

TOWN OF ESSEX
SELECTBOARD MEETING MINUTES
Monday, January 4, 2021

SELECTBOARD: Elaine Haney, Chair; Patrick Murray, Vice Chair; Vince Franco; Dawn Hill-Fleury; Andy Watts.

ADMINISTRATION and STAFF: Evan Teich, Unified Manager; Courtney Bushey, Assistant Finance Director; Charles Cole, Fire Chief; Caitlin Corless, Essex Free Library Director; Jill Evans, Community Justice Center Director; Ron Hoague, Police Chief; Karen Lemnah, Assessor; Dennis Lutz, Public Works Director; Sarah Macy, Finance Director/Assistant Manager; Owiso Makuku, Interim Community Development Director; Susan McNamara-Hill, Clerk; Rob Paluba, IT Director; Ally Vile, Parks and Rec Director; Tom Yandow, Buildings Manager; .

OTHERS PRESENT: Annie Cooper, Patty Davis, Tracy Delphia; Betsy Dunn, Ken Signorello; Margaret Smith; Irene Wrenner.

1. CALL TO ORDER

Elaine Haney called the meeting of the Town of Essex Selectboard to order at 8:02 AM.

2. AGENDA ADDITIONS/ CHANGES

There were no additions or changes to the agenda.

3. AGENDA APPROVAL

With no changes to the agenda, no vote for approval was needed.

4. PUBLIC TO BE HEARD

Those from the public in attendance had no comments at this time.

5. BUSINESS ITEMS

a. FY2022 Budget Work Session

Ms. Haney shared a brief overview of the day and stated that there would be time for public comment at the end of each departmental section.

8:04 AM, Overview, Revenues, Sarah Macy, Finance Director/Assistant Manager

Ms. Macy noted that the proposed Fiscal Year (FY) 2022 Town General Fund budget is \$16,094,707, which represents a 5% or \$759,572 increase over the FY2021 approved budget of \$15,332,135. The following are the four new initiatives in this budget driving the bottom line increase:

- Inclusion of the Village Rolling Stock transfer in the Highway budget (\$140,100). This change increases the bottom line but because it will be coupled with eliminating the highway tax it has a very small impact on the tax rate.
- New full-time position, Assistant Manager, netted against an existing part-time position (\$77,706). This was approved in last year's budget.
- Funding for additional racial equity work and stipends for all volunteer board and committee members (\$46,000).
- Proposed part-time Economic Development position (\$15,450).

51 Adjusting for these new initiatives, the increase over the prior year would be 3.15% which is more
52 in line with other years. Ms. Macy noted that this year the audit showed an excess fund balance.
53 This was caused by increased vacancies in the Police Department and the spring shut-down. As
54 a result, Ms. Macy suggests assigning \$600,000 of this surplus fund balance to offset the tax rate,
55 \$300,000 of which would be used in the FY2022 budget. Ms. Haney asked what the impact of
56 COVID has been on revenue. Ms. Macy said that the grace period for taxes was well-received
57 and thus, has not been a big impact on revenue.

58
59 8:30 am, Essex Free Library, Caitlin Corless, Library Director
60 Ms. Corless noted that the library budget is up 10.7% or \$41,921, and the main driver of this is
61 changing insurance benefit levels for employees. She stated that the Library's main goal is to
62 provide excellent services to residents. The use of e-books is up by 30%, and curbside service
63 has been well-received. She also said that the Library plans to purchase chrome books that
64 patrons can check out. Ms. Haney asked how library staff was doing during COVID, and Ms.
65 Corless said that everyone has pitched in to help one another and that morale was good.

66
67 8:52 am, Clerk, Susan McNamara-Hill
68 Ms. McNamara-Hill said that the only potential increase to the budget would be costs for mailing
69 ballots. She said that Ms. Hill-Fleury was in the office every day to assist with the presidential
70 election, and that she is very thankful for her help. Mr. Watts noted that, should the Town decide
71 to hold a vote on cannabis retail sales, money should be allotted for an additional election. The
72 cost of an additional election is about \$20,000. Mr. Teich noted that funding for this could come
73 from the Contingency Fund. Ms. Haney noted that the Town Clerk's office will soon be doing
74 passports.

75
76 9:07 am, Public Works, Dennis Lutz, Public Works Director
77 Mr. Lutz discussed the Public Works budget in four sections: Administration, Highways,
78 Stormwater, and Buildings. The total budgetary increase is 1.7%, or \$60,000. Mr. Lutz registered
79 his concern that having two low budget years in a row can cause problems because projects are
80 pushed out. He noted that he has one vacant position in the Highway Department that he does
81 not plan to fill right now, as well as one part-time position. He is waiting on the results of the
82 merger vote to see how to move forward with filling these. Mr. Teich noted that this is one of the
83 hidden costs of not merging. Mr. Watts asked about the costs of increasing sidewalk plowing. Mr.
84 Lutz said that many sidewalks, especially in the west end of the Town, are difficult to plow
85 because of their narrow size. Mr. Teich noted that Mr. Yandow, Building Superintendent, has
86 been able to keep building costs down by effectively managing contractors for building repair.

87
88 At 9:55 AM, Ms. Haney called a meeting break and the Selectboard reconvened at 10:05 am.
89 The board had a discussion regarding the use of electric vehicles. Mr. Lutz stated that they are
90 not practical for plows, however, could be used for administrative vehicles. Mr. Teich said that the
91 Community Development Department and Assessor both have hybrid vehicles. He also said that
92 solar could be an option for some of the Town's buildings. Mr. Lutz noted that the department has
93 been getting grants for construction, however he is concerned that the budget may not have
94 enough for summer construction this year. Ms. Haney asked about repair needs at the Essex
95 Free Library. Mr. Lutz said that this is a priority, especially the brickwork.

96
97 In public comment, Ms. Dunn asked if there has been an independent assessment of Village
98 buildings that may come under the umbrella of the Town after the merger. Mr. Teich noted that
99 the Buildings Manager is shared between the two communities and would keep the same
100 information for both communities. Ms. Dunn also asked if marijuana retail sales could be warned

101 as a part of the merger vote. Ms. Haney said that the board wanted to give the public the
102 opportunity to weigh in prior to a vote. Ms. Davis registered her satisfaction with the quality of the
103 plowing in the Town outside the Village and suggested paying the plow drivers more money so
104 that they can be retained. Ms. Wrenner said that Public Works should no longer be in limbo, as
105 these departments were consolidated four or five years ago. She noted her concerns that the
106 solar panels on the roof of the Police Station were ineffective, and her hope that there are
107 sufficient opportunities for public engagement on the issue of retail cannabis sales.
108

109 10:40 am, Finance Department, Sarah Macy Finance Director

110 Ms. Macy stated that there are five full-time Finance Department employees, and one who is part-
111 time. A large amount of staff time is being taken up on phone calls, especially regarding water
112 bills. Ms. Haney asked if the department would need more staffing in the future, and Ms. Macy
113 said that this is being considered, especially as one staff member nears retirement. Mr. Teich
114 said that the Town hopes to go to bi-weekly payroll to ease pressure on staff.
115

116 10:58 AM, Police Department, Ron Hoague, Police Chief

117 Mr. Hoague stated that the department was recently restructured so that Sergeants are now in
118 charge of shifts and eliminated the Captain position. This has increased shift supervision. The
119 FY2022 budget allotted more money for travel, in hopes that the department would be able to do
120 more out-of-state recruitment. The department is also working to increase capacity on racial
121 justice issues and allocated more money for translation services. Mr. Teich asked how call
122 volumes have been affected by COVID. Mr. Hoague said that domestic violence, thefts
123 (especially bicycle thefts), and mental health crises calls have all increased. The Howard Center
124 has staff available to assist with mental health issues. Ms. Haney asked if de-escalation training
125 was offered. Mr. Hoague stated that this training has been taking place for a few years and the
126 department has been participating in equity discussions. It can be difficult to schedule trainings
127 because of the need for continuous staffing. Ms. Haney said that she wanted the community to
128 know that these are areas that the Selectboard wants to invest more time and money into. Good
129 policing costs more but it is worth it.
130

131 11:33 pm, Community Justice Center (CJC), Jill Evans, Director

132 Ms. Macy began the conversation by noting that the CJC is a Special Revenue Fund, and that
133 much of this budget is grant-funded and out of the control of the Selectboard. Ms. Evans noted
134 that the CJC has taken on additional roles, namely taking over the reentry program from Winooski
135 and continued racial equity work. This has resulted in the need to convert one part-time employee
136 to full-time and the hiring of a part-time temporary employee. Mr. Hoague noted that many small
137 crimes are now being routed to the CJC. The CJC is funded by the Department of Corrections, as
138 well as the towns of Essex and Colchester. It is an autonomous part of the Essex Police
139 Department. While their work is growing, their funds are not, and Ms. Evans plans to approach
140 other Chittenden County communities for contributions.
141

142 In public comments, Ms. Smith offered the suggestion that Essex offer a bicycle registration
143 program to cut down on thefts. Mr. Hoague said that this had been done in the past and was
144 unsuccessful. Ms. Dunn suggested that the Essex Police look at the role of race in traffic stops on
145 a monthly basis. She also suggested that part-time officers be used to staff the department when
146 trainings were occurring.
147

148 Ms. Haney called a break for lunch at 12:03 pm.
149

150 12:32 pm, Assessing, Karen Lemnah, Assessor

151 Ms. Lemnah noted that the department is working on using technology to improve departmental
152 efficiencies. She said that many communities have property assessment information available
153 online for resident convenience.
154

155 In public comment, Ms. Davis asked if the high prices homes in Essex are currently selling for will
156 impact reappraisal. Ms. Lemnah said that reappraisal is based on a three-year period, and that
157 the department works to exclude homes that are selling for above or under fair market value in
158 their calculations.
159

160 12:49 pm, Debt, Sarah Macy, Finance Director

161 Ms. Macy noted that the Town has minimal debt: one bond and one lease in the General Fund.
162 Mr. Franco asked if it would be possible to pre-pay these debts with the fund balance. Ms. Macy
163 stated that this is not possible.
164

165 12:53pm, Community Development & Economic Development, Owiso Makuku, Interim
166 Community Development Director

167 Ms. Makuku noted that the training budget has been increased this year. She said that she is
168 working to build the department's focus on Economic Development, as well as restarting zoning
169 initiatives that had been put on hold. It would also be helpful to have a budget for events in the
170 future. Ms. Hill-Fleury asked for more details about the proposed part-time Economic
171 Development position in the budget. Ms. Makuku said that Economic Development had been
172 neglected by the department for a long time. When COVID hit, the department had a difficult
173 connecting with local businesses because they did not even know what businesses were in the
174 community. Mr. Watts noted that the new Assistant Manager position has Economic
175 Development in their job description and asked how the two would work together. Mr. Teich said
176 that this position had been cut in the last budget cycle and wanted to ensure that this
177 responsibility would be carried out should this happen again this year. Mr. Murray asked if Ms.
178 Makuku would become the permanent Community Development Director soon. Ms. Makuku said
179 that her understanding was that this would be dependent on the results of the merger. Ms. Haney
180 asked about the work of the new Affordable Housing Committee. Ms. Makuku said that right now
181 the committee is working on learning about the current situation in Essex before they set any
182 recommendations. Mr. Teich said that Community Development has been working on the racial
183 equity work in Essex.
184

185 In Public Comments, Annie Cooper said that she believes that the part-time Economic
186 Development position is very needed and will help local businesses thrive. Ms. Davis suggested
187 looking back at the work done as a part of the EDC Next initiative when doing economic
188 development work. Ms. Wrenner noted that business information is listed in the Vermont
189 Business Magazine and should be easily accessible to staff.
190

191 1:45 pm, IT, Rob Paluba, IT Director

192 Mr. Paluba stated that the 5% increase in the budget will be spent on a more consistent platform
193 for Microsoft Office products, server replacement, and increased education on cyber security. He
194 said that remote work has required more software licensing, the purchase of more laptops, and a
195 higher number of users on VPN. Mr. Watts asked why there was \$6,000 in the budget for Village
196 professional services. Mr. Paluba said that would be used to bring in a vendor if help was needed
197 for a specific project. Mr. Teich said that it would also be used to help with connectivity between
198 buildings.
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200 Ms. Haney called for a break at 2:03 pm.

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2:19 pm, Recreation, Ally Vile, Parks & Recreation Director
Ms. Vile noted that the budget was separated into four parts: administration, pool, parks, and senior activities. Administration covers three of the full-time employees, as well as recreation software. The Communications position that is currently unfilled has been kept in the budget as it planned to be advertised. The pool is now being heated, which will allow it to be used for at least two more months. This will bring in more money for rentals. The pool is an Enterprise Fund, which means that the funds it earns pay for upkeep. Rental costs were low this year but it is hoped that it will come back in 2021. Ms. Haney asked what the impact of COVID has been on the use of Indian Brook, and Ms. Vile said that it has been very popular. Ms. Vile noted that the department just leased a new senior van. The Selectboard noted a desire to have the entire Parks & Recreation budget listed together in the future, rather than in four sections. Ms. Haney noted that it would be helpful to see all of the Enterprise Fund information in one place as well.

In public comment, Ms. Davis noted the value of the Recreation Department to the community.

2:54 pm, Administration, Sarah Macy, Finance Director
Ms. Macy stated that the primary increase for this budget is the previously approved hiring of a new Assistant Manager. Mr. Teich noted that another driver of this increase is the stipends that are proposed to be offered for board positions. This will help to increase the diversity in those who serve on committees. Mr. Watts asked why there was an increase in professional services. Mr. Teich said that this is for translations and racial equity work, including training for staff. Mr. Watts noted his concern with the cost of the HRIS software and said that he did not realize that this would be an ongoing cost. Mr. Teich said that this is incredibly helpful for hiring and HR and noted that there is a surplus due to vacancies.

Mr. Murray stated that, if other committees are getting stipends, the Selectboard should consider increasing theirs as well. He stated that serving on the Selectboard is a large commitment for not a lot of money, and that it is inaccessible to many as a result. Ms. Hill-Fleury said that she was not in support of this, as she was a single mother who has volunteered for the past 45 years and has never asked for payment. Mr. Franco said that he was in support of this, provided members could opt out of receiving stipends. Ms. Haney said that this is an important part of making it more accessible to serve the community. She noted that the last few elections have had several people running unopposed. Mr. Watts said that this increase would cause the need to cut other parts of the budget, something that he was unwilling to do. He said that Selectboard pay was increased a few years ago and that this did not result in a greater number of candidates. The board also discussed improving the vetting process if board members are to be paid. Mr. Watts asked about the rising cost of the annual report. Mr. Teich noted that many communities are not printing the annual report to cut down on costs. Mr. Watts asked about equal funding for cemeteries in Town outside the Village and the Village. Ms. Macy said that they were roughly equal, however, there were differences in the number of times each are paid and our obligations for each.

In public comment, Ms. Davis said that the Selectboard should not be asking for a raise until merger is decided. Mr. Signorello said that there were ten applicants for a recent open seat, but only two who ran in a recent election. The problem is campaigning, not serving. Ms. Wrenner said that she had fought for increased stipends for years, saying, "If you are not paid you are not seen as being of value." Ms. Cooper indicated her support for increasing stipends.

4:08 pm, Fire Department, Charles Cole, Fire Chief

250 Mr. Cole noted that there is a small increase in salaries to stay in line with Essex Junction. Call
251 volume is down a little last year due to COVID, and we have streamlined with Essex Junction so
252 that both departments are not responding unless necessary. Ms. Hill-Fleury thanked the Fire
253 Department for their hard work.

254
255 Mr. Teich stated that the next step in this process would be for staff to look over notes from the
256 day and provide some suggestions to alter the budget. Ms. Macy noted, after looking further at
257 her notes, around \$95,000 of reasonable reductions can be found, by not funding all pPolice
258 Department vacancies, adding Wastewater Treatment Facility revenue, and correcting an error
259 where funds were double-counted.

260
261 **6. READING FILE**

262 **a. Selectboard Comments**

- 263 ○ Ms. Hill-Fleury thanked members of the public who attended today.
- 264 ○ Ms. Haney said that more information regarding the Unified Manager's evaluation would be
265 coming via e-mail.

266 **b. Upcoming meeting schedule**

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268 **7. EXECUTIVE SESSION**

269 No executive session took place.

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271 **8. ADJOURN**

272
273 **DAWN HILL-FLEURY made a motion, seconded by VINCE FRANCO, to adjourn the meeting.**
274 **The motion passed 5-0 at 4:34 p.m.**

275
276 Respectfully Submitted,
277 Darby Mayville
278 Recording Secretary

279
280 **Approved this _____ day of _____, 2021**

281
282 **(See minutes of this day for corrections, if any)**

283
284
285
286 **_____
Vince Franco, Clerk, Selectboard**