

Village Budget Summit Revelations

by Irene Wrenner, December 17

The Village Trustees discussed budget items in a day-long work session on Wednesday, December 9th.

During the seven-hour meeting, lots of figures were disclosed, but possibly more was revealed by the officials' candid comments.

Overview

Consolidation of municipal functions continues. Even so, no staff members are being cut, so no money is being saved on personnel.

In fact, the Unified Manager is now hiring for one of the six positions he reported needing back in August.

As more Village budget items shift to town-wide taxpayers, outcomes may become less predictable.

For example, if the Town Budget fails at the ballot box, what will happen to items the Village is counting on, such as the \$1 million in highway funds it receives from the Town?

By ditching the in-person Town Meeting budget approval, in exchange for an Australian ballot vote, many more voters will have the opportunity to express their feelings about officials' decisions, whether budgetary, or merger-related, at the ballot box.



15 Takeaways from Village Budget Summit

1) Unified Manager Evan Teich is looking ahead to building new, combined facilities, and he warns that 10-acre parcels of land are hard to come by.

We may need to re-purpose land and buildings we already have, such as one or more at the Tree Farm.

Meanwhile, we must ensure buildings don't fall down due to neglect.

2) Several municipal buildings have roofs needing repair or replacement. Pumps are needed for the pool house. The Village Garage is in desperate need. Also, much more money for water / sewer / sanitation infrastructure is needed and not set aside right now.

3) Trustee George Tyler, a strong advocate for merger, cautioned against centralizing everything, assuming a yes vote on merger. "That could be awkward in, say, 20 years if things don't work out."

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Food Insecurity Rises

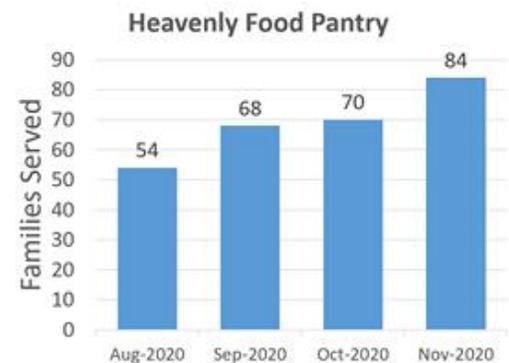
by Ken Signorello & Irene Wrenner
December 13

Resident Lorraine Zaloom noted, at the December 7th Selectboard meeting, that local food shelves are seeing increased demand. And she repeated her query from the last meeting about the impact of COVID on local business. The Selectboard didn't have a ready answer.

To get a better read on how the economic downturn has impacted our community, the *Retorter* surveyed three food shelves that serve Essex residents.

Their data indicates more and more of our neighbors need help to keep their families fed.

The Heavenly Food Pantry, based at the First Congregational Church of Essex Jct., has seen a steady increase in clients this fall, according to the Rev. Mark Mendes.



Demand is also up at Aunt Dot's Place in Essex Center and the Essex-Jericho-Underhill

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COVID Won't Delay "Merger" Vote

by Ken Signorello & Irene Wrenner, December 9

The meat of the December 7th Selectboard meeting, as for so many others over the past year, was Merger.

It was time for the Selectboard to put up or postpone. Staff wants to begin preparing the necessary documentation, warning, and marketing materials for the next election.

Concerns

Selectboard members voiced concern about warning a March vote, as the COVID-19 pandemic has made in-person meetings impossible and virtual meetings difficult, even for folks without technology challenges.

The board noted, the state predicts an estimated 9% increase in school tax is looming. This would compound any tax increases faced by the TOV and douse any decrease in the downtown district.

Al Bombardier, a school board member in attendance, noted that Essex Westford School District has spent \$1 million on substitute teachers alone this year. He expects increased

school costs at the local level due to COVID, in addition to the state's estimate. He doubted Essex will escape the full impact of the shortfall.

Selectboard member Dawn Hill-Fleury opposed separate tax districts for a "merged" community. She hadn't planned to vote NO tonight but recently came to that decision. She received emails and calls from 30 people, asking the Selectboard to put off the vote until COVID runs its course.

Selectboard member Andy Watts said the merger plan was "not ready" and doubted the value of the savings versus the cost to implement the Special Tax Districts.

He had specific questions about the 12-year Village Capital Tax District, when the capital plan for the Village only goes out for five years. Staff gave him three conflicting answers as to how capital would be funded. "It seems like we're not clean on what we're doing."

Selectboard Chair Elaine Haney pushed back, "The charter seems pretty clear to me... [Yet] at every meeting there is a new question [from Watts]."

As many members of the public weighed in, both pro and con, a recurring theme was that remote meetings are not sufficient for the public to be informed nor to debate this monumental issue.

As if on cue, the meeting was repeatedly zoom-bombed (interrupted with unwanted, disruptive intrusions by outsiders); hand-raising recognition cues didn't work right; and one resident was dropped while speaking.

A local software developer, Brian Sheldon, suggested that online meetings have actually increased public participation, and a pandemic is no reason to postpone the vote.

Board Member On a Roll

After the public spoke, the board discussion continued. Freshman Selectboard member Vince Franco [was highly agitated](#). He claimed that people are

fearful of change and of this merger.

He bemoaned that anybody currently speaking in opposition to the merger plan now, has waited and not shown up before.

The Chair admonished Franco, explaining that many folks in that very meeting have participated regularly, attending even more meetings than him.

While [Haney had pleaded](#) for feedback from new people just a month ago, here was her junior peer attacking the few new people who showed up for this meeting.

He criticized two merger opponents for not stepping up to run when Max Levy quit the Selectboard (editor: he didn't) and Annie Cooper did after her first year. Franco ran unopposed after a Village-based candidate withdrew. Ten people applied for appointment to Cooper's vacated seat.

In fact, the two residents named in his tirade had led an "unprecedented" (per Haney last winter) citizen-driven, successful charter change campaign.

Showing his nescience, Franco did not realize that the merger vote would be held the day after the, now informational-only, Town Meeting in March and asked for that to be clarified.

Haney "completely understands" pandemic concerns but wasn't letting empathy slow her march to merge.

"We were requested by the Trustees to put this on the ballot in November," she said.

["We took the risk](#), and waited, so we could do more research and have more public input." Yet, when public hearings were announced, Haney clearly communicated that no significant changes would be made due to public input.

Haney hyperbolized: "This process has had more thought, more expertise, and more public input into it than any other attempt at any other initiative in this town's history."

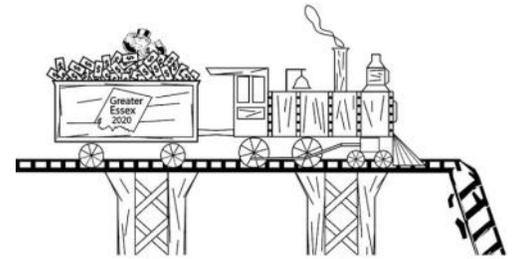
Split Decision on Merger

Murray moved and Franco seconded that the Selectboard

commit to warning a merger vote in March 2021.

They and Haney voted in favor of the motion; Watts and Hill-Fleury voted against it.

Next possible stop (in January) for the merger train is to warn a ballot vote for March 2nd.



"Railroaded Junction" © 2019

(Food, continued from page 1) Food Shelf in Jericho. Both have seen a steady increase in clients served over the past 23 months.

Fortunately, supply has kept up with increasing demand thus far. Phyllis, data keeper at EJU, says, "Our community has been very generous, with monetary donations, food donations, and [volunteer help](#). We have ample food stores at the moment."

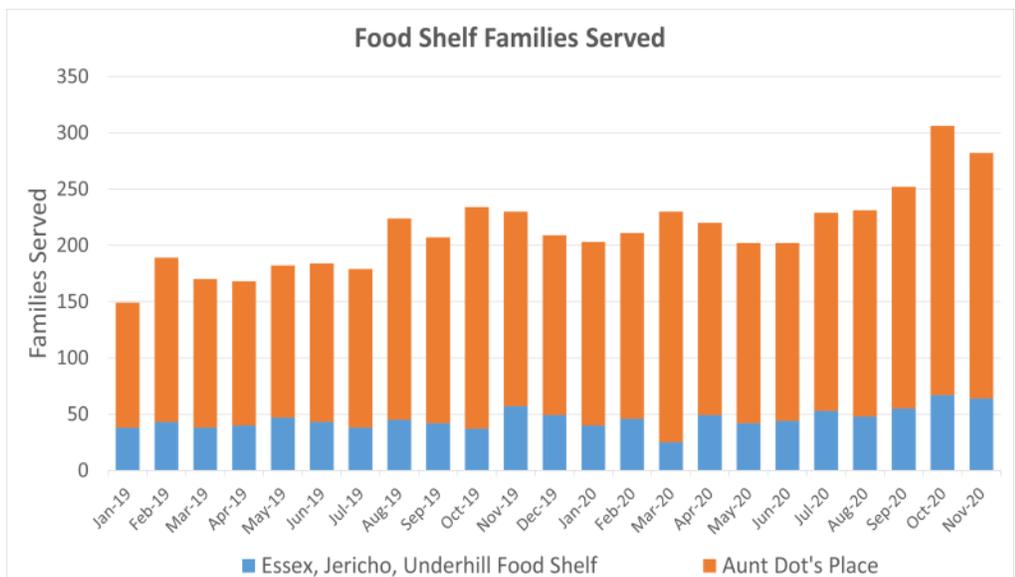
Most area food shelves could use more help to pick up, sort or distribute food, if you are not particularly vulnerable to COVID-19.

Please get in touch with any of them, if you can volunteer.

Aunt Dot's Place: www.auntdotsplace.com/volunteer/

Essex Jericho Underhill Food Shelf: ejufoodshelf@gmail.com

Heavenly Food Pantry: www.fccej.org/v5/erving-others/heavenly-food-pantry/



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4) Apparently residents and the library have a glut of books to sell; hence need exists for a venue for a perpetual book sale.

5) The FY22 budget increases on-call wages for EJ fire-fighters to \$15.50 per hour.

The number of fire calls is down with COVID keeping people off the road and vehicle mishaps down.

6) Retention and aging out are two staffing challenges for EJ Fire Department. Incentives they brainstormed included benefits (childcare at EJ Recreation & Parks) and amenities (workout room) to help volunteers fit fire service into their busy lives.

7) The Village website is so cumbersome to manage that staff want everything transferred to CivicPlus, the Town's web platform. Trustee Raj Chawla regretted "sounding like the curmudgeon", but Trustees do not want to give up a site that's easy for visitors to use.

Tyler: "I know I sound like a stick in the mud. We created our website for the convenience of the public. There's no comparison with the Town's website. Heart & Soul asked us to set it up like that. Staff's ability to add more stuff isn't my concern."

No Trustee expressed concern for the cost to maintain a completely different hosting platform for the Village than the Town's.

8) Chawla repeated his assertion from another meeting that "software doesn't solve process problems."

Rather than buy CivicClerk software, he'd like minutes and agenda issues to be resolved offline.

9) Another \$7,000 will likely be spent to mail Village election ballots in April to every voter.

10) The SuperSucker 5000 vacuum truck needs replacing in FY22. A US manufacturer couldn't be found. This will exclude the use of Federal grant money to buy a new one.

Just like the EJ School District, we may want to spend money we have tucked away on our own things before the merger effective date.
~George Tyler, Trustee

11) Tyler: Just like the EJ School District, we may want to spend money we have tucked away on our own things before the merger effective date. Teich: "I'm not necessarily looking for a vote that would get that statement into the minutes." Village Economic Development and Land Acquisition funds, presently total \$436,000.

12) Trustees wish to double the stipend for the Trustees, Planning Commission, and Zoning Board in the Village. Chawla believes that's still not enough. The Trustees spend "an awful lot of time, not sure what the difference is" compared to the Selectboard, who get \$500 more annually. One difference: the Town budget is 3x larger.

The Trustees also floated the idea of a \$50 stipend per meeting to appointed members of other committees: the cost of a babysitter or picking up dinner that night. This may make it easier for citizens to participate.

13) Consensus was that, regardless of the merger vote outcome, the number of board meetings won't go down anytime soon.

14) Chawla would like to see Recreation Capital Expenses transferred to the Town. Sarah Macy reminded the Trustees that the Selectboard just took on a \$140,000 increase in the Town Budget in order to pay for a

Transfer to Village Rolling Stock expenses.

Teich says Chawla's question is "fraught with danger, given what we are dealing with in March. These issues will be solved with a YES vote on Merger. A NO outcome will require a different conversation with the Selectboard on how to achieve equity without merger."

Chawla pulled back on his ask for Recreation money. "I don't want to put a kink in anything related to March. Not thinking about the Rolling Stock Transfer, sorry."

15) Assuming zero grand list growth, the proposed FY22 budget would increase Village taxes by \$12 annually per average \$280,000 residential property.

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