TOWN OF CHESTER
ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT COMMISSION
February 25, 2026, Minutes

Commission Members Present: Phil Perlah, Bryan Santiago, Carl Henshaw, Damon Tyler, Bob Flint, Preston Bristow and Julie Hance at Town Hall.

Visitors Present: Barre Pinske and Theresa Tyler at Town Hall.

Call to Order

Preston Bristow called the meeting to order at 6:00 p.m.

Agenda Item 1, Approve Minutes from Previous Meeting (January 29, 2026)

Preston noted that on page 7, Item 6, it referenced that Julie would have the gap inventory before the next meeting and that was incorrect. Julie wasn't sure what was being said but thought they would discuss the gap inventory at the next meeting and thought it should be amended to say they may discuss the gap inventory at the next meeting. Damon said the goal was if they could generate a useful business list, they would attempt a first pass at a gap report and, based on what Carl had generated, Damon thought that they had done that. Julie moved to approve the minutes, as amended. Phil seconded the motion and the motion carried, unanimously.

Agenda Item 2, Citizens Comments

There were none.

Agenda Item 3, Governing Bylaws Mission Change

Preston said what he had included on the agenda, the mission was in their governing bylaw which had been adopted by the Select Board. At the commission's previous meeting and what was in italics Preston thought he had heard Damon and others say might be nice to add and Carl came up with another. Preston said it was fine but their commission is a creation of the Select Board so whatever change they want to the mission statement would need to go back to the Select Board. Usually, a mission statement should be brief but can be long with a summary. Carl proposed the mission of the Chester Economic Commission is to steward Chester's long-term prosperity by setting clear direction, aligning community effort around reinforcing economic engines, including tourism, agriculture, forestry, local services, compatible light industry, and building the local capacity to execute. Carl was thinking of outreach, mentorships to young people, and engaging seniors in the community to collect their insight and knowledge so they can meaningfully contribute. Carl wanted Chester to be stronger, more resilient, and unmistakably itself and its best version in 20 years rather than trying to be something they're not. Preston wasn't sure the phrase unmistakably itself would survive but thought it was interesting. Phil saw a draft that included a phrase about dealing with the Grand List. Preston said that was on the agenda and pointed him to Carl's email. Julie said that was what was discussed at the last meeting and Phil thought they had agreed to it. Julie thought what was decided at the last

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meeting was that it would be added as an agenda item to this meeting and Carl had done some extra work. Preston agreed it was going to be added to this agenda for voting and then Carl came up with some more ideas. Julie was happy to take to the Select Board whatever the commission wanted. Bob wondered what the direction of the board was and how it fit in. Julie said the mission statement in the bylaws is the direction from the board. When the Select Board writes mission statements, they typically keep them broad and generic, but didn't mean they wouldn't support something different. Julie suggested that if they agreed as a committee to bring it back to the board for revision, that a couple of them should attend and promote and endorse the statement. Preston said they haven't developed a web page yet but that's where the mission statement would go and what would be presented to the public, so they should have something they like. Phil had no problem with it but suggested they add while increasing the local tax base - and building local capacity at the end of industry. Phil thought local capacity could also refer to infrastructure needs that increased economic development and would require water and sewer. Julie noted they had left off manufacturing from the original statement which included both light industry and manufacturing, but didn't know if that was intentional. Phil said it would read: compatible light industry and manufacturing, while increasing the tax base - and building local capacity to execute. Damon preferred that and moved that they accept and present to the board the revised statement. Damon liked this one better because it promoted not only new businesses, but current ones. Preston clarified the statement. Phil seconded the motion. Bob said his only issue was that simple was better and was worth getting feedback from the board. The motion carried, unanimously. Julie would let them know when it was on the Select Board's agenda, which would, likely, be the first meeting in April.

Agenda Item 4, Business List/Registry

Preston said Bob and Damon both had impressive lists. Bob said his list was still a work in progress and had noticed someone who was listed mistakenly. Bob said this was part of what they do and this was their best effort as of February 25th. Preston said it was his fifth year working in Chester and there were a lot of businesses on the list, some big and some micro, but it was impressive. Preston asked Bob what they use it for. Bob said they are making a master list of businesses in the region - their service area. If there was an event and they needed to reach out to people quickly, the list was available. They will divide them into buckets. Preston said contact information would be useful. Bob said there were businesses that hadn't been included until flooding and was sure they were missing information. Damon said he and Carl had gone through multiple AIs and sourced public data and was confident the web has businesses that no longer exist. Damon said AI found 68 that weren't on Bob's list and Bob's list had 56 that weren't on the other list and Damon recommended they collate the lists. Carl needed to go back and look at the lists. Preston asked Julie what she would do with the list and she said there are times they need to contact businesses and never are sure if they've notified all. Julie said they have plans to update their website and it would be nice to include a business registry or filter it by type of business. Preston saw it as a great tool for input. Preston said they would confirm with a business whether they wanted it posted, including contact information. Julie was thinking about posting them by categories but wanted a business registry first so they could have a meeting and gather input. Carl said if they had interesting stories, they would be fun to run. Bob, Carl, and Damon agreed to be a working group to work on the business registry and bring the final product back to the commission for review.

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Agenda Item 5, Community Survey

Preston circulated the last community survey that had been conducted by the Planning Commission and Tim Roper had been the primary author and was different from what this commission was looking for. Carl came up with several sets of possible survey questions: one for property owners, one for residents, one for visitors/second homeowners, and one for businesses. Carl said they were first passes and suggested they all review it and make any necessary modifications. Damon had read them and said he and Carl had bounced ideas off one another and Damon proposed they have two separate working groups, one of which would look at the list and cap analysis and compare it to the town plan and vision and the second which would work on the surveys and help get answers by talking with people. Damon said they need to be careful about how things are reported in order for people to be honest and open. Bryan asked how they would send the surveys out and Carl said he had wondered the same and noted there were free survey tools and why they wanted as many email addresses as possible. Carl said they could put QR codes in businesses for visitors to use but noted he wasn't an expert in this. Julie said they could collect data but let them know it was public information, so to be mindful not to ask for confidential information. One on one conversations are fine. Julie said it has to be available as back data to support the summaries which are available by FOIA requests. Damon wanted to use the Planning Commission's survey, which had not been used. Damon wanted to use it for analysis and bring it back to this commission. Bryan thought it would be great to have the survey to talk to people and make a human connection and let them know that they care and want to know their thoughts. Damon noted it was right up Bryan's alley. Carl suggested their own website for the results and Julie noted the town has a page on the town's website dedicated to the commission. Carl thought providing feedback to the community through the website would be helpful. Julie loved the idea and also wanted a forum for in-person attendance. The working group for the community survey will be Bryan, Damon, and Carl. The working group for the business registry will be Bob, Damon, and Carl.

In response to Preston asking what other working groups they wanted, Phil wanted one to bring in new enterprises and rebuild facilities to affect the Grand List. Phil wasn't sure how to do that and suggested a working group to tackle it. Bob knew work had been done for housing and wondered if the same had been done for commercial and Preston said that's what this commission was for. Phil thought the zoning maps indicated where that could be done. Bob didn't think that was shovel ready and thought work could be done to assist property owners with how to market their properties. Phil knew they approved some subdivisions in commercial light industry zones but wasn't sure a lot had happened with them. Phil thought those parcels would be prime targets for discussion and Julie thought they were actively marketing them. Preston has heard over time, many buildings, especially on the Green, had been converted to housing, law offices or commercial offices and they were saying shops and places to eat are needed in order to attract tourists. Preston saw that as a task of how to address that. Julie said they need the gap analysis to identify what they're missing. Preston said the restaurant business is difficult, especially now. Carl said where he was from, the lines out the door to restaurants were the biggest driver for getting more businesses. Damon agreed the gap analysis would inform them what was needed. Julie thought a list of commercial properties that are on the market for sale or rent would be helpful. Bob said they try to track through realtors but people don't always advertise. Julie said that was her point that there wasn't a lot available. There may be empty

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buildings but they're not necessarily for sale or available. Damon said as they build trust with the public, owners may be open to selling their properties if they're not being used. Preston noted the Masonic Hall had been for sale and there were some interested in it for a restaurant but the higher bidder was the law office, who had done a nice job renovating it and provided housing, also, which was a value.

Barre Pinske moved to Chester 20 years ago after having a place on Cape Cod and spent 5 years trying to find a place that was year-round for his business. He rented a place near Lake Winnipesaukee during the summer. It was hard for him to find year-round there. The whole time he's been in Chester, he's stated the road he's on is a gold mine and he didn't think Chester had done anything to mine the gold. Barre said his place looks like he's going out of business and he has no inventory because he sells his products as fast as he makes them. Barre said some of his customers are billionaires and there is a lot of money coming through Chester that they're not aware of. Barre said he has a live, work, sell environment. Barre thought they would have a base to build on if they convinced the people who don't sell from brick and mortar stores to move to Chester. Barre said in order to have enough people to support a restaurant, they need more restaurants. Barre didn't think there was another place in the country that would provide him with as much business that he has as his current location because he's been looking. Barre also noted they need a workforce because he can't put in a factory if there aren't the people to work in it. Barre concluded it was cultural and whether people wanted tourists. Barre saw tourism as valuable and thought they needed to get the town on board and didn't think they had enough representation for arts and culture and thought they could do better. Bryan said they were in serious deficit everywhere for arts and culture. Carl said being able to live, work, and produce in the same structure was advantageous and said their goal was getting people coming through Chester to stay a night and was a place they could compete. Carl said for some of the biggest employers, most of their employees don't live in Chester. Bob noted they had two relatively new dining establishments that were doing well. Preston agreed. Preston noted that he doesn't live in Chester and said some people go from Bellows Falls to Rutland to work and don't even realize Chester has a green, because they never see it. Damon said even though they may not be the destination, if they do the right marketing and support, they can get people to know what Chester has to offer and may be able to get them to stay over.

Agenda Item 6, Appoint Working Groups

Preston thought they should have work groups for the gap analysis and the marketing plan but didn't know if they were there yet. Julie agreed that they weren't there yet and they were nervous about too many projects at once. Carl said they could capture the notes and Julie agreed 100%. Bob wondered about the Village Master Plan and Julie said it was on the website and thought they had accomplished a lot from it but it did need to be updated. Julie said the website is managed in-house and due to that, needed to be something easy to manage, but they have considered making changes. They decided to have a working group for websites. Bryan has developed websites and teaches people how to manage them. Bryan didn't think the website would cost more than $300 annually. Julie and Bryan would discuss it further.

Preston confirmed they would have two working groups: business list and gap analysis. The working groups will come back to the commission with their product which they can approve.

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The survey group will have a survey by the next meeting for approval. Julie said they have to be careful not to have the working group perform the work of the entire commission. Damon suggested Julie and Preston provide the commission with a wishlist of what they would like them to accomplish and the commission could modify it. The others agreed.

Agenda Item 7, New Business/Next Agenda

- Carl and Bob discussed lodging and Bob said Chester and Springfield made out well with Okemo until Jackson Gore was built.
- Bryan found it interesting that people could live and work in their spaces and was something worth exploring.
- Barre talked about his family history and their and his friends' business successes and how Barre tried to do the same with his carving festival. Barre said he's getting into comedy and it would be nice to have rooms. Barre said the Festival on the Green has been successful and wondered why they didn't have more things like that. A lot of Barre's friends who have homes in Chester bring friends here who love it. Barre thought about getting promoters to get more people in Chester and said stick and mud seasons make it difficult to get people. Barre added that lack of a workforce didn't make it an easy place to have a business. Barre was glad the commission happened and was excited for what they were trying to do but didn't think it was going to be easy. Preston noted Woodstock tried to have an event on their green every weekend and that's what it took to support merchants. Preston said it would be nice to have something not so big but more often. Carl agreed. Preston said Woodstock has had lobster on the green and chili on the green, which people attended. Carl said there was a mix of ages and a lack of employment opportunities and this would provide something for them to put on their resume.
- Bryan said there were a lot of grouchy people living in yesteryear in Chester and changing their attitudes was going to be a challenge. Bryan said he gets discouraged when people aren't open to change. Julie understood but didn't think they were the majority. Julie speaks with a lot of people and most are excited about this. A lot of people understand you need to grow the Grand List and in order to do that, they need to bring business into Chester. They need to make it a place people want to be, have housing, and have things for them to do, so they're all part of the big picture. Julie suspected they would have support, and saw this similar to the Housing Commission. Having a business registry, and then the surveys and one on one conversations with the business owners would probably be bigger than they realized. It would tell the business owners that they want to hear what they hate or love about Chester, which they've never had. Carl thought some business owners may realize the success and want to go all in with the commission and those who drag their feet but see their peers' success may join in because they don't want to fall behind. When people see the value in what the commission is doing, there will be transformation. Julie said to be prepared that not everyone will like what is happening and they don't have to. Damon said they need to encourage each other because it will be work. Bryan said it is good to have those discussions. Julie said they've had tremendous support for the Housing Commission and Preston agreed.
- Julie will provide a list of objectives.
- Business Registry

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- Update on gap analysis.
- Update on surveys.

Agenda Item 8, Adjourn

Bob moved to adjourn and Julie seconded the motion. A vote was taken and passed unanimously. The meeting was adjourned at approximately 7:10 p.m.

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