

TOWN OF ESSEX
DRAFT PLANNING COMMISSION MINUTES
OCTOBER 24, 2024

Note: This meeting was held on Zoom and at Essex High School Cafeteria.

PLANNING COMMISSION (PC) PRESENT IN ROOM: Dustin Bruso, Chair; Georgia Lavigne, Clerk; Ian Carroll; and Stephanie Bixby.

PC ATTENDING VIRTUALLY: None.

PC ABSENT: Joshua Knox, Vice-Chair; Johnathan Schumacher; and Trefor Williams.

OTHERS PRESENT IN ROOM: Sharon Kelley, Zoning Administrator; Kent Johnson, Planner; Tracey Delphia; Hubie Norton; Max G. Levy; Irene Wrenner; Maybeth Redmond; Mark Redmond; Jan Mejia; Andrew Seaver; Betsy Dunn; Chris Lundbert; Gabe Mannarino; Gabriel Meger-Lea, (Winooski); Brian Clifford; Joanne Nelson; Brad Jackson; John Stawinski, Marina Brown; Cheryl Van Epps; Matthew Cohen; Keith McClymonds; Niki McClymonds; Ken Signorello; Rachael Lizotte; Dianne & Joe Percy; Miriam Berry; Tom Berry; Niels Giddeon & Lorna Swerhone; Johnny Mendez; Epona Rose Shield at War (E. Charleston); Em O'Hara (So. Burlington) Tabrene Kerish, 133 State Street, Montpelier, VT; State Commissioner Wanda Minoli; Al Cormier, Director of Corrections; Cole Barney, Communications; and Community Television.

OTHERS VIRTUALLY: Katherine Sonnick, Community Development Director; Sharon Zukowski; Cara West; Patty Davis; Jackson (Guest); Jean White; Lorraine Zaloom; Gina Halpin Barrett; Jane Halsted and Quans iphone (unidentified).

AGENDA ITEM 1: CALL TO ORDER: Chairman Bruso called the meeting to order at 6:42 p.m. and explained to the audience that that this meeting was not to vote on a proposed amendment to the regulations, rather to listen to a request for a proposed amendment from the State of Vermont. Chairman Bruso noted that the presentation allows for a specific time limit for each of the 4 items to discuss and requested that the audience be respectful with their comments and to the time limits of discussion. Chairman Bruso stated that if they can't get through all questions and comments, an additional meeting will be scheduled.

AGENDA ITEM 2: AGENDA ADDITIONS/ CHANGES: None.

AGENDA ITEM 3: APPROVE AGENDA: Commissioner Lavigne Moved and Commissioner Bixby Seconded a Motion to approve the agenda as warned. The Motion passed 4-0.

AGENDA ITEM 4: STATE OF VERMONT CORRECTIONAL FACILITY ZONING AMENDMENT REQUEST:

- a. State of Vermont Presentation (20 minutes)
- b. State of VT Response to Previously submitted questions (30-40 minutes)
- c. Public Open Forum (60 minutes)
- d. Next Steps/Take -Aways (30 minutes)

- Tabrina Kerish, Project Manager, introduced the State Team. Kerish explained that the State has been funding for a new building through the capital bill for the last two

years and will continue with funding efforts; she reported that they are requesting a zoning change to the Regulations by allowing a state institution facility to be permitted in two areas of town, on parcels that the state already owns (Colchester Road and River Road). She stated that these two sites in Essex are large enough to accommodate a new building.

- She reported that the Town's Community Justice Department has hosted 2 workshops, of which both were recorded and linked to the websites.
- She provided an overhead slide presentation, showing and describing each site and explaining that the project was to preserve critical partnerships; be located near employment opportunities for women in the reentry program; support connection to family; be conveniently located near public transportation; and limit the burden of relocation.
- The building would have two programs – to secure and re-entry.
- She forecasted 3-5 years to secure approvals/permits, which include conditional use, water and sewer approvals, site plan review and state approvals.
- An environmental study will not be done until a zoning change is decided.

(Chairman Brusco informed the audience that only constructed comments would be accepted and combative comments will not be entertained.)

- No building designs or site plans have yet been developed, but they are planning for a 112,0000 s.f. secure and re-entry building. The building will fit on 14-acres of land.
- The project is very early in the process and once a site is selected, it will take 3-5 years to complete permitting.
- Traffic impacts were discussed.
- A copy of the sewer core map showing the need to bring to the site at the Colchester Road location.
- Showed buildable areas on the site with environmental impacts.
- The access points were not yet designed.
- Showed the grades on each site, noting that Site 2 has steep grades. The access point for the River Road site may change in the future.
- There are not mountain bike trails near the sites.

e. State of Vermont Response to Previously Submitted Questions (30-40 minutes)

Commissioner Wanda Minoli stated that this was her 8th day on the job and asked for patience. The Commissioner and her team provided the following comments to some of the questions:

- Reported that approximately 15 million dollars has been set aside for this project and they will continue to fund the project. She believed the project was at least 3-5 years out. Funds will not be expended if the site is not permitted for the project. There is a significant cost difference between the sites, but the specifics are not yet known.
- In response to the question of what benefit this project gives to the town, she replied that they will work in partnership with the Town. It was too soon to discuss exact benefits but noted that increased revenue will result from this project.
- There are no intentions to change the women's facility to a men's facility.

- The South Burlington facility had no increase in crime due to its facility. The neighbors feel safe and they have a good partnership with the City.
- The existing facility has an employee turnover of approximately 45% for entry level officers, and they have just under 1,000 employees, including approximately 100 case workers.
- A traffic study will be required due to a lack of bus service to the site(s).
- Four properties were looked at and the two selected were the size that is needed for the project.
- No other development plans are proposed for either lot and it will house only the facility.
- Explained that the Town representatives can reach out to them with questions, as well as pose questions on the website.
- The facility will be designed as a minimum secure building.
- Any expansion would need site plan amendment review and approval.
- There has never been an escape from a women's facility.
- The VT State Police has jurisdiction over a correctional facility.

Public input was received as follows:

Mr. Brown, Newport, VT, stated that prisons degrade a town, people don't want to live near them; they are toxic and offer spiritual rot. He stated that prison guards become violent and bring that violence home. He stated that there has been rapes in the So. Burlington prison, with guards fired.

Chris Lundberg, Essex, would not have moved to Essex if he had known a prison could end up in the town. There is no benefit to the town and results with quite a bit of damage. He noted that families move to the town where family members are prisoners.

Matt Corman, asked where the population of the woman's prison comes from and how many are Essex residents. He did not see a number for re-offenders. He is concerned with the impacts once they are released. He did not believe this was a right move for the Town and does not want Essex to be known for a prison.

Andrew Seaver, 14 Hillside Circle, Essex, VT, did not hear answers to his written questions. He questioned ulterior motives. He does not believe that the public received any answers at this meeting.

Chairman Bruso stated that any person can come to the PC and ask for a zoning change – it all goes through the same evolution. He stated the points were well received and we all need to know more about the project.

Neals Giddens, noted that public transportation within the town is at odds. He was not sure how the sites qualify as having a commuter stop, while noting that Site 1 has zero transportation availability and Site 2 is no where near transit, but for the Amtrack Station.

Lauren, Essex Town, stating that moving the building from one section to another in Chittenden County makes it better for the prisoner, however scares people. She questioned if there is an intent

to go to a private operating facility. She asked what is being done for the inmates as there is no end to the programs available.

Gabe Mannarino, stated the questions being asked are spot on and asked everyone to think about that as schools are $\frac{3}{4}$ mile away; will a prison bring business to Essex. He does not believe the state has chosen the right spot for a new prison. He reported that Sand Hill Road is already busy with traffic; as well as a housing crisis, noting that if a house were for sale near the prison, it will not sell. He asked if the decision requires a public vote.

Community Development Director, Katherine Sonnick, reported that if the request for a zoning change was approved by the both the Planning Commission and Selectboard, then the public can get a petition going so that the zoning change request goes to a town-wide vote.

Rachel Lizotte, stated that zero information has been given on the submitted questions and the questions were basic. The discussion has been too broad and vague; the property value study is outdated; some residents can afford to move and some cannot. She agrees with all comments made thus far. She questioned the amount of guest traffic resulting from the prison.

Cheryl Banis, made the following comments: she cares that inmates and trauma systems are not where they should be at this time; one ounce of prevention is worth one pound of cure; work was needed to build up mental health; domestic survivors are not identified and end up incarcerated; investigate a 'Needs Assessment' for long term; and the crisis is in the health system as there is a shortage of case workers.

MaryBeth Redmond, town resident and former state representative, has lived in Essex for 22 years. She stated that there is no harder task to site for a prison and it was easy to bring up fear. She reported that South Burlington did not want to lose the prison, but they do not have the space needed. She is supportive of this project as the existing facility is sinking into the ground and there is no space for programs or rehabilitation. She stated that someone has to speak for woman and this project is the right thing to do.

Brian Clifford, stated that the current problems are under the responsibility of the Dept. of Corrections and cultural shifts are needed. He questions how a new facility can be created without changes of abuse, rape, etc. He stated to avoid ideological battles and get to a point where the public can have a discussion. He noted that the DOC has a 200 Million-Dollar budget and the community needs to come out as cohesive.

____ Rose, has been incarcerated and is not interested in politicians. This person stated that babies don't have mothers and said, "A new building has no use and cuts off opportunities in Turtle Island"; stated that you can't trust the system to fix all problems for you and lastly said, "don't abide by law enforcement."

Marina Brown stated that there are no true trauma informed prisons.

Brad Jackson, is vehemently opposed to the project; has lived in Essex for 28 years; he stated that they need to shortcut the procedure and do a petition to ask for no changes to the Bylaws. He realized there are well meaning people but wanted to figure out if the people want the project first.

He stated that the issue is too big to have representatives decide.

Max Levy, stated that the Town Plan wasn't prioritized as he does not see this on the list. He suggested going through a Town Plan process in order to have a community discussion, while noting the public votes on the Town Plan.

Mark Redmond, stated that there is a desperate need for a women's prison and he does not object to the proposal.

Epona Rose Shield at War, stated to hold the line at 70 million is unnecessary and irresponsible; noted that 1/3 await trial; and suggested to explore a healing campus.

Lisa Goodrich, stated that two site, out of five were chosen and suggested choosing the least expensive to build upon. She reported that she does not live far from Site 1.

Chairman Bruso instructed staff to put this item on the next agenda under 'Other Business' for internal discussion only, noting that the public can be there to listen.

The meeting adjourned at 8:43 p.m.

PLANNING COMMISSION

By:

Dustin R. Bruso, Chair