

**CITY OF ESSEX JUNCTION
PLANNING COMMISSION REGULAR MEETING
MINUTES OF MEETING
SEPTEMBER 3, 2026
DRAFT**

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

PLANNING COMMISSIONERS ABSENT: None

ADMINISTRATION: Chris Yuen, Community Development Director

OTHERS PRESENT: Gail Boundy, Kevin Collins, Cora Delucca, Brett Grabowski, Theresa Gookin, Stephen Lemcke, Sue McCormick, Resa Mehren, Nick Meyer, Reed Nye, Mitchel Stern, Stephen, RMJ

1. CALL TO ORDER

E. Massey 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

G. Boundy said she recently installed a fence on her property and received a letter from the City stating that she is in violation of the Land Development Code (LDC). She feels that complying with the guidelines will prevent her from enjoying her privacy, as she would need to move the fence substantially further into her yard and make a portion of her yard unusable. She would like to request a waiver from the City to address this issue. C. Yuen said staff reviewed this case, noted that the PC cannot make immediate decisions on waivers and that he does not see a viable path forward within the LDC as written. He said there is no substantial proposed change to the LDC that would currently allow this to occur. The PC agreed to discuss these concerns after the Public Hearing.

4. MINUTES

a. August 11th, 2026

ELENA JUODISIUS made a motion, seconded by SCOTT MCCORMICK, to approve the minutes of August 11th, 2026. Motion passed 5-0.

5. BUSINESS ITEMS

a. 2026 Land Development Code (LDC) Amendments

i. Overview Presentation on Proposed Amendments

C. Yuen presented the proposed 2026 Land Development Code amendments aimed at implementing the Connect the Junction Transit Oriented Development Master Plan adopted in December 2025. The most significant change is increasing the allowable building height limit to a maximum of nine stories, with an additional story for affordable housing, in specific areas of the City Center and Pearl Street Corridor. Much of this change is driven by a desire to accommodate the majority of the City's 2050 housing target within the City Center and Pearl Street corridor. C. Yuen provided an overview of form-based standards to regulate building form and public realm interactions. This will allow the Development Review Board to review projects against clearer and more defensible standards. Permitted and conditional uses are still

covered by the use chart and historic resources will remain protected. C. Yuen provided an overview of the street room ratio and intent to have human-scale development in Essex Junction. Properties which exceed the 1:1 street room ratio would not be permitted. C. Yuen presented renderings to demonstrate the impact that this would have on the pedestrian-level view from Pearl Street and from Park Street in Essex Junction. He reviewed the residential adjacency standards, which are intended to mitigate the impact of increased height on established, lower-density neighborhoods. C. Yuen discussed changes to façade composition, articulation and materials standards. He described how structured parking frontage can be used to conceal the location of parking in mixed-use buildings. A new performance-based landscaping system is proposed to replace the previous cost-based approach. C. Yuen detailed the extensive online and in-person public outreach associated with the LDC update, noting that this project was also featured by the local news media and Reddit. Additional technical adjustments are included in the LDC, as well as changes to meet statutory requirements.

ii. Public Hearing on LDC Amendments

E. Massey requested public input and asked that commenters keep their input under three minutes.

M. Stern described high-rise buildings as a threat to the Vermont way of life. He said changes to the height standards could result in Essex Junction having some of the tallest buildings in Vermont. He questioned the results of the survey stating that most residents are amenable to buildings this high. Taller buildings block sunlight and will result in the need for significantly more infrastructure. The fire department is not equipped to protect buildings of this size. He described Essex Junction as a community of single-family homes and said more starter homes are needed in the community. The infrastructure needs from the construction of taller buildings will result in higher taxes. M. Stern said housing within 500ft to 1,000ft from highways is not recommended, and housing less than 500ft from highways is a health hazard. The mitigation for buildings in these locations is keeping windows always closed and utilizing air conditioning filters, which is not environmentally sustainable. He cited several studies which have found unhealthy air quality along highways. M. Stern described housing within 1,000 feet of a major highway, such as Route 15 or Route 2a as being a health risk and a “death threat.” C. Delucca emphasized the need for affordable housing rather than luxury apartments. She said she is a public-school teacher and pays more than 50% of her income in rent. Raising the height limit does not mean that housing will be more affordable. She believes that affordable housing should need to be required prior to building the 10th story. She asked how the PC is addressing affordability and helping seniors and young families in obtaining affordable housing.

N. Meyer, Chair of the Tree Advisory Committee (TAC), asked for additional details on what the changes to the landscaping standards would involve. He also stated that ten stories is too high for buildings in Essex Junction. He discussed the need for street trees in new developments. N. Meyer asked for clarification on setback standards in specific areas of the City Center and said such variability may reduce the pedestrian-friendliness and ability to plant street trees. He believes the mandate to build housing should be done in a way that protects the livability of Essex Junction. S. Lemcke said he lives in a neighborhood adjacent to Pearl Street. He said he understands the pressure to carry tax revenue and develop new housing but said he believes that nine or ten stories is too high on Pearl Street. He would like to see a more livable scale building height. He does not believe such a high concentration of housing is healthy in a community. He encouraged the PC to consider livability, not just tax revenue. He suggested 5-6 stories as a livable height for the Pearl Street corridor. R. Mehren concurred with S. Lemcke that

livability needs to be considered along with housing demands. She also said it is important to ensure that all developers meet the standards of the LDC, even if they already have a building constructed. She suggested setting fines and ramifications for not meeting the LDC. M. Stern asked what the repercussions would be for not meeting the housing targets. C. Yuen said the housing targets do not come with an enforcement mechanism; however, municipalities need to prove that they are working towards these goals.

iii. Discussion and Consideration of LDC Amendments

D. Clemens said the Fire Department was consulted when developing LDC standards and can serve high-rises with their current apparatus. S. McCormick thanked all members of the public for their comments. He said he would like to see the PC be more proactive with what they would like to see in specific areas and buildings in downtown core. He would also like to see methods of integrating public feedback throughout the process. E. Juodisius said the PC would like to make the development process as understandable as possible, which is why the landscaping regulations were changed. Regarding affordability, the PC has discussed incentives and further regulations. S. McCormick said Essex Junction is working to update the Comprehensive Plan and is looking into alternative methods of transportation. Denser housing may result in less room for parking, and thus additional options need to be investigated. K. Paschall said, just because ten story buildings are allowed, does not mean that they will be built. This allows for making space for possibilities for the future.

D. Clemens said the street room standards may make it so that ten stories would not be allowed in many areas. She said it would be helpful to hear from developers about the practicalities of the LDC. She encouraged members of the public to continue communicating with the PC and the City Council regarding what is important to them about their community. E. Massey said all input provided at this meeting has been delivered with care and knowledge. He said the PC is aware that these changes are not small nor simple and have consequences. As Vermonters, he said issues of housing are not something that can be handled in isolation or that we can push off on other communities or groups. The City is engaged in other efforts to increase different types of housing other than multi-family developments along Pearl Street and the City Center. E. Massey said that what is built is dependent on market drivers and the intent of developers. D. Clemens said she would like to see typos and other formatting issues resolved with the LDC draft and ensure that all requested changes are incorporated.

E. Massey noted that the setback requirements for fences were brought up during public comment. C. Yuen said that while they may discuss this issue, an actual change to the LDC amendments would require re-warning a hearing. Per the regulations, corner lots are considered to have two front and two side yards for setback purposes. Combined with the prohibition of full-height non-transparent fences in the front yard setback, this means that corner lots face more restrictive fence standards than non-corner lots. He said the property at 1 Mansfield Road had a privacy fence installed and the City has had complaints from drivers about blocking their view. The fence is outside of the visibility triangle; however, he believes it does have an impact on visibility. He said he does not know the full history of why these regulations were put in place. He noted that trees and hedges are allowed in front setbacks so long as they do not block the visibility triangle, while full-height non-transparent fences are prohibited. He said this distinction suggests an urban design rationale behind the regulations. The intent appears to be improving the pedestrian connection with the surrounding environment and avoiding long, featureless opaque surfaces along pedestrian routes, similar to the form-based code prohibitions on blank walls. E. Massey noted that he considers the recently installed fence is attractive, however a different property owner could put something

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up with a less neighborly feel. S. McCormick discussed how large fences can impact the community feel of a neighborhood but said he can see the need for it in a more heavily traveled area.

E. Massey asked if there is a precedent for offering a solution for properties which are facing a highly traveled road. C. Yuen described how some communities do not have this similar prohibitions against full-height fences and how that impacts the pedestrian experience. E. Juodisius said corner lots can have high visibility, and she understands the conflict between the need for privacy and maintaining an attractive public realm. G. Boundy discussed privacy concerns at her property. E. Massey recommended that the PC move forward with the LDC draft as presented, with the clarification cross-references between the Fence regulations and the corner lot set-back regulations already included in the draft. He suggests adding this subject to the PC's list of possible adjustments for further consideration.

M. Stern asked how the height limits had been established and asked if they could be changed by the PC. E. Massey said it was originally suggested by a consultant and approved by the City Council. E. Massey asked if PC members would like to open back up discussion on height limits based on tonight's discussion. S. McCormick said he understands these concerns, but that Essex Junction will be unable to meet the housing targets if they do not increase the allowable building heights. He said not meeting the targets may prevent Essex Junction from obtaining state or federal grants in the future.

DIANE CLEMENS made a motion, seconded by SCOTT MCCORMICK, to close the public hearing on the Land Development Code amendments. Motion passed 5-0.

SCOTT MCCORMICK made a motion, seconded by ELENA JUOSIDIUS, that the Planning Commission approve the revised § 4441(c) Report and submit it, together with the proposed 2026 Land Development Code amendments, to the City Council for consideration. Motion passed 5-0.

6. MEMBERS UPDATES

D. Clemens suggested that all members listen to a new piece by Carly Berlin on Vermont Public Radio regarding Vermonters who are "stuck" in larger homes because there are no options for downsizing. S. McCormick thanked C. Yuen for his hard work on the LDC project.

7. STAFF UPDATES

C. Yuen said staff continue work on the Comprehensive Plan, and there will be an additional PC meeting on September 21, 2026 to discuss this.

8. ADJOURNMENT

DIANE CLEMENS made a motion, seconded by ELENA JUOSIDIUS, to adjourn. Motion passed 5-0. Meeting adjourned 8:45 PM.

Respectfully submitted,
Darby Mayville