

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

- MEMBERS PRESENT:** John Alden, Vice Chair; Diane Clemens; Patrick Scheld, Phil Batalion (David Nistico and Andrew Boutin were absent).
- ADMINISTRATION:** Robin Pierce, Community Development Director; Regina Mahoney, Chittenden County Regional Planning Commission.
- OTHERS PRESENT:** Benjamin Avery, Annie Cooper; Brett Grabowski, Gabrielle Smith.
- AGENDA:**
1. Call to Order/Audience for Visitors
 2. Additions/Amendments to the Agenda
 3. Minutes – January 21, 2021; February 4, 2021
 4. Work Session: Continue updates for the Land Development Code
 5. Other Planning Commission Items
 6. Adjournment
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1. CALL TO ORDER/AUDIENCE FOR VISITORS

John Alden called the meeting to order at 6:12 PM.

2. ADDITIONS/AMENDMENTS TO THE AGENDA

None.

3. MINUTES

January 21, 2021 – no action at this time.

February 4, 2021 – no action at this time.

4. WORK SESSION: DISCUSS LAND DEVELOPMENT CODE

Brett Grabowski of Milot Real Estate was in attendance to discuss his experience with and provide feedback on the Village's development approval process. Mr. Alden asked about his experience with developing 4 Pearl Street and 9 & 11 Pearl Street and whether the process had improved with the second development. Mr. Grabowski spoke about the impact of Act 250 on both projects, which caused some delay. He noted that the second project had gone through the process of qualifying for an exemption from Act 250, but that it was still impacted by historic preservation requirements due to its location. He said that his firm is going through the process to survey and qualify them for the national historic registry.

Mr. Grabowski provided an update on the second project, noting that they are beginning working on interior finishes and that the parking deck is slated for installation at the end of February or beginning of March, and that they are aiming for occupancy between June 1 and July 1. He further noted that they are seeing renewed commercial interest for both developments.

Patrick Scheld asked if there was a wait list for residential units, or if they have not yet started advertising spaces. Mr. Grabowski replied that the 4 Pearl Street development is full, but that they have not yet begun advertising for the second development. Mr. Scheld

asked about the building process, how long it took, and whether they had suggestions about efficiencies and improvements. Mr. Grabowski replied that the Essex Junction Planning Commission has thoughtful regulations that align with its development goals as a Village, which makes it easier to work with and feels more like a collaborative effort. Community Development Director Pierce agreed with this assessment.

Diane Clemens asked how the relationship between the Planning Commission and developers could be better and whether parts of the process could be improved upon or clarified. Mr. Grabowski replied that giving the developer the flexibility and having a clear set of expectations and a vision is key. Ms. Clemens asked if there is a market for something larger than what is currently being built. Mr. Grabowski replied that the market shifts between smaller and larger units, and his firm tries to strike that balance. He said that the design review area of the Village should be expanded, which would give the Planning Commission the ability to have more oversight and give its input on development.

Mr. Alden asked about parking issues with the developments, noting that the first development had minimal parking and the Planning Commission exerted limited oversight. Mr. Grabowski replied that many of the parking issues in the Village are really about perception, and that residents or visitors in the Village expect to have parking very close to their destination. He contrasted that with Burlington, where the expectation is that one would park in a central location and walk to their destination. He said that as the Village brings more working people to the area, the perception will shift and they will walk to amenities. He also spoke about the concept of shared parking, which is non-existent during COVID-19, since everyone is staying home and not commuting to work. He said that it doesn't free up parking for retail, but that he believes this is temporary.

Phil Batalion asking about reduction in cars. Mr. Grabowski replied that developers can only look so far into the future and that they need to be mindful of current demand as well as future demand. He said that they are trying to plan for fewer carbon impacts in the future, and that once the Five Corners area has a higher density of retail and commercial, there will be less demand for cars.

Ben Avery from BlackRock Construction spoke about streetscape, parking, and the shoulder areas or transition areas around the Village core. He said that the Village's vision for development is a community-building vision with the goal of revitalizing downtown Essex. He suggested that as the Village looks to update its Land Development Code (LDC), it be mindful of the transitional areas between four-story, mixed-use, high-density buildings, and the average single-family home. He said it's important to be mindful of those transitional areas, to ensure that a massive development isn't located right next to a historic, two-story, single-family home. Mr. Alden said that the Village Center District never developed as a downtown, so it's hard to protect and preserve those structures and the feeling of the Village while allowing for new development.

Mr. Avery asked for more detailed guidance during the development approval process and spoke against form-based code. He said that spending extra money to ensure that any development is integrated with the existing streetscape is money well spent. He said that

he is grateful for the amount of guidance that the Planning Commission has, since it's helpful to ensure that a project is designed correctly the first time.

Mr. Avery spoke about parking and that as the Five Corners area transitions to a higher-density location in the next several years, the suburban mold of having a parking spot close to a business will need to be broken. He noted that larger communities function very well without specified parking that is immediately adjacent to each business. He asked how municipal parking can be structured so that it works cohesively with private parking. Mr. Pierce concurred, saying that parking as a whole needs to be examined, not just parking for each individual project.

Annie Cooper provided an update on the latest Economic Development Committee meeting and activities. She said that Mr. Pierce had suggested funding a pool that would foster economic development such as pop-up shops and vendors. Mr. Pierce spoke about an idea around a Healthy Community Fund, which would help fund the pocket park on Main Street or the Crescent Connector. Mr. Scheld suggested a revolving loan fund, which would help create incentives for businesses to make small improvements, or could be used for a small streetscape project, or microgrants. Ms. Clemens asked how these ideas are different from a Tax Increment Financing (TIF) district. Mr. Scheld clarified that a TIF district borrows against the future tax base that the project would develop, since revenue doesn't currently exist but would once the economic development from the project occurs. Ms. Cooper stressed the importance of clearly stating any initiatives for the community and that the EDC should have a list of priorities to ensure that funds are transparently and fairly distributed.

Gabrielle Smith provided an update on the Housing Commission, which recently had a meeting focused on articulating the commission's priorities in order to meet its mission and charge (which is to increase housing and accessible housing so that people to move to and stay in Essex). She said that the Housing Commission is examining ways to increase the number of housing units by researching construction of new units and to rehabilitate current units that are not livable. She said it is also looking at existing housing stock that is empty or under-utilized, as well as researching accessory dwelling units. She also said that they may decide to establish a subcommittee to update the rental registry.

5. OTHER PLANNING COMMISSION ITEMS

None at this time.

6. ADJOURNMENT

MOTION by Patrick Scheld, SECOND by Diane Clemens, to adjourn the meeting.

VOTING: unanimous (4-0); motion carried.

The meeting was adjourned at 7:52 PM.