

Apr 27, 2023, 7:00 p.m. EDC Meeting Minutes - Virtual

- Attendees:
 - Donna Roy, Jodi Harris, Tina Lane, Shelly Bradbury, Margaret Eklind, Stacey Clarimundo, Town Administrator Brendhan Zubricki, BOS Chair Ruth Pereen, Town Planner Dana Menon
- Meeting called to order at 7:01 pm by Chairman Harris who welcomed and introduced new member Stacey Clarimundo to the committee and thanked outgoing member Martha Mazzarino for her many years of serving on the committee.
- Public Comment: Tina Lane mentioned that the “Welcome to Essex’ sign needs to be maintained. Brendhan said that it is the Town’s to maintain however he cannot identify any money to do so until the end of the fiscal year. Jodi added that she would also like to identify who places the flowers at the sign and in the various planters around town so that she can give them a heads up about future plans. Donna reported that Essex Merchants Group (EMG) and private citizens have been maintaining them: Sue Lufkin on Spring St., Ann Trudeau on Southern Ave. & Bob Coviello of Essex Merchant’s Group has someone do the wagon at Paglia Park. Jodi said that with the Placemaking plan we will be replacing some of the planters and taking over the maintenance of the plants as part of the town’s maintenance of the downtown district. Jodi said that we can use Essex in Bloom funds to do a refresh of the sign ahead of the event. Donna will reach out to Sue Lufkin who has knowledge of the history of the sign and its builder.
- Minutes from the 3/16/23 meeting were approved with new member Stacey abstaining.
- Warrant Articles – Brendhan Zubricki
 - Article 21: Changing current hotel/motel tax from 4% up to 6% (the current short term rental tax rate). Article 22: Add community impact fee of 3% for hotel/motel and short term rentals (professionally managed). Article 23: Short term rentals impact fee of 3% for owner occupied short term rentals
 - If Article 22 fails, Article 23 will be indefinitely postponed.
 - Per Jeff Soulard the Town revenue can increase from 21K to 47.5K from short term rentals
 - Discussion on Short term rentals in town:
 - Shelly asked how we know who is offering short term rentals. Brendhan said they self-report and are required to pay state tax. Town is unable to know how many people are offering short term rentals unless someone (from the EDC?) monitors the internet advertisements, then we can cross compare with DOR information.
 - Jodi offered that Air B&B and Vrbo already collect the tax and remit to the state. It is those that offer rooms outside of those platforms that we don’t know about. She asked how does a homeowner occupied landlord remit tax to the town? Brendhan said they pay the state via the DOR.
 - Donna asked about the licensed businesses, Shea’s & Cedar Hill, do we reach out to them to find how they will be impacted? Ruth spoke with Dave Brown (Shea’s) who, while he did not like it, understood the town’s position, and would do the same. Ruth did not contact Cedar Hill and questioned if they are licensed to be an inn as she doesn’t remember signing a license.
 - Brendhan suggested they are operating as a short-term rental. Jodi noted that their business license describes as a B&B home and asked if there is special license they should have. Brendhan outlined how differences between incidental traveler (motel) vs reservation (hotel, inn) could factor into the discussion. Jodi said that if they serve breakfast would most likely be licensed through the Board of Health.
 - Jodi will read Articles 21, 22 & 23 at town meeting. Shelly, Margaret offered to jump in if needed.
 - Donna will read Article 33 which is a request for a 50K match for 500K grant for Centennial Grove to fund a central restroom facility, heating system in cottage and the well to serve the cottage. It will also leverage the Pavilion volunteer led construction project valued at 350K. Brendhan will respond to any questions about this article at Town Meeting.

- Jodi will read Article 35 which is a request for 20K which will be used for refresh of the plantings at 17 identified downtown sites in time for the Essex in Bloom event and through to October. A budget line will be added to town property category at Fall Town Meeting for downtown continued improvement and maintenance. With these funds we will be able to refresh the sites in the spring to reflect our Placemaking vision before the Annual Town Meeting. This budget line will be in place for the FY25 budget to be replenished. Jodi spoke about the use of the meals tax to fund this line and Brendhan shared how funds once used for marketing are now being used for downtown improvements which is another way to entice people to Essex.
- Downtown Lighting Design - Brendhan
 - Brendhan presented a photo of the type of fixture recommended by the contractor for our review. The engineer recommended that the material should be copper because any black painted metal will not fare well over time in our environment whereas copper will get a patina. The fixture resembles the one in the historic photo that we used as reference. Jodi commented that the copper will patina naturally in under a year.
 - Donna asked about using the lightposts for holiday lighting. Jodi said there are GFIs in the post to allow for holiday lighting. Brendhan added that there will be planter hangers and banner hangers.
 - The lighting is a Fall project. The preliminary design will show areas of light installation, details and fixture specifications. If we want to make an imprint into the fresh concrete flags, we need to come up with ideas to give to the engineer if we want to take advantage of the opportunity. If it is a simple impression the contractor may not regard it as an “extra” to the contract. Jodi said we are leaning towards a shipbuilding theme with items pressed into the concrete. Brendhan said that he just needs enough detail (amount and approximate size of items to supplied by the town) so the contractor can factor it into the bid for the sidewalk. Shelly said she will work with the contractors during that time to insure it is done correctly. There are 23 lights... Jodi suggested we put a placeholder of \$5K to produce the lazer cut metal items that will be pressed into each of the concrete flags. Brendhan advised that we specify “at the owner’s option, there may be items pressed into the concrete” in the contract because we need an option should the bid be too high. He doesn’t want anything to hang up the lighting project. Jodi said she, Shelly and Donna will follow the contractor during the concrete pour and impress the items immediately after the concrete is brushed finished. Shelly will work on designs for the next meeting.
 - Jodi moved to accept the new lantern style lights in the copper material as shown in the picture. Donna seconded. The motion was approved unanimously.
- Signs at Memorial Park – Jodi expressed that we are not ready to have a discussion yet and reported that Tina suggested we straighten the signposts and then give it more thought. Brendhan said that until you go look at it you cannot be in a position to suggest changing all the signs as the public is already accustomed to what is there, and no one is getting inordinate fines. Discussion was tabled.
- Sidewalks – Brendhan
 - DOT is installing new sidewalks from Water St. to the Gloucester city line on one side of Rt 133 by the end of the year. The town asked, if when they do work, can they bury conduit for future lighting. They cannot do the whole length of the project but will give us 500’ of conduit with 10 handholds to disperse where we choose, suggesting near critical crossings and higher pedestrian activity. A handhold is where a wire comes off the main line conduit and goes to a feeder that goes to the lamppost. Brendhan asked the committee for input on the location of the handholds. Shelly offered that it is very dark when walking from Water St. to Blue Sky Farms. Jodi suggested two clusters of lighting around business areas. The discussion was tabled to the next meeting so committee members can visit the site to assess the lighting needs in the area. Dana suggested we do it at night. Brendhan said that the DOT will be starting the project soon.
- Placemaking Grant update.
 - Survey is closed and Shipbuilding theme was the clear winner. Civic Space will return to do a site visit on Wed and will make final recommendations a couple weeks after
 - Robin Kanter determined plant palettes for causeway (not including 24 Martin). Pocket parks will be refreshed in time for Essex in Bloom. Robin will supervise Lahey Landscaping for the plant installations at the pocket parks. Lahey has also been hired to do regular maintenance.
 - Brendan reminded that we have \$40K left over from striping/signage project that can be moved to the current Placemaking project. Shelly suggested it can help fund the “Welcome to Essex” sign.
 - Some Essex in Bloom funds are being used for the seasonal flower flashes.

- Off Season Event update
 - May 19-21 Working group of volunteers are getting town events in place (secure artists and musicians, etc) while also promoting event. The group hired Carmon Emory to build a website because the consultant's effort was not working for necessary forms required for artists & businesses. Banners will be installed; posters and postcards will be distributed before Mother's Day. Donna is working on PR through North Shore magazine; Jodi will interview with Gloucester Daily Times and the Cricket.
 - The Bridge opening will take place Sat May 20 at 10:00 with state and local officials and contractors present for the official ribbon cutting.
 - Anna Hardy has plans for floral flashes on either end of the bridge featuring an excavator and antique truck. Bridge construction has created lots of hurdles, but the volunteers are working around them.
 - Essex River Race protesters are planning to be there. Brendhan questioned why the organizers of the race are so revered. KD Montgomery from the Shipbuilding Museum reported that last year the museum had allowed them to use a portion of the museum's property. Race attendees took over the entire property and broke into the shipbuilding museum buildings without any permission to do so.
 - Despite construction and protest threats Jodi reports that the volunteers are moving forward, and she is optimistic that businesses will be motivated to continue the event on their own in the future.
- Gregory Island Parcels
 - BOS asked Brendhan to look at the parcels and with his knowledge of terrain, septic systems, etc. he determined that none will be able to support a septic system. Even by combining lots there is a question of adequate area and frontage and whether the road they sit on has a public right of access.
 - The town will advertise in the central register on May 3 and direct mail will be sent to everyone on the peninsula. Bids are due by Jun 5. Minimum bid is 5K/lot and that person has to pay a 1K flat legal fee with a buyer beware understanding. We will know if the sales effort is successful on June 5 and BOS will then determine if they are willing to sell. Town will not lose money on the sales and will opt out of sale should there be legal challenges. Sale of all 12 parcels will give us 60K which will go to the town's "Sale of RE funds" to be used for capital projects. Brendhan commended the committee for pursuing the effort and going through the process.
 - Margaret asked about the properties off 128 on Southern Ave. Brendhan said it is on hold because the title research would cost 100K with no guarantee of determining whether the lots belong to the town. Margaret and Jodi opened a discussion of past research available at town hall. Brendhan said that information was offered to the title examiner and, even with it, the cost would be 100K.
 - BZ questioned if the frontage lots are big enough for someone to make an investment.
 - Margaret offered that METC is researching properties along Southern Ave in their attempt to acquire properties for a green corridor of conservation property and suggested we could benefit from their research.
 - Jodi commented that per Dick Cairns, Conservation restricted land will put Essex in the poorhouse by losing parcels on the tax rolls. She stressed it is imperative that we get zoning in Essex because we can't put forward projects because there are no rules. No split tax rate, no enforcement. Many problems that the BOS encounters are directly related to zoning or lack of zoning. She recommends the committee become well versed on what is going on with zoning and supportive in order to bring forth business development in an orderly way. Jodi questioned if a retired title examiner or attorney volunteered their services to research owner unknown properties on near 128, could the town accept the services?
 - This discussion segued into the last agenda item Revenue in Essex
- Revenue in Essex, current and future
 - Jodi opened the topic of revenue by sharing that another town committee member said the town needs to find more revenue to fund their spending. She explained our challenge, that if more houses with an average 12K assessment have families with 1 student in the district at a cost of 24K/pupil there is a negative 12K to the town for the first child. Over 55 housing is an option to find revenue that does not have an offsetting expense. Commercial revenue is another option. She sees value in picking through all opportunities for revenue which may not look like much at first

but accumulate over time. An example being the meals tax which now brings in approximately 300K/year.

- Enforcement for permits, licenses, conservation, etc. is important or why bother putting policies or bylaws in place? Building permit software is great but if permits aren't closed and inspected then the assessors can't reassess the property which will bring in the real revenue. The revenue is not in the fees for permits and licenses but in the increased property reassessments as new growth.
- We need to understand tax assessments and revenue, as a committee, to look for other revenue sources.
- Margaret asked about a split tax rate. Jodi said she will continue to pursue if we want to bring commercial businesses into town. She shared how the DPW has different water and sewer rates for commercial vs residential. New revenue from a split tax may be small at first but can grow to decent money down the road.
- Dana added that in the zoning bylaws the fees for non-compliance are not enough to cover the hours to cover enforcement. Improvements in the zoning code could help cover the hourly cost of enforcement more than the "5.00 slap on the wrist". Jodi added we may need more building inspector hours and fees should cover the work.
- Enforcement = revenue.
- Margaret asked about looking at surrounding towns. Jodi mentioned Rockport with its seasonal population has less of a school budget burden because the seasonal population does not use the school services. Other towns have commercial businesses with split tax rate. She agreed that it is worth looking at surrounding towns.
- Shelly mentioned that a speaker presented to the Affordable Housing Trust the benefit of legalizing Accessory Dwelling Units with a bylaw. It would both bring in revenue and add to housing.
- Revenue in Essex will be discussed in depth at future meetings.
- Committee members' homework is to review the signage at Memorial Park and possible locations of lighting along Rt 133 between Water St. and the Gloucester city line
- Next EDC meeting will be held virtually on Thursday, 6/8/23 at 7:00.
- Meeting Adjourned 8:31

Respectfully submitted,
Tina Lane