

TOWN OF ESSEX

HOUSING COMMISSION MEETING MINUTES

Wednesday, March 6, 2024

Housing Commission (HC): Deb Flannery (Chair), Rupesh Asher (Vice Chair), Lauren Ressue (Clerk)

Administration and Staff: Kent Johnson (Town Planner)

1. CALL TO ORDER AND AGENDA ADDITIONS / CHANGES

Ms. Flannery called the meeting to order at 3:00 PM. There were no proposed changes to the agenda.

2. PUBLIC TO BE HEARD

There were no members of the public present.

3. Action ITEMS

a. Minutes

Corrections

Ms. Flannery made a motion, seconded by Ms. Ressue, to approve the minutes of 11/1/23. The motion passed 3-0.

4. MEMBER REPORTS

Ms. Ressue shared a presentation with data about housing-related issues in the town of Essex (see attached). Discussion occurred about it with the main points of interest being:

- i. While the rate of new housing units has historically kept up and exceeded the increase in population, it has fallen short in the past two decades.
- ii. Renters are more likely to be severely cost burdened than those that own their home.

Mr. Asher asked as a follow-up to the data shared what's preventing more housing units to be built. Mr. Johnson suggested a few possibilities, including not enough land available for building (most land is privately owned), disincentives to create sprawled development patterns.

Ms. Flannery asked about the current plan and vision for the Essex Experience area and whether the HC should be involved in that.

Mr. Johnson answered that as far as he knew there was a concern about sewer capacity and there's now a hold on further work or planning in that area.

Ms. Flannery suggested the town could look at vacant properties, buildings that are publicly owned to see if there are other potential sites that could potentially be housing.

Mr. Johnson suggested the HC get in touch with developers to see what barriers there are – the town is unlikely to actively go out and build, so what is it the town can do to engage with developers or other nonprofits to help figure it out.

Ms. Flannery replied that a streamlined permitting process is helpful in addition to having the town identify sites where they want building to happen, having HC or someone else to share ideas of where housing could be. Towns don't usually invite developers in, but if they did, they could suggest town owned or "problem sites", public works, schools, land owned by DOT, etc. and have these sites ready for building.

Ms. Ressue recommended looking into encouraging senior housing projects given their efficiency and the aging population of the state.

Mr. Johnson introduced another barrier to building that he's been hearing about: workforce housing. This is a barrier to businesses coming in, so could housing stock could be subsidized by employers, specifically for employees until they find permanent housing?

Ms. Flannery has experience with this in the Upper Valley; employers came together to create more affordable rents for people in service area. UVMMC is doing this, but there are real challenges because it puts them in conflict with people that are their employees, creates fair housing challenges, and run up against laws that prohibit selecting tenants in ways that are other than open and fair. Furthermore, most employers when doing this have just locked down existing housing, not built more. Local efforts would probably not be possible, but regional efforts may be.

Mr. Johnson asked what municipalities could provide such as a shovel-ready site.

Ms. Flannery replied that sometimes there are sites that are vacant or have contamination, someone would give it to you for a dollar. Additionally, towns can often apply for brown funds sites moneys that are not accessible to the public. She also suggested looking more at promoting accessory dwelling units, in particular what the guidance is for towns for planning to allow this to be optimized².

Mr. Johnson suggesting having information on the town website to point individuals to housing resources, such as regulations/assistance to build ADUs, but also for businesses and developers who might want to build here.

5. DISCUSS WORK PLAN, WORK ASSIGNMENTS AND SCHEDULE

Mr. Johnson informed the HC that the Selectboard is still interested in talking with the HC to learn more about the direction we're going and to hear recommendations or needs.

The HC then discussed how to look for additional members. Ms. Ressue suggested changing the time to an weekday evening slot to potentially allow more members of the public to join outside of the typical workday. The HC tabled this but agreed to discuss it more at the next meeting.

Ms. Flannery has decided to step down as Chair and therefore nominated Mr. Asher, the current Vice Chair as Chair, and Ms. Ressue as Vice Chair. These changes will be discussed further at the next meeting as well.

To prepare for the next meeting, Ms. Ressue agreed to dig into the data further based on the discussion of the data presented today, and in particular will look more at the Chittenden County Regional Public website for the data they prepare and their recommendations.

Mr. Johnson will look for more current data that the town might have.

Mr. Johnson informed the HC that the Town Plan was passed at Town Hall Meeting day and so the HC should return to that document as well as the charter of the HC to inform its next actions and workplan.

Mr. Johnson also reminded the HC that Essex Town is working to update its regulations to be in line with the recent Act 47 changes and the HC could assist with this process. Ms. Flannery requested an informational session for the HC on this to be better prepared to assist.

Mr. Johnson also informed the HC that the town has purchased a new property for its new municipal facilities and is considering if part of it could be used for housing. A consultant is working with the town to determine how the site will be developed. If housing is included, it would be great for HC to be involved – give best practices/ best case scenario for how we can do housing here.

6. ADJOURN

The Chair adjourned the meeting at 4:16.

Minutes submitted by Lauren Ressue, Clerk