

Essex Economic Development Commission (EDC)
Business Outreach Meeting Minutes
November 20, 2025, 8:00AM
Meeting Held at Aviatron, 17 Thompson Drive, Essex VT 05452
Draft Minutes Submitted by Clerk Keith Dunbar, November 22, 2025

Attendees

Commission Members:

Present: Irene Wrenner, Chair; Ken Signorello, Vice Chair; Keith Dunbar, Clerk; Anne Miller

Remote:

Absent: Igor Polenov

Staff: Tammy Getchell

Staff:

Hosts: Zlatan "Z" Valjevac
Eliane Barrett

Partners: N/A

1. Call to Order

The meeting was called to order at 8:02 AM by Chair **Wrenner**.

2. Agenda Additions/Changes

- No additional agenda items or changes were proposed
- Motion to approve the agenda:
Signorello motioned to approve the agenda, seconded by **Miller**.
Vote passed unanimously 4-0.

3. Public to be Heard

- No members of the public were present. No public comment was offered.

4. Business Items

a. Aviatron – Company Overview & Discussion

Presenter: Zlatan "Z" Valjevac, General Manager, with comments by Eliane Barrett, Senior Executive Administrator

Company history and growth

- Aviatron is an aviation components company that relocated from a long-time facility at the Burlington International Airport to 17 Thompson Drive in Essex in March 2025.
- The company had outgrown the airport facility (parking, bathrooms, general capacity) and undertook a substantial build-out of the new space, reported as roughly a \$4 million project.
- Aviatron currently employs approximately 44 employees and is planning to hire several more, expecting to add about six additional staff in the near term.

Products, regulatory environment, and operating model

- Aviatron focuses primarily on *repair and overhaul* of aviation components, with some limited manufacturing via approved parts:
 - Air cycle machines / air conditioning units (“ACMs” or air recycling machines) used to provide conditioned cabin air;
 - Engine starters (critical components—if the starter fails, the aircraft cannot depart);
 - A broad catalog of FAA-approved replacement parts.
- The company largely stays in “Class 3” aviation components (failure does not cause catastrophic loss of the aircraft because backup systems exist), as opposed to Class 1 components, which carry significantly higher liability and insurance costs.
- Aviatron both repairs and re-assembles units and supplies replacement piece parts. Every part used must be FAA-approved, with full master engineering, reverse engineering, and documentation.
- The company began developing its own FAA-approved parts around 2010 to escape unreliable OEM lead times. It now has over 400 approved parts and employs four engineers. They aim to secure approval for 30–40 parts per year.
- Manufacturing of parts is done through specialized machine shops across the United States (East and West Coasts). Aviatron itself focuses on:
 - Receiving and inspection (robust inspection against engineering drawings);
 - Cleaning, disassembly, assembly, and testing;
 - Quality control and documentation.
- Aviatron services a global market, shipping components worldwide (South America to China) using carriers such as FedEx, UPS, and DHL.
- Products cover regional airlines and larger aircraft such as Boeing 737s, 787s, 777s and Airbus A320 family, with the same principles applied to progressively larger aircraft.

Testing, facilities, and environmental practices

- The facility contains test cells that simulate the pressures and conditions in aircraft systems so that repaired ACMs and other components can be tested under realistic operating conditions.
- Technicians balance and verify components using instrumentation that indicates where material must be removed to achieve proper balance.
- The company uses evaporators and related equipment to minimize hazardous discharges; waste chemicals are reduced and managed through specialized vendors.
- A second-floor space exists and is currently underutilized, representing future expansion capacity.

Workforce, training, and retention

- Aviatron relies heavily on on-the-job training; relevant backgrounds include aircraft technicians, mechanics, or other hands-on technical workers.
- There is a shortage of workers with aviation-specific experience in Vermont, so the company invests in training tiers of technicians and tries hard to retain experienced staff because their loss is acutely felt.
- The company has strong ties to technical education:
 - Ongoing engagement with the Burlington Technical Center, including annual visits and talks by “Z”, who is an alumnus of the program from 30 years ago.
 - Some involvement with mentoring students in aviation and helicopter maintenance programs.
- Turnover pressures include higher wage offers from other employers and the high cost of health insurance and housing in Vermont.
- Before acquisition, the previous owner (with a Canadian background) offered a “Cadillac” health insurance plan, widely recognized as exceptional. After corporate acquisition, that plan changed significantly.
- “Z” is encouraging the corporate headquarters (based in Georgia) to fully understand Vermont’s high health-care costs and the competitive impact of reduced benefits on retention.

Site benefits: RPD location, recreation, and environment

- The building is one of the older structures in the Resource Preservation District-Industrial (RPD-I) area and conforms to the original 50-foot vegetated buffer requirement between the road and the parking / building frontage.
- Commissioners explained that newer buildings in the area have often received more flexibility from the Planning Commission/DRB, resulting in smaller buffers and more conventional “industrial park” appearance.
- “Z” and Eliane acknowledged that the setting is a clear upgrade from the noisy, exposed airport location. Benefits noted:
 - Proximity to trails and recreation: some employees go out for walks around the ponds during the day;
 - Wildlife viewing (foxes, turtles) has been a morale booster; staff take photos and display them in their offices;
 - Natural surroundings visible from workspaces, especially when doors are open in summer.
- During the build-out, “Z” insisted on including a shower to support employees who bike or use the nearby recreation paths on breaks or before/after work. That feature is actively used.
- The setting appears to help with employee stress relief and overall satisfaction, even as the company still faces the usual pressures of hiring and retention.

Local option tax and address confusion

- Commissioners raised the ongoing issue of address labeling and the 1% municipal local option tax:
 - Using “Essex Junction” on purchases can trigger the additional 1% tax, whereas using “Essex” should not—despite shared ZIP code and confusing postal conventions.
 - Essex is now recognized as a place name by the U.S. Postal Service, but many ordering systems still default to “Essex Junction.”
- Commissioners urged Aviatron to:
 - Use “Essex” (not “Essex Junction”) on online orders whenever possible;
 - Check whether the tax calculation is 6% (correct) versus 7% (incorrect with the local option add-on);
 - Experiment with entering the address both ways to confirm that tax is not being over-charged.
- Aviatron noted that on some vendor systems the municipality cannot be easily overridden. Commissioners noted that they have had success with many platforms but acknowledged that not all systems behave consistently.

Sidewalk maintenance and access issues

- “Z” and Elaine raised concerns about poor maintenance of the sidewalk along the street near the building: overgrown vegetation and lack of clearing/plowing, despite the Town’s emphasis on nature and recreation.
- Commissioners acknowledged that this is a recurring complaint that has been voiced at Selectboard meetings.
- There was agreement that hearing it from employers could add weight to the need for upgrading the maintenance.

Space constraints and building limitations

- The RPD-I buffer and tree preservation come with trade-offs:
 - Aviatron encountered physical constraints when building out spaces such as the compressor room, which ended up cramped.
 - Expansion options are limited by the surrounding trees and buffer requirements.
- Despite these issues, Aviatron views the overall facility as a major improvement over the previous airport site.

Transportation, truck traffic, and access to services

- Employee commute patterns:
 - Several employees live within a mile of the facility and were pleased by the move.
 - Others commute from Milton, St. Albans, and Burlington; overall commute impact is mixed but generally manageable.
- Commissioners noted an ongoing transportation study aimed at understanding how employees reach industrial areas like Thompson Drive, given limitations in bus routes and

bike connectivity, and asked whether van services or other options might help. Aviatron reported that most employees drive, and distance is not the primary issue.

- Truck traffic:
 - Aviatron is not heavily dependent on large truck deliveries; they ship approximately 10–15 units per day via UPS/FedEx.
 - 18-wheelers are seen regularly in the area but, from Aviatron’s perspective, move at reasonable speeds and have not posed significant problems.
- The main logistics concern for Aviatron is *pickup timing*:
 - At the old airport location, carriers often picked up around 4:00 PM.
 - At the new site, pickup times are earlier (around mid-afternoon), sometimes forcing Aviatron to delay shipments to the following day if work finishes at 3:30 PM.
 - Carriers have indicated they cannot guarantee later pickups.

Food access, zoning, and potential commercial uses in the district

- Aviatron staff often rely on a nearby convenience store or drive to Price Chopper/Hannaford for lunch; there is no immediate food option in the industrial area.
- Commissioners noted that the Planning Commission is revising zoning regulations and that there has been discussion about allowing more commercial uses (e.g., a small restaurant, convenience store, or food service) in industrial areas to serve both workers and recreational users.
- The idea of food trucks was also discussed:
 - Aviatron has previously brought in a local wood-fired pizza vendor with a trailer; permitting was more complicated in Burlington than in Essex.
- There was discussion about a broader effort to move temporary sign rules (including lawn signs for hiring/job fairs) from zoning into a Town ordinance that would allow permitted temporary signage for limited durations—this connects both to business visibility and event advertising.

Signage challenges and business visibility

- Aviatron described significant difficulty with permanent signage at their entrance:
 - Historically, IBM controlled an existing sign at the entrance. Zoning rules allow only one sign at the entry.
 - When Aviatron moved in, IBM did not initially want Aviatron added to its sign, and zoning would have required removal of the IBM sign before a new sign could be installed.
 - Ultimately, IBM’s sign became effectively “empty,” but the building owner wants to reserve space for another future tenant, limiting Aviatron’s ability to have clear, prominent signage.
- Commissioners noted:
 - Similar issues exist in other Essex commercial areas (e.g., malls along Susie Wilson Road) where it is difficult for drivers to know which businesses are located in a given complex.

- Multi-tenant directory signs are an obvious solution, but existing rules and ownership complications have created barriers.
- Next steps: Commissioners will review relevant sign ordinances and zoning rules more closely and discuss with zoning staff (including Sharon) to see if there are more practical ways to allow multi-tenant identification at shared entrances without running afoul of one-sign limits.

Zoning and permitting experience

- Aviatron reported that navigating the zoning and permitting process for the build-out was “very exhausting”:
 - The application paperwork was described as confusing.
 - It was difficult to reach the zoning office by phone.
- Commissioners acknowledged that the zoning office is one of the most public-facing parts of Town government, and it needs to be accessible and responsive.
- The feedback will be used to support discussions about staffing and process improvement in the zoning office.

Competition, wages, and broader economic context

- Aviatron has lost some employees to Beta Technologies and saw rent increases at the old airport location attributed in part to Beta’s presence and related activity.
- The move to Essex was partly a way to get out from under airport-related pressures and competition for space.
- There was brief discussion of a possible Amazon distribution facility in the region; Aviatron does not expect that type of facility (with primarily driver-level jobs) to directly threaten its wage levels, which are higher.
- Commissioners and Aviatron discussed Vermont’s broader issues:
 - High health-care costs—Vermonters reportedly pay among the highest rates in the country;
 - An aging demographic;
 - Pressure on employers to balance wages, benefits, and rising fixed costs.

Workforce needs and potential connections

- Aviatron is looking for:
 - Additional engineers (at least one more in the near term);
 - Technicians with mechanical/technical background and comfort with tools; many skills can be built via on-the-job training.
- Commissioners highlighted the importance of continued connections with tech centers and schools (including Essex’s programs) for long-term workforce development.

Tour of the facility

- Following the discussion, Aviatron staff led a tour of the facility, including:

- Engineering, quality, and 3D printing area (e.g., printing caps for parts, prototyping fixtures);
- Test cells for ACMs and related components;
- Disassembly and cleaning areas;
- Electronics and smaller component testing;
- Balancing stations and evaporation/chemical management equipment.
- The tour highlighted the complexity of the work, the importance of meticulous quality control, and the potential for future expansion into the unoccupied second floor.

5. Reading File

- **Essex Keystone Connectivity Draft Plan**
 - The Essex Keystone Connectivity Draft Plan was received and briefly noted. No action was taken; the item was held for future discussion.

Next Meeting – 12/3/2025

- Next meeting scheduled for 12/3/2025 at the Essex Town Offices

6. Adjournment

- Motion: **Signorello** motioned to adjourn the meeting at 9:04am, seconded by **Miller**.
Vote: Passed unanimously 4-0.