

**CITY OF ESSEX JUNCTION
PLANNING COMMISSION REGULAR MEETING
MINUTES OF MEETING
MAY 7, 2026
APPROVED JUNE 4, 2026**

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;

OTHERS PRESENT: John Burnett, Bart Frisbie, Marcus Certa, Mark Mendes, David Minkoff, Darren Schibler

1. CALL TO ORDER

Mr. Massey called the meeting to order at 6:34 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 31st, 2026

SCOTT MCCORMICK made a motion, seconded by DIANE CLEMENS, to approve the minutes of March 31st, 2026, with corrections. Motion passed 5-0.

Corrections:

-Naming customs will be consistent throughout.

5. BUSINESS ITEMS

a. Discussion of the 2027 Comprehensive Plan Update Process

Mr. Schibler, of the Chittenden County Regional Planning Commission (CCRPC), provided an update regarding recent community engagement efforts, including two focus groups on housing and energy/climate issues. Business owner outreach is also underway. Regular progress reports are available. The budget for this project is on track, with 67% of the project budget being spent. The housing focus group, held on April 21st, attracted around twenty attendees. Mr. Schibler discussed the format of the focus group and specific brainstorming sessions. Attendees discussed a desire to maintain the village feel while allowing for housing development, with particular emphasis on green spaces, partnerships with developers, mixed-use development, and affordable housing options. Landlord-tenant relations were discussed, and the need to offer assistance to both groups. A revolving land fund for improvements to rental projects was discussed. Mr. Mendes discussed the need to have a variety of housing types in Essex Junction. Ms. Clemens discussed the connection between these topics and the rental registry, which was proposed several years ago, Mr. McCormick concurred. Mr. Schibler said the focus groups worked on identifying issues, rather than suggesting specific solutions. He said attendees felt that there should be a difference between approaches with larger rental properties and smaller landlords. Mr. Schibler discussed

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conversations with the Champlain Valley Expo relating to developing housing on the parcel and the need to address traffic operations.

The energy and climate focus group was attended by several experts in the energy industry. Key points included achieving Essex Junction's targets for electric vehicle adoption, reducing heating costs and improving renewable energy in the heating sector. Public/private partnerships were discussed, as well as regulatory and incentive-based approaches. Discussions also focused on sustainability strategies for Essex Junction, particularly regarding new developments at Five Corners and the Pearl Street corridor. Mr. Schibler discussed the balance between regulatory requirements and incentive-based programs, suggesting a three-pronged approach: regulatory measures for large developments, incentive programs for smaller buildings and retrofits, and grant-funded initiatives for existing buildings. The importance of connecting residents to existing resources was discussed, and the possible need for an energy coordinator. The possibility of municipal-based public transportation for specific destinations was discussed. Attendees explored ideas like renewable heating ordinances and geothermal technology, while acknowledging cost concerns and the need for equitable implementation. Mr. Schibler suggested reaching out to recent developers to see their reasoning for choosing specific heating technology. Mr. Yuen said there is no incentive for landlords to choose higher efficiency products if a tenant is required to pay the utility bills.

Mr. McCormick discussed new technologies which are being developed for multi-family units and said the City could help to provide additional information to developers on these options. Answering a question from Mr. Hamilton, Mr. Schibler discussed balancing the shift to renewable energy with cost realities. Programs exist to assist lower-income residents; however, it is important to look into why they are not being used as much as they could be. Answering a question from Mr. Massey, Mr. Schibler discussed state funding and assistance for energy-efficiency projects. Mr. Schibler said it is important to highlight the fact that energy-efficiency is a positive financial investment.

Mr. Schibler discussed business outreach efforts. CCRPC staff has visited numerous local businesses to learn more about how the City can better support them. Conversations have been insightful, and some of the challenges cited include signage visibility, parking needs, and building maintenance issues. This is particularly relevant to larger properties. Sandwich board signs were specifically cited as an issue. Mr. Schibler said, overall, most businesses are happy and satisfied with being in Essex Junction. Mr. McCormick discussed business promotion and a potential business association. He also discussed a desire to better engage with minority-owned businesses. Mr. Schibler suggested leveraging connections with the Vermont Professionals of Color Network and community liaisons at CCRPC. He suggested soliciting responses to specific documents, rather than open-ended questions. Cymone Beford, Economic Mobility Manager at CCRPC, may be available to assist with engagement. Mr. Schibler discussed efforts working with the Essex High School Business Club for door-to-door outreach. Business owner outreach and focus group formation will continue for the next month or so. Next month, the PC will discuss how to work through this information, and draft chapters will be available for review in August.

b. Discussion and consideration of First Congregational Church of Essex Junction

Mr. Yuen discussed a proposal from the First Congregational Church of Essex Junction to add housing to their property to generate sustaining income in a way that aligns with their mission and values. He said this is a good idea, however there are neighborhood impact issues to consider. The plans are dependent on successfully rezoning the parcels from Multi-Family 3 to Village Center (VC) district zoning and

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changes to the future land use map. Church officials will present a general idea to the PC this evening, and details regarding zoning and neighborhood protections do not need to be reviewed tonight.

Mr. Burnett, of the First Congregational Church, said it is important for the church to diversify their income sources, as member contributions are down. He discussed redevelopment options to include mixed-use housing while continuing to maintain the thrift shop as a storefront. Ms. Clemens noted the historical status of all three buildings. Rezoning the property is essential to moving the plan forward. Mr. Massey noted the challenging nature of demolishing a historical structure, and Mr. Burnett said that church leadership is supportive of moving this forward. Any type of change to the exterior of the historic buildings must go through the review process. Mr. Mendes, Pastor of First Congregational Church, clarified that, while the Church Council has established a committee to investigate the feasibility of this project, no financial analysis has been conducted yet, and the congregation has not been formally consulted. Further design will only be done if zoning will not allow for such. Mr. Massey said there are several multi-unit rental properties in the immediate area. Mr. Yuen said development to the Sawyer House parcel is unlikely to have much impact on surrounding residential properties. He said form-based code would apply to any development. The proposed three or four-story buildings would likely be acceptable under the residential adjacency standards. Mr. Yuen said he believes that this proposal would not look out of place in the neighborhood.

The PC discussed adjusting the future land use map to allow for the potential church development project. All commissioners expressed support for the request, noting that the church property aligns with community feedback about pedestrian-friendly streetscapes and building character. Ms. Pascall said that the PC must consider precedent-setting in this process. Ms. Clemens suggested that this was a good opportunity to solicit feedback regarding changes to other parcels adjoining the VC district. Mr. Massey described the public input that would be involved with their process. Ms. Pascall noted that the church is an important part of the community, and that some of the character of the current parcel would be maintained. This feedback will be integrated in the draft Comprehensive Plan and future land use map, though the church will still need to go through a separate zoning revision process after the future land use map is approved.

c. Discussion and consideration of Land Development Code amendments, including Form-Based Code Proposal

Mr. Yuen discussed the first draft of the document and technical difficulties in formatting that some PC members have experienced. He will resend the document as a PDF. He outlined a timeline for revisions, with a second draft anticipated by June 4th and a potential public hearing in August. Targeted outreach will occur in May and June. General public engagement will focus on the changes that are anticipated to be most important to the public. The PC discussed specific form-based code amendments regarding street room ratios, rights-of-way, building massing, and frontage types, particularly focusing on parking frontage standards in Transit-Oriented Development (TOD) and VC districts. Mr. Yuen suggested the future renaming of the VC District as City Center. Answering a question from Ms. Clemens, Mr. Yuen discussed screening and buffering requirements for surface parking. These new standards aim to improve pedestrian orientation while maintaining flexibility for certain development styles. Frontage relating to surface parking was discussed.

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Mr. Hamilton noted the rear setbacks in the form-based code, particularly a 30-foot requirement, could impact buildable area and reduce housing unit availability. He believes that the buffering requirements are too extreme. Mr. Yuen said the setback only applies under specific conditions, particularly when buildings reach maximum height. The residential adjacency does not add to the increased rear setback unless the building is much higher than the adjacent buildings. Mr. Massey confirmed that while setback reduces developable space, it helps balance housing needs with community concerns about impacts and change. Mr. McCormick concurred. Exceptions are available for smaller unit developments. Mr. Yuen said there are limits on what can be built on small lots for functionality and usability purposes. The PC indicated support for the thirty-foot setback as it aligns with form-based code goals and provides green space.

Mr. Yuen discussed the applicability, benefits, and waivers for form-based code compliance, particularly regarding landscaping standards. Mr. Yuen said projects which do not increase the gross floor area by more than 30% do not need to come to compliance. Regarding the proposed scoring system for landscaping, developers do not need to come in full compliance for projects which only impact a smaller area. Mr. Yuen reviewed the recent Chittenden Crossing and 8 Railroad Street projects and found that the 30 point threshold reasonably well. The PC decided to move toward using impacted area for landscape scoring and to test the new system with more cases. Ms. Juodisius discussed the applicability of internal renovations with minimal site disturbances. Mr. Yuen discussed changes of use for linear frontage and confirmed that single-family dwellings in the VC would remain unchanged under the current regulations.

Regarding proposed changes to design review overlay district boundaries, Mr. Yuen proposed plans to eliminate the VC and TOD districts from design review requirements as they would fall under the Form-Base standards. He addressed technical corrections to TOD district parking minimums and parking requirements in VC district. He noted that there are some properties in the VC district with no parking whatsoever. He suggested that should a new development provide less than 75% of the typically required parking spaces, the DRB should have the option to stipulate that the developer has to facilitate parking space lease options from nearby properties within a 600-foot radius is proposed. Mr. Yuen said this does not force the DRB to impose this, however it provides them the option of doing such. He said developers may be able to trade unused spaces in other nearby areas as well. All agreed that the DRB should be able to determine if the developer can facilitate parking in other nearby areas. Mr. McCormick discussed reserving spaces for residents in mixed-use developments. The VC currently has no required spaces per unit.

Mr. Yuen discussed unit mix requirements for larger residential developments. Mr. Massey asked if the PC is interested in requiring more than the 20% minimum requirement for units to have two or more bedrooms. Mr. Yuen said Essex Junction would like a better mix of units but noted that studios and one-bedroom units are currently in high demand due to limited availability in the market. Mr. McCormick said he believes the 20% figure is too low and Ms. Juodisius encouraged flexibility. Mr. Massey said additional offerings will help to allow more people to stay and move into the community. Mr. Yuen suggested seeking input from Framework, the project consultant.

Mr. Yuen discussed updates to development standards, including landscaping requirements, street design and infrastructure standards, bike lane requirements for new streets and parking requirements for commercial spaces. Architectural review is not required for smaller projects. Mr. Yuen said it has been

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common to assume retail use for parking calculations at the time of site plan application and asked for input on this process. The PC expressed preference for Option B, which would codify current practice. Mr. McCormick said Option B may provide an excess of spaces, however these could be leased out to other businesses or rental properties. He discussed the balance between maximizing units and providing sufficient parking. Mr. Yuen reviewed updates to parking waiver criteria, including a change to require off-site parking to be within 600 feet rather than 200 feet, and clarified that assigned parking spaces cannot be counted toward available waiver justification, even if they are vacant. This is to discourage assigned parking and to encourage the re-allocation of disused spaces to other residents or commercial tenants who need them.

The PC discussed several code amendments, including window wells and landscaping requirements. They agreed to codify a three-foot setback requirement for window wells in districts where there is otherwise a higher setback requirement. If there is no setback this is not applicable. The PC discussed how to determine the affected area for landscaping, and the applicability of interior-only renovations. This will be sent to Framework for further review. A landscape architect is currently required to be hired for properties of five units or above, when smaller projects only require a landscaping professional. This will be left as is. The technical review committee will continue to work on technical changes.

6. MEMBERS UPDATES

Ms. Clemens said she attended the Chittenden County Regional Housing Convening on April 29th. Mr. Hamilton attendant Plan BTV 250 on April 30th. Mr. Massey said community input is being sought for the artist pitches for the Vermont Arts Council mural. Online surveys and in-person engagements are ongoing, and the working group will select an artist and move forward with the actual design in June. Both potential artists are from Vermont.

7. STAFF UPDATES

Mr. Yuen said the City Council chose to install a buffered bike lane on Park Street and move the parallel parking from both sides.

8. ADJOURNMENT

SCOTT MCCORMICK made a motion, seconded by SCOTT MCCORMICK, to adjourn. Motion passed 5-0. Meeting adjourned 9:24 PM.

Respectfully submitted,
Darby Mayville