

**TOWN OF ESSEX
SELECTBOARD
REGULAR MEETING
Monday, January 3, 2022**

SELECTBOARD: Andy Watts, Chair; Patrick Murray, Vice-Chair; Tracey Delphia, Clerk; Sue Cook; Dawn Hill-Fleury.

ADMINISTRATION: Evan Teich, Unified Manager; Courtney Bushey, Interim Finance Director; Charles Cole, Fire Chief; Caitlin Corless, Essex Free Library Director; Greg Duggan, Deputy Manager; Karen K. Lemnah, Assessor; Dennis Lutz, Public Works Director; Owiso Makuku, Community Development Director; Aaron Martin, Director of Public Works Operations; Jean O’Sullivan, Economic Development Coordinator; Robert J. Paluba, IT Director; Larry Ransom, Honorary Fire Chief; Tom Richards, Assistant Fire Chief; Steve Trenholm, Battalion Chief/Safety Officer; Tom Yandow, Facilities Manager.

OTHERS PRESENT: Gina Halpin Barrett, Christopher Bird, Paul Bohne (Green Mountain Transit), Andrew Brown, Bob Burrows, Matt Carmolli, Marcus Certa, Annie Cooper, Patty Davis, Jon Demeritt, Erin De Vries, Erin Dickinson, Karen Dolan, Stephen Dowd, Betsy Dunn, Lori Houghton, Megan Humphries, Jim Kenney, Max Levy, Rachael Lizotte, Deb McAdoo, Ed Malina, Timothy Miller, Jon Moore (Green Mountain Transit), Greg Morgan, Nate O’Connor, Lynn Powers, David Sheeran, Ken Signorello, Gabrielle Smith, Harlan Smith, Margaret Smith, Dennis Thibeault, Ann Wadsworth, Doug Wilson, Irene Wrenner, Lorraine Zaloom, Sharon Zukowski.

1. CALL TO ORDER

Andy Watts called the meeting of the Town of Essex Selectboard to order at 6:30 PM.

2. AGENDA ADDITIONS/CHANGES

None at this time.

3. AGENDA APPROVAL

There was no approval needed, as the agenda was not modified.

4. PUBLIC TO BE HEARD

a. Comments from Public on Items Not on Agenda

Lorraine Zaloom asked whether cannabis will be warned and voted on in March. Mr. Watts said there is a petition that’s been signed that will compel the Selectboard to put it onto the ballot and that it is anticipated to be warned on January 24.

Rachael Lizotte said that the inability of this board to take a position on separation has put the Town in danger of higher taxes.

Betsy Dunn asked about informational sessions regarding the retail cannabis question, so that voters can make an educated decision about it. Mr. Duggan said that there is information on the website which is updated as more information becomes available. He said that there is a committee that is looking into the cannabis issue.

47
48 Irene Wrenner spoke about the severance that is going to be paid to the unified manager, saying
49 that it seems excessive. She said the Unified Manager had adequate notice about when they
50 would be leaving, and said they should not accept the severance.

51
52 Annie Cooper said that if money is due to someone they should accept it graciously and the
53 community should support it. She also spoke about the Selectboard's formal positioning on
54 separation.

55
56 **5. PUBLIC HEARING**

57 a. Second public hearing on the proposed 2022-2023 municipal budget for the Town of Essex

58
59 **DAWN HILL-FLEURY made a motion, seconded by TRACEY DELPHIA, to open the public**
60 **hearing. The motion passed 5-0.**

61
62 Ms. Bushey noted that this is a hearing on the proposed Fiscal Year 2023 general fund budget
63 for the Town. She outlined the goals that were used to shape the budget for the year. She noted
64 several budget highlights, including a fund balance of \$431,000 used to offset the tax rate, costs
65 in finance department, and vehicle costs in the police department; a variety of proposed staffing
66 changes; and increased County/Regional Health & Human Services commitment of
67 approximately \$229,000. She noted that the budget will entail a 4.7% increase in the general
68 fund, a 5.1% increase on the tax levy, and that the tax rate would increase by 4% (or \$60 annually
69 on a Town property with an assessed value of \$280,000). She explained why the tax rate
70 increase is different than the budget increase.

71
72 John Moore of Green Mountain Transit spoke about the reasons for the increase in the GMT
73 program costs for Essex, which are based on increased Essex ridership in the last fiscal year as
74 well as increased operating costs and costs related to Covid (and resulting decrease in overall
75 ridership). Ms. Delphia asked whether the decrease in ridership could be addressed through
76 ARPA funding. Mr. Moore replied that yes, GMT received some direct Covid relief funds that
77 they have spent, but there are not federal funds available for offsetting cost increases. Ms. Cook
78 asked whether the increase in Essex ridership is the result of decreased ridership elsewhere,
79 and Mr. Moore replied in the affirmative.

80
81 Mr. Duggan addressed questions about the health officer and deputy health officer positions and
82 duties.

83
84 Betsy Dunn asked for an explanation of the per diem Fire Department positions and Mr. Teich
85 clarified that those are on-call positions, and the hours will be shared by the roster of volunteer
86 workers at the Department.

87
88 Max Levy asked about the fund balance and whether the Town considered putting a portion of
89 that towards future designated capital expenses. Mr. Watts replied that a portion had already
90 been moved over to the capital budget and that there was a fair amount of fund balance available
91 due to Covid relief funding from state and federal sources. He also added that some of the fund

92 balance is set aside for smoothing the potential transition to separation with the Village and any
93 tax impacts.

94
95 Harlan Smith asked about some of the budget line items related to the Fire Department, and
96 Chief Cole spoke about the Fire Department's current needs and current major issues.

97
98 Lorraine Zaloom asked about deputy health officer position and how the current staff in that role
99 balances those responsibilities with their duties as the Zoning Administrator. Mr. Duggan replied
100 that they are two separate positions fulfilled by the same person, one of which is salaried (ZA),
101 and the other of which is more of an on-call commitment.

102
103 **DAWN HILL-FLEURY made a motion, seconded by SUE COOK, to close the public**
104 **hearing. The motion passed 5-0.**

105
106 **6. BUSINESS ITEMS**

107 a. **Consider adoption of the fiscal year 2022-2023 municipal budget**
108 Ms. Delphia asked whether impact fees were sufficient or if they should be increased. Mr.
109 Duggan replied that the only major impact fees currently collected are for recreation, and
110 public works has some smaller impact fees they collect. He spoke about the considerations
111 that need to be taken when attempting to create and assess new impact fees. He said the
112 Town is exploring ways to do that.

113
114 **SUE COOK made a motion, seconded by TRACEY DELPHIA, that the Town adopt the**
115 **proposed Fiscal Year 2023 general fund budget in the amount of \$16,675,241. The**
116 **motion passed 5-0.**

117
118 b. ***Interview and potential appointment: Erin De Vries, Conservation & Trails Committee**
119 Ms. De Vries spoke about her experience and background as a watershed ecologist and that
120 she has been working in conservation and stewardship management.

121
122 Ms. Cook asked what ideas the applicant has for enhancing trails and recreational areas. Ms.
123 De Vries said that one idea is to use trails at Sand Hill Park to highlight some of its interesting
124 features. Mr. Murray asked what is prompting her to volunteerism, and Ms. De Vries spoke about
125 past volunteering experiences. Ms. Hill-Fleury asked if the applicant has grant-writing
126 experience, and Ms. De Vries replied in the affirmative. Mr. Watts asked how she might
127 contribute to conservation, and Ms. De Vries replied that she has a background in conservation.

128
129 c. ***Interview and potential appointment: Stephen Dowd, Conservation & Trails**
130 **Committee**

131 Mr. Dowd spoke about his efforts to clean up Indian Brook Reservoir and that he is a long-time
132 Essex resident. He said he is the type of person that collaborates to get things done and achieve
133 results.

134
135 Ms. Hill-Fleury asked if the applicant has grant-writing experience, and he replied that he does
136 not, though he is a skilled writer. Ms. Cook asked about his ideas for top priorities for the

137 Conservation & Trails Committee, and the applicant replied that constant maintenance of Indian
138 Brook Reservoir is extremely important.

139
140 **d. * Interview and potential appointment: Ken Signorello, Conservation & Trails**
141 **Committee**

142 Mr. Signorello spoke about his education and background in forest management. He said one
143 of his big concerns is the increase in invasive species in Essex's forests. He spoke about the
144 mission statement of the Conservation & Trails Committee and noted its broad scope and
145 expressed concern about the lack of resources needed to accomplish goals in this broad scope.

146
147 Ms. Hill-Fleury asked if the applicant has experience in grant-writing. He spoke about his past
148 experience in application-writing. Ms. Cook asked for the applicant's thoughts about priorities on
149 rural projects. Mr. Signorello spoke about the areas that need to be identified for further action,
150 particularly around invasive species.

151
152 **e. Discussion about proposed fiscal year 2023 capital budget and five-year plan**

153 Mr. Lutz said that at the previous meeting, staff described the capital plan and how it is
154 organized. He said he would like to use this opportunity to answer questions related to the plan.

155
156 Ms. Hill-Fleury asked why Mr. Lutz is recommending investing in the water tower at Fort Ethan
157 Allen. Mr. Lutz replied that the water tower is an important historical feature for Essex. He noted
158 that fund-raising drives have fallen short consistently, and that the funding for fixing it needs to
159 be made available. Mr. Duggan agreed. Ms. Cook asked what the funding would go toward,
160 specifically. Mr. Lutz replied that it would go toward repairing some of the slating in the cupola,
161 the wood trim, and fixing the window frames.

162
163 Ms. Delphia asked about Indian Brook dam repairs, noting a \$0 line item in the capital plan
164 budget for it. Mr. Lutz replied that the Town is waiting for a needs assessment to be conducted
165 on the dam by the Dam Safety Department. He added that work on the dam does not currently
166 have defined costs or features, so dollar amounts were not included in the budget.

167
168 Mr. Watts asked about records preservation for 2 Lincoln Hall and asked for more specifics on
169 those activities. Mr. Lutz said that staff will follow up with more information at the Selectboard's
170 next meeting. Mr. Watts asked about the \$25,000 expenditure for a Fire Department expansion
171 study. Mr. Duggan replied that those funds would be used to gauge what is needed in a future
172 location for the Fire Station.

173
174 Ms. Hill-Fleury asked if there are health concerns about the heating/ventilation at the Police
175 Station. Mr. Lutz replied that there are no current health concerns but that some of the
176 infrastructure needs to be repaired to prevent future health concerns.

177
178 Margaret Smith asked if others recall an event that took place years ago for the water tower and
179 included a display of photos. She said that display should become part of Town archives. Betsy
180 Dunn suggested accommodations for handicapped to get in and out of the water at the dam.
181 Lorraine Zaloom and Ken Signorello spoke about the water tower. David Sheeran asked if there
182 is a timeline of when the Fire Station could potentially be relocated, expressing concern at the

183 lack of available land in Essex. He also asked what the \$25,000 funding is for related to this. Mr.
184 Duggan replied that the funding in the FY23 capital plan budget will go toward a needs
185 assessment for the Fire Station. Irene Wrenner noted that a plaque had already been assigned
186 in 2006 and that there is a museum at the base of the water tower.

187
188 **f. Consider action to warn public hearing on fiscal year 2023 capital budget and five-year**
189 **plan**

190
191 **SUE COOK made a motion, seconded by DAWN HILL-FLEURY, to authorize staff to warn**
192 **a public hearing for January 18, 2022 for the Fiscal Year 2023 capital budget and five-year**
193 **plan. The motion passed 5-0.**

194
195 **g. Discussion about estimated budgetary and property tax impacts of Village of Essex**
196 **Junction separation from Town of Essex**

197 Mr. Duggan said staff wanted to present financial impacts of separation to the Selectboard to
198 help plan for the future and think about local option tax, alternative revenue sources, and desired
199 service levels. He said that Ms. Macy reviewed each department and made educated estimates
200 of what will change if the Village becomes independent and the Town loses that tax base. He
201 said the overall impact of separation for the average home in Essex (\$280,000 value) would be
202 a 19-22% tax increase, or roughly a \$300-340 increase in an average homeowner's tax bill. He
203 spoke about different financial levers that could be used to increase revenue, including tax
204 increases and impact fees.

205
206 Ms. Cook asked whether there are service fees that are within the Town of Essex that could be
207 leveraged from other municipalities and whether services could be shared with surrounding
208 municipalities. She requested that staff look into this.

209
210 Ms. Hill-Fleury asked about the local option tax and how much it would generate. Mr. Duggan
211 replied that the State produced a combined estimate for the Town and Village, and is around
212 \$1.5 million and is based on point of sale and population. Ms. Delphia asked whether this figure
213 is prior to or after the State's cut of that tax, and Mr. Duggan said he would get confirmation but
214 thinks it represents the figure that would flow to the Town after the State takes its share.

215
216 Mr. Murray asked if staff have started looking at departments that are scaled for 20,000 versus
217 10,000 residents and identifying departments that could see reductions. Mr. Duggan replied that
218 current departments are staffed and sized for a Town of 10,000 people.

219
220 Mr. Watts noted that the tax levy would decrease by around \$5,000,000, though individuals'
221 taxes would increase. He also noted that the \$0.02 capital tax will increase more than is being
222 projected when a reassessment occurs for the Town. Mr. Watts asked staff to look into how
223 much fund balance would be available in subsequent fiscal years to help smooth out the tax
224 increase.

225
226 Ms. Cook noted that surrounding municipality tax rates are quite varied, and helps put Essex's
227 proposed rates into perspective. Mr. Duggan said the rates are influenced by a number of
228 factors.

229
230 Irene Wrenner noted that estimates provided last year on the impacts of merger versus the
231 impacts of separation indicate a roughly \$25 per year average savings in taxes if the Town and
232 Village separate rather than merge. Megan Humphries suggested updating the survey on local
233 option taxes, given the current tax estimates that would occur as the result of separation. Nate
234 O'Connor spoke about food insecurity and urged residents to support local food shelves. Sharon
235 Zukowski disagreed with the assumption that costs can be reduced by enlarging the grand list,
236 saying that services to new housing and businesses always result in a net loss. Patty Davis
237 suggested the Town should look to similarly-sized towns or municipalities that separated to see
238 how they handled impact to taxes.

239
240 **h. Consider approval of statement of position in regard to Village of Essex Junction**
241 **separation from Town of Essex**

242 Mr. Duggan said there was interest in having talking points around separation, should the Town
243 be asked to testify before the legislature on the topic. The Selectboard reviewed and discussed
244 the draft talking points that were presented as well as potential edits to content. Mr. Murray said
245 that the Selectboard should not take a formal position on separation and should remain neutral.
246 Mr. Watts said the intent is to be prepared to speak to the legislature. Ms. Delphia said this
247 exercise would ensure consistency in messaging, should Selectboard members need to testify.
248 Ms. Cook agreed.

249
250 Lorraine Zaloom, Annie Cooper, and Harlan Smith spoke about the contents of the talking points
251 document. Andrew Brown asked to discuss the contents with Mr. Watts at some point. Patty
252 Davis suggested sticking to the facts during any testimony, and Irene Wrenner said that laying
253 out the facts about Essex for the legislature will be important.

254
255 **i. Discussion about possibility of putting local option tax on Town Meeting ballot**

256 Mr. Duggan said if the Selectboard wants to put this on the ballot for Town Meeting Day, they
257 would need to do so by January 24th. He noted that this is one of the few mechanisms the Town
258 has to raise additional revenue. He noted that it would likely generate about \$1.5 million town-
259 wide through retail sales, meals and alcohol, and a very small portion from rooms. He said there
260 was a survey fielded in December to gauge community support for a local option taxes and that
261 responses were mixed. Ms. Delphia suggested looking at how much in sales would have to be
262 generated from people living outside of the Town to make it worthwhile. Ms. Hill-Fleury said that
263 now is not the right time to vote on local option taxes, and suggested waiting until after separation
264 occurs. Ms. Delphia agreed.

265
266 Ken Signorello suggested that the Town would need to collect at least \$100 per capita in local
267 option tax to ensure that it's not just Town residents who are paying it.

268
269 **DAWN HILL-FLEURY made a motion, seconded by TRACEY DELPHIA, to extend the**
270 **meeting until 11:30 PM. The motion failed for lack of a unanimous vote (4-1, Patrick**
271 **Murray voting nay).**

272
273 Sharon Zukowski said there needs to be more education prior to voting on a local option tax and
274 said she does not support having one. Andrew Brown noted that a municipality has the ability to

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275 include/exclude certain services from its local option tax. John Demeritt spoke against a local
276 option tax at this time.

277
278 Mr. Duggan will provide additional information from the State at a future Selectboard meeting
279 and the Selectboard will revisit this topic at some other point in the future.

280
281 j. ****Discussion and potential action on tentative agreements about shared services**
282 **between Town of Essex and Independent City of Essex Junction**
283 No discussion at this time.

- 284
285 **7. CONSENT ITEMS**
286 a. Consider approving application for Caring for Canopies Grant from the Vermont Urban &
287 Community Forestry Program
288 b. Consider approval to mail 2022 Town Meeting ballots to all active voters
289 c. Consider request from Essex Westford School District to mail ballots to all active, registered
290 voters
291 d. Check Warrant: #17936—12/30/2021

292
293 **DAWN HILL-FLEURY made a motion, seconded by SUE COOK, to approve the consent**
294 **agenda. The motion passed 5-0.**

- 295
296 **8. READING FILE**
297 a. Board member comments: Ms. Hill-Fleury thanked Troy Austin for what he has done for the
298 community, both in terms of festive lights and the toy drive around the holidays. Mr. Watts
299 thanked the Public Works departments for keeping the roads safe during adverse weather.
300 b. Memo from Susan McNamara-Hill re: 2022 Candidate Information
301 c. Email and memorandum from Miro Weinberger re: Burlington Housing Announcement Today
302 and Mayor Miro Weinberger's 2021 Action Plan to Fulfill the Promise of Housing as a Human
303 Right in Burlington
304 d. Upcoming meeting schedule

- 305
306 **9. EXECUTIVE SESSION**
307 a. ***An executive session is anticipated to discuss the appointment of public officials**
308 b. **** An executive session may be needed to discuss the negotiation of contracts and**
309 **agreements between the Town of Essex and Village/City of Essex Junction.**

310
311 **10. ADJOURN**
312
313 **DAWN HILL-FLEURY made a motion, seconded by SUE COOK, to adjourn the meeting.**
314 **The motion passed 5-0 at 11:00 PM.**

315
316 Respectfully Submitted,
317 Amy Coonradt, Recording Secretary

318
319 Approved this _____ day of _____, 2022
320 **(see minutes of this day for corrections, if any)**