

**CITY OF ESSEX JUNCTION
PLANNING COMMISSION REGULAR MEETING
MINUTES OF MEETING
MARCH 31, 2026
DRAFT**

PLANNING COMMISSIONERS PRESENT: Elijah Massey, Chair; Diane Clemens, Vice-Chair; Finn Hamilton (non-voting) Elena Juodisius, Scott McCormick; Kirstie Paschall

PLANNING COMMISSIONERS ABSENT: None

ADMINISTRATION: Chris Yuen, Community Development Director; Michael Giguere, City Planner; Chelsea Mandigo, Water Quality Superintendent

OTHERS PRESENT: Marshall Distel, Robert Frederick, Sarah Lukins, Katherine Magee, Nick Meyer, Amanda Svensson

1. CALL TO ORDER

Mr. Massey called the meeting to order at 6:31 PM.

2. AGENDA ADDITIONS/CHANGES

None.

3. PUBLIC TO BE HEARD

a. Comments from Public on Items Not on Agenda

None.

4. MINUTES

a. March 5th, 2026

SCOTT MCCORMICK made a motion, seconded by ELIJAH MASSEY, to approve the minutes of March 5th, 20206, with corrections. Motion passed 5-0.

Corrections:

-The first sentence in Item 5B should be included as the last sentence of Item A.

-In the third paragraph of Item 5A, the following sentence shall be edited to read: “Ms. Juodisius suggested mortgage lenders or realtors, as well as a diversity of housing types.”

-In Item 5b, it should be noted that Mr. McCormick would like to participate in the energy focus group, rather than facilitate it.

5. BUSINESS ITEMS

a. Discussion and of Phased Implementation of TOD Master Plan Zoning Changes related to Wastewater Capacity Constraints

Ms. Mandigo said that she would like to discuss the impact of allowing ten-story buildings in certain zones of Essex Junction of the wastewater infrastructure. She said that the West Street pump station is older and due for a retrofit and is also the pump station that has the highest flow in Essex Junction. It is currently at its max capacity, and funding, shared with the Town of Essex, has been approved for retrofitting. This is anticipated to occur in June of 2027. Replacing a portion of the force main along West Street will also be necessary to accommodate a higher capacity. Thus, Mr. Yuen is recommending a phased approach to implementing TOD Master Plan zoning changes, prioritizing updates to the VC and TOD districts in the

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near term, while deferring changes to the HA and MF-MU1 districts until wastewater infrastructure constraints are resolved.

Answering a question from Mr. McCormick, Ms. Mandigo said that approximately 70% of flow on the West Street pump station is from the Town of Essex. Once the pump stations are upgraded a flow meter will be installed which will better be able to more accurately track this. Mr. McCormick said that he believes that the Town of Essex should also have restrictions on development as well. Ms. Mandigo said that minor development requests, such as accessory dwelling units, will not have a substantial impact on the station. She said that the allocation issue has gotten worse during the last six months. Mr. McCormick said that this project is not included in the Capital Program Review Committee's project list, Ms. Mandigo said that this is since it is an enterprise fund. Once the project is complete it will be able to support the type of density that the PC would like to see put in place. Mr. Yuen said that once the sewer projects are underway, the zoning changes can be fully implemented. All agreed to move forward with Mr. Yuen's suggestion of a phased approach to implementing the TOD Master Plan zoning changes.

b. Introduction of Draft Form-Based Code Proposal

Mr. Yuen said that staff has been testing these regulations against upcoming recent and developments in Essex Junction and has identified six main issues. He suggested that PC members bring up specific technical issues to him directly and said that he would like to focus on policy decisions today. Ms. Lukins and Ms. McGee, both of Framework presented the draft of the form-based code. Ms. McGee reviewed the sections of the code that Framework is proposing updates to, and the reasons that such updates are being suggested. Mr. Massey said that focusing the conversation on the six staff identified topics that need clarification would be the most helpful. He requested public input, of which there was none.

The first topic discussed was the street room ratio. Mr. Yuen said that this can help to ensure that corridors feel human-scale. He raised two main questions, if the current proposed 1:1 ratio is appropriate and if the rail right-of-way (ROW) should be counted for the purpose of street room ratio. He said that it could be difficult to determine where the street ROW ended and the rail ROW began as the City has an easement on rail property for the road in some instances. Ms. Clemens initially suggested that the rail ROW should not be included due to different regulations of these areas. The Commission discussed the merits of both options and noted that regardless of the street room ratio, building height limits would remain. Ms. Juodisius suggested that requiring the inclusion of rail ROW as a part of the street room width may inadvertently lead to an increased minimum allowable height at the street frontage. The Commission subsequently agreed that for purposes of determining the street-room, applicants should be given the option to include or exclude the Rail ROW as a part of the street room width if the Rail ROW is adjacent to a road .

The Commission discussed setback requirements and building height ratios in the Village Center district. Ms. McGee clarified that while zero setbacks are only allowed for active commercial uses, buildings without commercial frontage would require minimum setbacks. The group debated whether to maintain the current 1-to-1 street room ratio or increase it, with some expressing concerns about the constraints this might impose on development. Ms. Clemens raised questions about whether to negotiate specific setback distances or codify them in the regulations, referencing the 4 Pearl Street project as an example. The Commission discussed the balance needed between meeting housing targets and preserving the aesthetic character of the Village Center Zoning district.

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The PC discussed specific situations where the 1:1 ratio could require an overly tall building, and the potential of a more situational approach. Aesthetic concerns, the “squished” feeling that some may experience when driving past taller buildings close to the road, open space requirements in front of the building, and the implementation of step-backs were also discussed. Mr. Yuen said that staff has reviewed several recent or proposed developments to compare the street room to determine if a 1:1 ration is appropriate. Staff has created illustrations of what the maximum limit of height would look like in specific areas. Ms. McGee presented massing options showing how developers could implement varied setbacks while meeting the street room ratio and maximum height requirements. All other frontages will have some type of setback.

Mr. Yuen asked if corner lots should be subject to the street room ratio on both sides. He said that applying the street room standards to both sides may be overly limiting where side streets are particularly narrow, but only applying only to one side could cause an unbalanced look. Ms. Magee said that a mix of setbacks and step backs could be integrated. She said that the street room standard as is will result in the desired type of urban environment desired. She also suggested a baseline 60-foot right-of-way assumption, which could be moved up or down if necessary. Mr. Massey said that there are people in the community who are very concerned about the impact that large developments will have on the community. Ms. Clemens spoke of the need for street trees. The Commission subsequently agreed to maintain a 1-to-1 street room ratio with a 50-foot minimum setback assumption for narrow streets, combined with a required minimum setback along the side facing the narrow street.

Regarding the residential adjacency section, Mr. Yuen asked if the increased setback should be based on the difference between proposed building height and the maximum allowable building height in the adjacent residential zone; rather than the difference between the maximum allowable building height in the parcel being developed and maximum allowable building height in the adjacent residential zone. The Commission agreed that the former makes more sense. Ms. Magee said that the residential adjacency is fairly typical, but sad that additional setback requirements have been added due to concerns about a ten-story building being placed next to a single-family home.

The Commission discussed the proposed residential adjacency section should supersede existing buffering standards in the Land Development Code. Mr. Yuen said the existing buffering standards only apply to multi-family housing adjacent to single family homes. They do not apply if the adjacent property has been converted to a duplex or higher. He believes that the proposed residential adjacency section would standardize requirements. The Commission decided that the residential adjacency section should supersede existing buffering standards in the Land Development Code.

Regarding the list of allowable primary materials (75% of the primary façade), Mr. Yuen compared these standards to recently constructed projects. The group discussed material requirements for building facades in the TOD and VC district, specifically focusing on high-quality fiber cement siding. Diane expressed concerns about cement siding being overused based on community feedback, but Katherine clarified that the current 75% minimum requirement and articulation provisions should help prevent monotonous facades. The group decided to maintain the existing list of materials rather than restrict options, reasoning that removing any materials would limit developer choices and diversity.

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The meeting then focused on evaluating a new landscape performance scoring system against an existing approved master plan at Chittenden Crossing. Mr. Giguere presented findings showing the approved plan scored below the proposed minimum threshold of 30, leading to discussions about whether this threshold should be adjusted. The current LDC requirements are for 2-3% of the project cost to be spent on landscaping. He said that this is a robust landscaping plan but did not get to half the performance score that would be required with the proposed form-based code standards. Ms. Magee said that she will run a few other tests with built site plans to ensure that these are plausible. She provided examples from Seattle that meet the lowest thresholds. Mr. Yuen said that the form-based proposal is more objective and that he believes that it will get better results. Mr. Meyer encouraged the City to include green infrastructure and a vibrant streetscape in the green space in downtown Essex Junction. He believes that the current landscaping requirement of “2-3% of construction costs” has been a failure and questioned the validity of the financial figures used in previous applications. Mr. Yuen suggested doing a little more testing and calibration to determine whether this method can be successful. Ms. Juodisius noted that pedestrian amenities, such as painted benches or public art, were elements that counted towards the existing landscape requirements but not the new proposed scoring system but that these features would now be regulated under the frontage standards requirement. All agreed to further investigate, but the PC supported the proposed form-based requirements.

Regarding screening of at-grade parking structures, Mr. Yuen said that some recent examples in Winooski may not be permissible under the proposed code as written. He suggested that the proposed strict requirements are reasonable in the VC district but suggested that the PC to consider if this is too strict in the TOD district. Ms. Magee said that she generally does not recommend having parking on a frontage unless space is limited, however some of the negative impacts could be mitigated with screening. Ms. Juodisius that there can be situations where it can be very difficult to get sufficient parking in small corner lots in the Village Center if a liner building is required. Ms. Clemens said that underground parking is not always possible due to the high-water level. She said that it is important to remember that many people will always have a motor vehicle. Mr. McCormick discussed options to have indoor parking in a more aesthetic way and said that he is concerned about not having enough parking in the Village Center. Mr. Massey said that he does not believe that a developer would build without sufficient parking. The Commission subsequently asked for an additional frontage type in the TOD district to be added that incorporates a mix of screened parking and linear building elements. It asked for fir tge ratui if the parking to active frontage to roughly reflect that of Winooski's form-based code. For the Village Center, while the preference is to maintain current requirements, The Commission asked Framework to explore whether additional modifications are necessary to ensure the rule are workable for small lots.

Framework will provide guidance on the impact of form-based code to small and medium sized developments. Mr. Massey said that he does not want to see form-based code discourage small developments. Mr. Yuen will work with Framework to ensure that this is not the case. Ms. Magee said that this would not apply to any developments that do not require site plan review. An exemption could be created for façade materials for mid-range developments.

In public comment, Ms. Svenson asked if traffic diversion and pedestrian safety would be a part of form-based code. Mr. Yuen detailed other engineering initiatives and efforts to create and maintain a bike/walk

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network that are currently occurring in Essex Junction. Ms. Svenson asked if screening would prevent on-street parking, Mr. Massey said that it would not.

c. Discussion and consideration of First Congregational Church of Essex Junction Zoning Amendment

SCOTT MCCORMICK made a motion, seconded by ELENA JUODISIUS, to table discussion and consideration of the First Congregational Church (5c) item to the May meeting. Motion passed 5-0.

Ms. Juodisius said that she believes that the PC is generally in favor of this idea, however additional time is needed to discuss it.

6. MEMBERS UPDATES

Ms. Clemens discussed an upcoming regional housing event on April 29, 2026 and encouraged PC members to sign up to attend.

7. STAFF UPDATES

Mr. Yuen said that two Comprehensive Plan focus groups have been scheduled and said that he would like to see a PC member at each. The housing focus group is on April 21 at 6 PM, and Ms. Paschall will attend. The climate and energy focus group will be held on May 5th at 6 PM, and Mr. McCormick will attend. A regional infill housing workshop will be held on May 16th.

8. ADJOURNMENT

ELENA JUODISIUS made a motion, seconded by SCOTT MCCORMICK, to adjourn. Motion passed 5-0. Meeting adjourned 10:16 PM.

Respectfully submitted,
Darby Mayville