISCUSSION ON MOTION:

- Glenn Rogers, 17 Fairview Drive, encouraged support of the request since the farm is an excellent piece of property in agricultural use and the last large open parcel in the village. There was mention of potential future uses on the property beyond a dairy operation, such as growing fruits, vegetables, having community gardens. The solar farm is long term (25 year lease) and the acreage where the array is located will likely go back to agricultural use or remain in solar at the end of the lease period.
- Mike Beebee asked for further explanation of the excluded areas. Allen Karnatz said in addition to the area for farm buildings and the solar array there are eight acres of “special treatment area” with natural heritage and rare plants and species. The agreement stipulates the special treatment area will never be cleared and always in forest. There are 10 acres off Cascade Street that will be retained by the Whitcomb family and is not part of the easement because Vermont Land Trust has a limitation on the amount of money that can be raised.

CALL THE QUESTION by Claire Wilcox, **SECOND** by Harlan Smith. **VOTING ON CEASING DISCUSSION:** unanimous; motion carried. Discussion ceased.

VOTING: majority of ayes; motion carried. Article 4 is adopted.

ARTICLE 5: Shall the voters approve holding the 2014 Annual Meeting on Wednesday, April 2, 2014 to act upon any articles not involving voting by Australian ballot and to reconvene on Tuesday, April 8, 2014 to vote for the village officers and transact any business involving voting by Australian ballot?

MOTION by Leo Couture, **SECOND** by Chuck Barry, to approve Article 5 as read.

DISCUSSION: None.

VOTING: unanimous; motion carried. Article 5 is adopted.

ARTICLE 6: To transact any other business that may lawfully come before the meeting.**MOTION by Elaine Sopchak, SECOND by Diane Clemens, to suspend the rules and allow nonvoting attendees to speak. VOTING: unanimous; motion carried.**

Kyle Riester, Essex High School, mentioned the contribution by the village to the town's budget and the deficit in return on services. In FY15 a general fund deficit is anticipated for the village due to infrastructure projects. Mr. Riester asked if there is a policy to ensure lower spending or increasing taxes. President Tyler stated the village is part of the town and village residents can serve on the town selectboard and participate in meetings and the budget vote. Villagers need to be encouraged to get involved in the town government and help change the long standing climate between the village and town. Regarding the FY2015 deficit, the Trustees will make a decision in deliberation on whether to borrow money, increase taxes, or take no action. A special committee has been formed to look at capital projects in the village and proposed funding. Capital projects involve infrastructure such as roads, sidewalks, water lines, sewer lines and the project cost must be greater than \$10,000. There are 30 projects identified with a total cost of \$13 million to complete. The line item in the budget for capital project funding contains \$750,000. The village typically completes two projects every three years. Projects are added each year. Some projects are not yet known. To save money the village is maintaining sidewalk on only one side of the street and scaling down projects to repair the worst portions. Also, materials with a longer shelf life are being used (better return on investment) and roads are being narrowed to 28' where possible. Options for funding include a new capital improvement tax or bonding (borrowing money). For the tax, two cents on \$100 in assessed property value raises \$200,000. Estimated cost to taxpayers would be \$54 per year. Funds raised would allow one more project per year to be done. For bonding, presently rates for borrowing are very low. The village could bond for \$3 million and have the money available to complete more projects on the list. The cost of the bond is \$52 per year. A straw poll indicated the majority are in favor of bonding.

Annie Cooper, Franklin Street, extended an invitation to Mr. Riester and all high school students to get involved in local government and attend village trustee and town selectboard meetings.

George Dunbar, III suggested next year the capital plan show the list of projects and the timeline.

Mike Munson suggested consideration be given to a local options tax as a possible funding source.

Harlan Smith asked about the bike/path committee. Lori Houghton explained the village received a \$10,000 Building Healthy Communities grant from the Department of Health to assess the walkability of the community. An action blueprint was created involving the partners (village, town, schools, recreation department). Volunteers are needed for the committee.

John Rowell, Tamarack Drive, asked about status of the village manager position. George Tyler assured there would be no combining or coalescing of the position without full voter knowledge and approval. Both the trustees and selectboard are willing to try new ideas, such as sharing a manager for a few months to see if the arrangement works for both communities. Before a permanent change is made the matter will be brought before the village and town for more robust discussion. Mary Morris and Jeff Carr are assessing village and town services to identify synergies and the administrative tasks that could be combined.

Linda Costello, Williams Street, expressed concern about finding an individual to work under the combined manager circumstance beyond a short tenure.

Greg Morgan, Grove Street, pointed out the trustees currently serving were elected under the general notion of pursuing efficiencies between the two governments so the election shows the desire in the village to actively explore the matter.

An individual in the audience mentioned that the Heart & Soul grant for \$100,000 discussed “mutuality” and if the village and town looked like that then nothing will slow progress.

Candidates for office were announced:

Lori Houghton – Board of Trustees, three year term

Daisy Benson – Library Trustee, five year term

Nina Curtiss – Library Trustee, three year term

Scott Moore – Moderator

The school budget information meeting on April 8, 2013 was announced.

Adjournment

MOTION by Bob O’Neill, SECOND by Paul Dane, to adjourn the 121th Annual Meeting of the Village of Essex Junction. VOTING: unanimous; motion carried.

The meeting was adjourned at 8:25 PM. Voting by Australian ballot will take place on April 9, 2013 from 7 AM to 7 PM at Essex Community Educational Center.

Attest:


Village Trustee


Village Trustee


Village Clerk