

# HOUSING COMMISSION

**TOWN OF ESSEX**  
**HOUSING COMMISSION MEETING MINUTES**  
**Wednesday, February 2, 2022**

**Housing Commission (HC):** Katie Ballard, Chair; Gabrielle Smith, Vice Chair; Mia Watson, Clerk; Mark Redmond; Emily Taylor; Michelle Teegarden

**Administration and Staff:** Owiso Makuku, Essex Community Development Director; Robin Pierce, Essex Junction Community Development Director; Charlie Cole, Essex Town Fire Chief; Chris Gaboriault, Essex Junction Fire Chief.

**Others Present:** Noah Lafaso - Essex Reporter

## **1. CALL TO ORDER AND AGENDA ADDITIONS / CHANGES**

**Ballard called the meeting to order at 3:05 PM.** Ballard called the meeting to order at 3:05 PM. There were no proposed changes to the agenda.

## **2. PUBLIC TO BE HEARD**

Noah Lafaso, a reporter with Essex Reporter, was attending to learn about the Short term rental registry item on the agenda.

## **3. BUSINESS ITEMS**

### **a. Approval of Minutes**

**Redmond made a motion, seconded by Teegarden, to approve the minutes of January 19. The motion passed 6-0.**

### **b. Fire & Life Safety in Housing**

Town Fire Chief Cole has been working to promote this topic for about 10 years. Unmet concerns and needs. Mostly volunteer fire departments. More multi-unit housing. For a community our size, it is typical not to have local fire safety codes. Is handled by the state. We have ONE inspector for all of Chittenden County. They only have time to handle complaints and mostly can't do preemptive visits/reviews. Life safety and fire code violations are not uncommon, including senior housing, small scale and large-scale housing units, where people are living in substandard housing. When his staff go on calls related to fire safety and see firsthand the issues. Rents are high and issues go unmet by landlords, even sometimes when brought to their attention. Is local code advisable, desired, and how would it be staffed? Essex Town has a trained staff member that could be considered for a potential role. The Village Department is more likely to continue to rely on the state. Chief Cole - we have great success with preemptive visits to units to address safety; need more resources to address preemptively with visits and enforcement. Codes would need to be implemented gradually in the Town. BALLARD notes the Housing Commission would need time to do research to create recommendations related to codes. SMITH asked about enforcement options. WATSON pursued this line of discussion, asking if enforcement for those landlords who choose to pay fines rather

40 than comply is inadequate to affect change and improvements. Chief Cole noted  
41 they work with local Health Officers. Sees gaps in services, enforcement, and  
42 supports to landlords and renters who are not in compliance with health, fire and  
43 safety codes. Fire marshals are buried in work, doing their best, and if some cases  
44 could be handled through local codes, this may help to fill in gaps and improve  
45 housing situations. BALLARD noted that the health, safety, and dignity of those  
46 living in Essex is a high priority for the Commission.

47 Discussion

48 Short-term housing interest from the Trustees. Chief Cole is very interested in short  
49 term registry to support safety in those units. Chief Gaboriault notes the difference in  
50 this market between single family and multi-unit rentals. BALLARD summed up the  
51 next steps and will ask the two Chiefs back when the Commission is ready. Fire  
52 Chiefs left the meeting.

53 **c. Short term rental registry**

54 SMITH reported on her comments to the Trustees at their last meeting (comments  
55 reported in those meeting minutes. MAKUKU commented on the kind of data that is  
56 available locally and statewide. The market is very different in Essex than other  
57 tourist towns like Stowe, Burlington. BALLARD commented that we need to respond  
58 to the request of the Trustees to research. Not the time to pursue a rental registry  
59 until resolved at the state level. Prioritize that workgroup to build landlord  
60 relationships and community engagement; could prioritize research and data  
61 collection for that group, with support from Robin Pierce. A lot of interest among  
62 Trustees and staff. SMITH Housing Trust Fund could take on fire codes, as that is  
63 unlikely to see much movement on either local boards until after separation is  
64 resolved. Will be joined by Taylor and Teegarden. short term rental and fire codes,  
65 which will become new priorities over trust fund and rental registry in the coming  
66 months. WATSON data for short term rentals. There has never been more than 30  
67 short term rentals on AirBnB, representing .7% of our housing stock. Does not seem  
68 to be growing. Not clear what numbers should cause concern. BALLARD providing  
69 the research and perhaps a recommendation is our charge. We don't need to  
70 overdo, as there is already good data from VHFA. PIERCE notes that investment  
71 properties vs owner-occupied short term rentals is an important distinction. The  
72 former could need action related to available long-term housing stock.

73 **d. Development Review process**

74 BALLARD tabled this agenda item due to lack of time and absence of Darren  
75 Schibler, the staff member who was to address the item.

76 **e. Recognition of departing Town Community Development Director, Owisu  
77 Makuku**

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79 **4. Reading File**

80 Discussion on reading file did not occur.

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83 **5. Adjourn**

84 **Ballard called meeting to close at 4:19 pm.**

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86 Minutes prepared by Gabrielle Smith, Vice Chair and reviewed and submitted by Mia

87 Watson, Clerk. Minutes approved February 16, 2022.