

**CITY OF ESSEX JUNCTION
PLANNING COMMISSION REGULAR MEETING
MINUTES OF MEETING
AUGUST 9, 2025
DRAFT**

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

ADMINISTRATION: Chris Yuen, Community Development Director

OTHERS PRESENT: Eva Benen, Luke Brockmeier, Steven Eustis, Jack Evans, Joseph Finch, Dave Fogle, Christine Forde, Karen Halverson, Carlton Houghton, Daniel Liguori, Resa Mehren, Sean Neely, John O'Brien, Lauren Philbrooke, Alison Wermer, Dave, Emily

1. CALL TO ORDER

In Mr. Massey's absence, Ms. Clemens called the meeting to order at 6:30 PM.

2. AGENDA ADDITIONS/CHANGES

None.

3. PUBLIC TO BE HEARD

a. Comments from Public on Items Not on Agenda

None.

4. MINUTES

a. July 10, 2025

DIANE CLEMENS requested to approve the minutes of July 10, 2025. Motion passed 4-0.

5. BUSINESS ITEMS

a. Introduction of new members of Planning Commission

Mr. Yuen said that Finn Hamilton has been appointed to the Planning Commission (PC) as a non-voting member. Mr. Hamilton said that he is fifteen and has lived in Essex Junction his entire life. He is excited to be involved in the planning process.

b. Discussion of Revised Design Alternative for Pearl Street between Susie Wilson Rd and West St Extension

Mr. Yuen said that Essex Junction has been contemplating changes to Pearl Street over the past several years, and that a scoping study was held in 2018. Funding could not be secured for the entire \$4.3 million dollar project; however, the City's Capital Plan has \$1.2 million allocated for this project. An updated scoping study has been created to fit within the revised budget. Mr. Neely, Associate at Stantec, discussed existing project conditions, noting that there are no dedicated bicycle facilities in the project area. He reviewed the purpose and need statement for the project. He discussed alternatives that had previously been reviewed for this project.

Mr. Neely highlighted the new alternative that was developed to meet the updated project cost. This alternative does not include the removal of the median, which would be necessary for improved motor vehicle access. However, the alternative improves safety and connectivity for cyclists and pedestrians,

minimizes disruption to existing curbs, sidewalks and utilities and incorporates new crosswalks and a proposed eastbound transit stop. The existing sidewalk will be converted to a ten-foot multi-use path and will include a buffered bike lane. The alternative proposes that the speed limit be reduced from 45 mph to 30 mph. Ms. Clemens said that the road cannot currently handle the traffic that it has and expressed concern about reducing lanes. Mr. Neely said that the bike lanes could possibly be closed to accommodate an additional car lane during events. Mr. McCormick said that traffic gets delayed due to the light sequence, and that changing this could assist with better moving traffic. The estimated project cost for the current alternative is \$960,000. Median removal would cost \$1.8 million and is outside of the project scope. Stantec has been consulting with VTrans during this project and will contact the Police Department for input in the future.

Mr. Neely said that this project is a missing bicycle link. Mr. Yuen said that this project was developed with Essex Junction's comprehensive planning process. Essex Junction is densifying, and it is important to allow for more transportation methods to be able to use the space. The Transit-Oriented Development Draft Plan is available for review and mentions this specific area as needing pedestrian-friendly improvements. Mr. Yuen said that Pearl Street is one of the region's strongest transit corridors and has three bus stops in the westward direction, however it currently has none in the eastward direction. Answering a question from Mr. Houghton, Mr. Neely discussed the traffic volume counts from each intersection as well as the average daily traffic along the corridor. Mr. Houghton said that Pearl Street should remain at the current lane structure and said that he was interested in the destinations for inbound and outbound travel from Essex Junction. He said that reducing the median will reduce the safety margin.

Answering a question from a member of the public, Mr. Neely said that this project will increase walkability from project transit stations. Mr. McCormick said that information about increasing bus access on the westbound side needs to be in the purpose and needs statement. This is a very important issue, especially in inclement weather and for people with disabilities. He also suggested having crosswalk signal at the intersection. Mr. Neely said that this would increase the project beyond its available budget. Ms. Wermer said that narrowing the road to one lane would not be a good experience and suggested a single bike path on one side of the road. She cited the Fanny Allen crossing as an example of a successful two-lane road with safe pedestrian crossing. Mr. Neely said that a single lane of travel will help to reduce driver speeds and that the Fanny Allen intersection is only safe because of the signalized crosswalk. Mr. McCormick questioned the need for both a bike lane and a multi-use path. Mr. Yuen said that there is only one lane feeding into the westward direction and that this can lead to a bottleneck. He said that planning for future capacity is important.

Mr. Evans said that he commutes this area every day and that it is unsafe. Pedestrians and bikers are often competing for a small amount of space. Adding a shared use path will assist with this. Mr. Evans said that he does not see how the second lane of car travel alleviates congestion. Increasing biking and walking to events at the fairgrounds could also lead to a decrease in impaired driving. Mr. Eustis said that he prefers this plan as he believes that maintaining the median is important. He said that stacking is critical and that the proposed signalized crosswalks will work well. He suggested not changing the traffic timing at the light at West Street Extension as this plan provides room for a right-turn onto West Street Extension. He would like to see some shade trees planted in the greenspace. Answering a question from Ms. Clemens, Mr. Neely said that it is GMT's preference not to use bus pull-offs. Mr. Finch said that he rides along the sidewalk and said that he has had safety concerns along the driveways on this route. He said that sometimes going on the road feels safer. He said that the only thing that helps reduce traffic is to offer

alternatives to driving. Mr. Neely said that no signal phasing to accommodate bike crossing will be included with the new alternative.

Mr. Finch spoke of drivers speeding and said that reducing Pearl Street to one lane is essential to helping with this. He also feels that removing the median would contribute to drivers speeding to make a green light. He suggested that the speed limit be reduced to 25 mph. Mr. Neely said that the speed limit could be reduced along Pearl Street and in the project limits if desired by the City. A member of the public asked if the speed could be reduced near the Fort, Mr. Neely said that residents could petition the state for this to occur. Mr. Evans said that transit only works when it is convenient, and that improving connectivity will assist with usage. He said that the conditions shown on the map will make it so that more people take advantage of biking and public transit. He said that buffered bike lanes are often not used for their intended purpose. A member of the public asked about the slip lane included in the current project. Mr. Neely said that this is a part of a current study that VTrans is doing. If the median remains, the slip lane provides the stop control necessary for a left-hand turn. A member of the public said that the expo only has shows on 10% of the days of the year, and that it is important not to design for the worst-case scenario.

Ms. Wermer asked how eastbound bikes would be accommodated with this project. Mr. Neely said that they would use the shared use path. Mr. Houghton said that it is not Essex Junction's responsibility to alleviate Chittenden County's traffic concerns. He believes that diverting traffic is a better alternative. A member of the public said that the bike lane would help to remediate bike traffic in the shared-use path. Mr. Neely said that a low height retaining wall might be necessary, and that there is some space in the budget for additional projects. If need be, the ten-foot shared use path can be reduced to eight feet. Also included in the project is pedestrian lighting. No additional streetlighting is included. Underground utilities are present which could interfere with street tree planting. Planting could also increase the cost.

A member of the public asked what could be done to help bicyclists crossing the slip lane and heading west. Mr. Neely said that this is not ideal but that the crossing will be realigned with this project and that a pedestrian signal could be added. Mr. Houghton said that there should be signaling for bikes and pedestrians so that they could safely cross Susie Wilson Road. Mr. Neely said that the pedestrian signal on the slip ramp for turning right contains no pedestrian signal. VTrans will be doing signal work in the area. Mr. Houghton discussed the West Street crossover, stating that it backs up and pushes a bottleneck to the shopping center area. Mr. Neely said that they will be coordinating with VTrans on this issue. Mr. Finch recommended a slightly raised crossing instead of a slip lane. Mr. Houghton expressed concern about snow storage with the bike lane, and Mr. Neely said that the median will be available for snow storage. The green strip will maintain its width. Mr. Houghton said that biking is only available during the non-winter months. Mr. Finch said that the ease of plowing with this configuration will make it easier for more people to bike during the winter. Mr. Houghton said that most of the traffic going through Essex does not terminate in Essex Junction.

Mr. Neely said that he will review and incorporate all the helpful comments from this evening, as well as what was received online. An alternatives evaluation will be completed, which includes a traffic evaluation. A recommended preferred alternative will be selected for approval by the City. The process should be completed by the end of the year. Once the preferred alternative is endorsed by the City Council the project will be able to move forward.

6. READING FILE**a. a. Vermont Public story- “Vermont towns continue to debate short-term rental rules****7. MEMBERS UPDATES**

Mr. McCormick said that he will be the new Essex Junction representative to the Chittenden County Regional Planning Commission. Ms. Clemens said that the Lincoln Inn is planned for demolition and suggested that the Development Review Board and PC request a tour of the building prior to this occurring. Future planning for the site should also be considered and discussed. Mr. McCormick said that this and other issues could be discussed at a joint meeting. Mr. McCormick said that it would also be helpful to discuss Pearl Street as the PC separately prior to additional public comment. He said that he would like to see how it fits into the Capital Committee process and the Transit-Orientated Development District. Mr. Yuen said that this project can be discussed further at a future PC meeting. He said that there needs to be direction to Stantec on how to refine the alternative or how to provide an additional alternative. Mr. McCormick said that he would like to have additional discussions after a vehicle study is conducted. He believes that not enough through traffic uses the Circ highway and said that a traffic study could help to determine if this is true. Ms. Clemens said that she preferred this version to the 2018 version. Mr. Hamilton said that a reduced speed limit could reduce the risk of an accident for bicyclists.

Answering a question from Mr. McCormick, Mr. Yuen said that VTrans is interested in removing the jug handle at Susie Wilson Road due to its non-standard design. Several alternatives have been developed, however no funding is available for this. Regarding the Connect the Junction project, Mr. McCormick said that it would be helpful to look at reusing the presentations to the Rotary to other local organizations and religious organizations. Data from all the events will be summarized and compiled by the consultant. The in-person open house is tentatively scheduled for September 27. There is also a plan by Essex Junction Recreation and Parks to do a temporary pedestrianization of Main Street at this time. The report is anticipated to go to the City Council by late fall.

8. STAFF UPDATES

Mr. Yuen said that staff will be in touch regarding tabling assistance for the Connect the Junction project. Ms. Clemens said that the amount of data available at previous events was overwhelming to some but that the dot polling was popular.

9. ADJOURN

Ms. Clemens adjourned the meeting at 8:50 PM.

Respectfully submitted,
Darby Mayville