

**VILLAGE OF ESSEX JUNCTION
PLANNING COMMISSION
MINUTES OF MEETING
February 4, 2021**

MEMBERS PRESENT: David Nistico, John Alden, Diane Clemens, Philip Batalion, Patrick Scheld, Steven Shaw (Andrew Boutin was absent).

ADMINISTRATION:

OTHERS PRESENT: Annie Cooper, Jim Jutras, Micah Hagan, Nick Meyer, Regina Mahony, Richard Hamlin, Ricky Jones, George Tyler, Owiso Makuku, Katie Ballard,

- AGENDA:**
1. Call to Order
 2. Audience for Visitors
 3. Additions/Amendments to the Agenda
 4. Minutes – January 21, 2021
 5. Work Session: Perspective of Departments or Committees for process of updating the Land Development Code:
 - A. Rick Hamlin and Rick Jones – Village Engineer and Public Works
 - B. Jim Jutras – Village Waste Water Treatment and Stormwater
 - C. Micah Hagan – Bike Walk Committee
 - D. Nick Meyer – Tree Advisory Committee
 - E. Katie Ballard – Essex Housing Committee
 - F. Annie Cooper – Essex Economic Development Committee
 6. Other Planning Commission Items
 7. Adjournment

1. CALL TO ORDER

David Nistico called the meeting to order at 6:04 PM.

2. AUDIENCE FOR VISITORS

None at this time.

3. ADDITIONS/AMENDMENTS TO THE AGENDA

None.

4. MINUTES

January 21, 2021

MOTION by John Alden, SECOND by Diane Clemens, to table approval of the minutes for January 21, 2021.

VOTING: unanimous (6-0); motion carries.

5. PERSPECTIVE OF DEPARTMENTS OR COMMITTEES FOR PROCESS OF UPDATING THE LAND DEVELOPMENT CODE

A. Rick Hamlin and Rick Jones – Village Engineer and Public Works

Mr. Hamlin said that he did not anticipate any major changes to the development section of the Land Development Code (LDC). He said that any changes would be revisions to any technical drawings or Village standard details that weren't caught in the previous update to the LDC. He asked when the changes to the LDC need to be finalized, and Ms. Mahoney replied that there is no statutory deadline for LDC updates but that they need to be consistent with the Town Plan. Ms. Clemens noted that the goal is to present changes to the Village Trustees by December, so the deadline for modifications would be in October.

Mr. Alden asked Mr. Hamlin if he had any policy suggestions or other more big-picture changes that would affect process. Mr. Hamlin replied that no, he has no suggestions. Mr. Alden then asked how the waiver process between the Planning Commission and Engineers is working. Mr. Hamlin replied that it is working well.

Mr. Nistico asked if the engineers and Public Works see opportunities for improving energy efficiency. Mr. Hamlin replied that because the Village doesn't have building envelope code, it falls to the State, and that the engineers don't review plans with regard to the building envelope. He added that the engineers look at elements outside of the building envelope, such as water, sewer, stormwater, traffic, sidewalks, etc, and said that there is not much more to improve on in standard energy-conservation measures. Mr. Jones noted that simple things like tree placements are something to keep an eye on.

B. Jim Jutras – Village Waste Water Treatment and Stormwater

Mr. Jutras said that the State is a leader in building code for LEED certification energy and that they did change the standards for building envelopes a few years ago, which the Village needed to meet. He said that state oversight is an improvement for municipalities who do not have a standard building code. He said that he and his department are working on a flow restoration plan, and that it may require some commentary on the fringes of some zoning areas, depending on how it is approved in the next round of permits. He also noted activity around compliance with phosphorous control and stormwater absorption. He said that rules around impervious standards are always changing, but that the Village is in a good position to meet them, since it has infiltration requirements at building sites. He noted potential wetland rule changes, which could impact areas where municipal runoff goes across the Whitcomb farm and other lands, but that the impact is minimal. He additionally noted that there may be some zoning requests in the near future around enhancements to stormwater runoff around the Winooski River, to maintain compliance with permits. He finally noted that his department will prioritize what it can achieve by November in terms of LDC updates, and ask the Planning Commission to consider amendments for specific sections when more information about them become available.

Mr. Alden said that in 2020, the state has adopted new regulations for commercial building and residential building energy standards, and suggested that the Village review them closely to ensure that any new development or construction problems are in compliance.

C. Micah Hagan – Bike Walk Committee

Mr. Hagan spoke about the Bike Walk Committee's goals and priorities, which are focused on enhancing crosswalks, protection of existing paths, and long term goals of safe access to connecting with other towns in the area. He noted that these seem to be more project-based goals, and not necessarily things that can be achieved through regulation at this level, but said he is interested in how some of this could fit into the LDC updates. Mr. Alden said that other communities have strict regulations for interconnectivity for bikes/walk lanes, etc, and that the Village could be more proscriptive about where those are put, for example by requiring developers to include these items as part of their plans. Mr. Shaw suggested requirements around bike racks, and Mr. Alden replied that the Village already has a lot of regulation around racks. Mr. Nistico added that the last LDC update included overlay maps for connectivity, and that there is leeway to include that in this update and require developers to include that in their plans.

Mr. Hagan said that one of the most challenging areas of the Village for walking/biking is the Five Corners intersection, saying that the conduits are very narrow and not protected. Mr. Nistico and Ms. Cooper agreed, and Mr. Nistico noted that one recent development at Five Corners widened the sidewalks. Mr. Hamlin said that the Crescent Connector would be a new link between Park and Maple Street and will have dedicated bike lanes.

D. Nick Meyer – Tree Advisory Committee

Mr. Meyer spoke about the Tree Advisory Committee's goals and actions. He said that the Committee was formed in 2014 to evaluate the forest canopy of the Village, and that they developed management plans, conducted an inventory of what trees the Village owns in the right of way, and identified planting opportunities to expand the urban canopy. He said that they began their focus at the Five Corners area and worked their way outward from there. He said they have also engaged in public/private partnerships in instances where trees would be best located on private property. He said the committee works with schools, and have planted about 155 trees, and that they have a partnership with Branch Out Burlington to raise their own trees in a nursery, which is a great way to get good nursery stock at a reduced price. He noted the threat of the Emerald Ash Borer beetle, saying that they have begun a removal and interplanting project in the event that the beetle arrives in the Village (it is currently in Richmond and on South Hero), to minimize the visual impact of potentially losing all of the trees at once in neighborhoods.

Mr. Meyer spoke about code changes in the Village center district that have been challenging for greenery, since developers are allowed 100% lot coverage and there are no green space requirements. He said that this puts the onus on the municipality and taxpayers to landscape. He said that the guidelines in the LDC need to be more specific around planting requirements, and better oversight during installation. He said that attention to soils and drainage is key. He suggested that the Tree Advisory Committee could help review landscape portions of applications and assist the Planning Commission in their decision-making process.

Mr. Alden agreed that landscape reviews have been inconsistent. He agreed that the Village has been told by the community that greenery is very important, and that should be doing a better job at incorporating those elements into projects.

Ms. Clemens asked how places for dogs to do their business could be incorporated with trees. She said she's been thinking about how to accommodate for dogs in green spaces. She asked if the Tree Committee could advise about that. The group had a discussion about how to address this issue, and will continue to explore options.

Mr. Tyler said that the Village does have an economic development fund and anticipates spending some of that money to develop the pocket park. He said there was never an intention to not have the Tree Advisory Committee be involved in the process.

E. Katie Ballard – Essex Housing Committee

Ms. Ballard spoke briefly about the Housing Committee's mission and goals. She said it was formed in 2020 and only began meeting in October, so it is a relatively new committee. She said that they will be advising the Selectboard, Trustees, and other committees about the housing needs of the community. She said that the committee will also be reviewing various proposals, such as inclusionary zoning. She said that the committee has recently reached out to seven other housing committees or task forces in neighboring municipalities to get a sense of what they have done and how their groups have collaborated within their towns. She said that the committee does not have significant feedback to provide for the LDC update at this time, but she asked for feedback on how the committee can be useful to the Planning Commission for this exercise.

Ms. Clemens asked if there was a survey about housing types and apartment types and sizes. She said that the perception is that the only units being built are single-bedroom apartment buildings. She asked if the Housing Committee is going to look at the types or styles of buildings, the dynamics of how the mix is going to be between single-family homes and apartment buildings, etc. Ms. Ballard replied that yes, they are currently reviewing a housing assessment conducted in 2019. She said they would be getting more involved in trying to figure out if there are enough types of units for people who are trying to move into the area. She said they will be getting more in depth on this topic as well as what the community needs in future.

Mr. Nistico said that there may be grants available to help do a study and create an inventory and get more information on what type of housing Essex has and where there are gaps and needs. Ms. Ballard said that would be helpful. She said that the 2019 study has been helpful in determining where there are information gaps that can inform future studies. Ms. Mahoney suggested that the committee explore primary data gathering.

Ms. Makuku said census data should be coming out in April and that there are a number of subsets of information like housing, which will be invaluable.

Mr. Alden said that housing is one of the key and top issues around architecture, as well as how the housing market has massive shortages.

F. Annie Cooper – Essex Economic Development Committee

Ms. Cooper said that the Economic Development Committee has been trying to work on a master list of all known business entities in Essex. She talked about the Out and About in Essex grant, which was an opportunity and event to encourage residents to inject

money into businesses and have a socially-distant, appropriate way to bring life back into the downtown during the pandemic. She said that the committee is exploring whether to adopt a Local Option Tax. She said that they are waiting until after the merger is on the ballot. She said that the committee is talking to neighboring communities who have a local option tax to see what they've done with it.

Mr. Nistico said that there is a lot of vacant retail space. He suggested some kind of fee in development projects that would then go to the Economic Development Committee, to encourage businesses to come to Essex.

Ms. Clemens said she was reviewing new legislation and saw that some new Tax Increment Financing (TIF) projects would be available this year. She asked whether the Village should pursue a TIF project. She also asked whether the Village should be shifting or redoing its zoning districts. Ms. Cooper said these are good suggestions to bring back to the EDC.

Mr. Shaw pointed out that business and commercial rents in Vermont are extremely low. He said that as the Village looks to promoting economic development, need to think about getting people here and also how to transport them to the businesses.

Ms. Makuku said that interconnectedness is vital to take into account when developing or redeveloping. She said that businesses are attracted by residents, and that residents are attracted by businesses. She said that ground floor commercial spaces need to be required in urban zones, because they will add to the vibrancy of the community. She said that this is a model that has demonstrated success, and should look at the LDC to make sure that is achieved.

Mr. Nistico noted that he will be warning another work session in 1st week of March.

6. OTHER PLANNING COMMISSION ITEMS

None at this time.

7. ADJOURNMENT

MOTION by Phil Batalion, SECOND by Patrick Scheld, to adjourn the meeting.

VOTING: unanimous (6-0); motion carried.

The meeting was adjourned at 8:10 PM.