

**TOWN OF ESSEX
INFORMATIONAL MEETING FOR
ANNUAL TOWN MEETING
MONDAY, FEBRUARY 28, 2022**

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

STAFF PRESENT: Courtney Bushey, Finance Director; Charles Cole, Fire Chief; Caitlin Corless, Essex Free Library Director; Greg Duggan, Town Manager; Tammy Getchell, Assistant to the Manager; Ron Hoague, Police Chief; Sharon Kelley, Zoning Administrator; Marguerite Ladd, Deputy Manager; Karen Lemnah, Assessor; Dennis Lutz, Public Works Director; Aaron Martin, Director of Public Works Operations/Town Engineer; Susan McNamara-Hill, Clerk; Rob Paluba, IT Director; Ally Vile, Parks & Recreation Director

PUBLIC SPEAKERS: Patricia Crocker, Patty Davis, Roger Drury, Zachery Forcier, Adam Goodroe, Ron Lawrence, Meredith Mann, Hubert Norton, Gillian Smith, Andy Suntup, Rep. Tanya Vyhovsky, Sharon Zukowski

OTHERS PRESENT: Chris Bird, Rep. Alyssa Black, Alex Caron, Nicole Clayton, Heidi Clark, Kevin Collins, Annie Cooper, Annie Davis, Erin Dickinson, Betsy Dunn, Rep. Rey Garofano, Maureen Gillard, Gina Halpin Barrett, Maggie Hjort, Maureen Hoague, David Irwin, Adam Kavanaugh, Sam Kwon, Jacob Law, Ethan Lawrence, Rachael Lizotte, Resa Mehren, Linda Myers, Colleen Nesto, Kristin Romick, Michael Ross, Brian Shelden, Ken Signorello, Margaret Smith, Liz Subin, Linda Suntup, Kristina Sweet, Laura Taylor, Carmelle Terborgh, Amber Thibeault, Michael Thorne, Melanie Tupaj, Jessica Quinn, Janet Watts, Kevin Wrenner, Irene Wrenner, Bill, Bob, Carl, Dawg, Deming, Greg, Juan, HolmT, Patrick, Travis

MODERATOR: Steve Eustis

Mr. Eustis introduced himself as Town Moderator at 7:30 PM and introduced Selectboard Chair Watts. Mr. Watts introduced the other members of the Selectboard and recognized staff, the Essex Junction Board of Trustees, and state representatives present. Ms. Delphia read "An Invitation to Civility." Mr. Eustis explained how the informational meeting would run.

Mr. Eustis read Article I:

ARTICLE I. Shall the Town adopt a budget for the fiscal year July 1, 2022 to June 30, 2023 as recommended by the Selectboard in the amount of \$16,675,241?

Mr. Watts shared the Selectboard budget goals, which included funding equity initiatives and mental health support, funding to address climate change, minimizing the financial impact of separation, and addressing the impact of separation by working towards tax equity. He said that a fund balance of \$431,000 will be used to offset the tax rate and highlighted several staffing changes. Mr. Watts detailed currently consolidated services, and what is being done to disentangle each one, if applicable. He said that the Town's contribution to Essex Rescue has increased, and that the Fire Department will have an additional eighty hours of paid fire support. The total increase in the budget is \$.75 million, which

50 would result in an average estimated tax increase of 4%, or \$59.36. The largest increases are
51 appropriations (Essex Rescue, Green Mountain Transit, etc.), followed by personnel increases, and
52 Village Highway & Stormwater. The largest expenditures are Police, Public Works, and General
53 Government.

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55 Mr. Eustis opened public discussion of the budgets. Mr. Suntup asked if the Town was receiving
56 COVID relief funds, and if so, what they were used for. He expressed concern with the rapid rise in
57 taxes. Mr. Watts said that much of the \$431,000 in fund balance is a result of COVID funds. Ms.
58 Zukowski expressed concern that an increase in the grand list will result in a larger increase in the
59 services needed for the increased population. Mr. Watts said that some discussions have been had
60 regarding impact fees to mitigate this. Mr. Forcier commended the Selectboard for keeping the budget
61 low, especially considering high inflation.

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63 Mr. Eustis ended the public discussion on Article I at 8:03 PM.

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65 Mr. Eustis read Article II:

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67 *ARTICLE II. Shall the Town of Essex authorize cannabis retailers and retail portions of integrated*
68 *licensee establishments in town pursuant to 7 V.S.A. § 863?*

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70 Mr. Eustis opened public discussion about cannabis retailers and retail portions of integrated licensee
71 establishments in town.

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73 Mr. Forcier asked if there would be any additional regulatory mechanisms to determine cannabis levels
74 in potentially impaired people and asked if restaurants would be allowed to serve cannabis menu items.
75 Mr. Watts said that impairment would be determined by the police department, and that no on-premises
76 consumption would be allowed. Rep. Vyhovsky said that the Cannabis Control Board was still
77 considering on-premises consumption, but that it will not be permitted at this time. She said that there is
78 currently not a reliable method for testing cannabis intoxication.

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80 Ms. Crocker expressed concern that legal cannabis could increase its availability to youth and asked if
81 any additional educational initiatives would be funded. Rep. Vyhovsky said that funds will be set aside
82 for education and prevention. Ms. Davis asked what the legal age for purchase would be, Mr. Watts said
83 21.

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85 Mr. Drury said that marijuana is still illegal according to federal law and asked if there would be any
86 protections available against potential federal enforcement. He questioned how the Town could justify
87 authorizing the sale of something that is federally illegal. Rep. Vyhovsky said that the federal
88 government will have precedent, but typically does not get involved in these cases. Ms. Mann said that,
89 as a cannabis business owner, that the responsibility of legality is something that the individual business
90 will take on. She said that IDs will be checked at the door of all establishments. Mr. Goodroe asked if
91 there was any financial liability on the part of the Town, given that marijuana is federally illegal. Mr.
92 Watts said no.

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94 Mr. Norton asked for clarification as to what the “retail portion of an integrated licensee” was. Mr.
95 Watts said that an integrated license involves growing, packaging, and retail. The Town is only able to
96 regulate the retail portion of the license. Mr. Norton asked how growing cannabis will be regulated by
97 the Planning Commission. Mr. Duggan said that the Planning Commission has begun this discussion,
98 and that cannabis operations must be a certain distance from schools.

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100 Ms. Crocker asked if the Town has consulted an attorney regarding liabilities, and if the Town's
101 insurance rates would be increased should retail cannabis be permitted. Mr. Watts said he felt that it was
102 in a similar category as alcohol sales, where retailers would not have any liability or control over how
103 cannabis is consumed. Mr. Duggan said that the Towns' insurer has not raised this as a concern. Mr.
104 Lawrence asked if the Police Chief has weighed in on this issue, Mr. Hoague said that he had concerns
105 about cannabis use and impairment, however none of these were specific to retail sales in Essex.

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107 Mr. Eustis ended discussion on Article II at 8:31 PM.

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109 Mr. Eustis read and announcement about Article III:

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111 *ARTICLE III: Election of the following: Moderator, one vacancy (1-year term); Selectboard, three*
112 *vacancies (two 3-year term and one 1-year term); Champlain Water District Commissioner, one*
113 *vacancy (3-year term)*

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115 Mr. Eustis said that ballots have been mailed out, and that in-person voting is available March 1st from 7
116 AM - 7 PM.

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118 Mr. Eustis opened the Public to Be Heard portion of the meeting and called for any other public
119 comments on issues not on the agenda.

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121 Ms. Hill-Fleury thanked Mr. Murray and Ms. Cook for their service to the Town, as tonight is their last
122 Selectboard meeting. Mr. Cole and Ms. Davis thanked Mr. Lutz for his decades of service to the Town
123 of Essex.

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125 Mr. Eustis made a motion to adjourn the meeting at 8:36 PM.

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128 Respectfully Submitted,

129 Darby Mayville

130 Recording Secretary

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