TOWN OF CHESTER
ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT COMMISSION
April 22, 2026, Minutes

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

Visitors Present: Barre Pinske at Town Hall; Anne Henshaw and Amber Wilson of VTel via Zoom.

Call to Order

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

Agenda Item 1, Approve Minutes from Previous Meeting (March 25, 2026)

Preston noted on page 5, line 222, Carpet should be Covered. Julie moved and Damon seconded a motion to approve the minutes, as amended. The motion carried, unanimously, and the minutes were approved, as amended.

Agenda Item 2, Citizens Comments

Barre Pinske said his comedy event on Saturday had been successful. Both he and a comedy group from Northeast Kingdom put up $100. Six guys traveled two hours one-way from the Northeast Kingdom to attend. Five came from Worcester and two from Lake Winnipesaukee, as well as some local people. Barre said this was proof that people can do something like this in a small town and people will attend, though he had done a lot to promote the event. Barre does a live feed on his YouTube channel, as well. He is trying to do things that reflect positively on the community. Barre wished Town Hall or the Economic Commission used social media to advertise events without allowing for comments to eliminate any nonsense that reflected poorly on the town. Barre said 35 people attended his event and loved it. The commission thanked Barre for his input.

Agenda Item 3, Review CEDC webpage on Town website

Preston had put together something for the town website and distributed it to the members for their review. It had their mission statement and goals and Damon found the agenda and minutes that were posted helpful. It was noted that Carl was the Vice Chair and not Bryan and Preston would modify the site to reflect that.

Agenda Item 4, Report of Business List / Gap Analysis Working Group

Carl said they had just finished up the materials. Their goal was to have the committee review things and integrate with the Select Board, and Planning and Housing commissions. Carl said the Town Plan was happening and during the Planning meeting, it was noted that cohesion needed to happen and leaning on each other for feedback, as they all were trying to improve Chester. Damon had done a good job identifying what there is to do around Chester but Carl thought

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someone who lived here longer would have even more, so it was good to have more people adding to the list. Bryan said it was a good foundation and Julie agreed. Preston noted the Regional Commission had provided the Planning Commission with a graph from 1970 to the present representing each census and the declining population, including less children and an increase in older adults. Carl thought they could look at enrollment at Chester Elementary. Damon and Carl had researched the elementary enrollment and Preston said they would provide it to the Regional Commission and ask them to confirm it. There was a 20% drop in 20 years. Carl noted Green Mountain Union High School wasn't just children from Chester but other towns, so the elementary school would be a better read on the local population. Julie said most people educate their children at the elementary school but may switch to other schools for middle and high school. Preston said the Planning Commission didn't want bigger businesses but more artisans and home businesses, which is an untested philosophy. Carl said towns that have a primary employer are whipsawed when that employer takes the business elsewhere and noted Jeff had mentioned Drew's, who employed 100 people and used 30% of the town's water and sewer. Bob said they employed almost double that. Carl said this illustrated they don't have the infrastructure to support big businesses. Damon mentioned Newsbank and Julie said it wasn't as many because many were now remote, and Bob agreed. Bob said the Chester location of Newsbank used to employ over 200 but were much less now, physically, in Chester. Damon thought it would just be matching up resources and areas that have the best fit and they wanted to make sure they were making the matches because everyone would benefit. Damon and Carl both noted if COVID hadn't happened, they would not be in Chester with their jobs. Damon said he's able to have an executive job and spend money locally, and thought there were a lot of people like him who were there due to COVID. Bryan said there is a segment of the population who poo-poos having artisans, makers. and similar and wondered what they wanted to see. Bryan said at the first Housing Commission meeting he attended, someone complained about the empty buildings but had no solutions and they'd been here a long time and Bryan wondered what they wanted. Phil suggested surveying people. Julie said there was a group who wanted more cultural things and one that wanted more industry but hadn't specified what type of business. Julie said it would be a lot for Chester to support another Drew's but there was a big mix between Drew's and light industry and she hoped the Planning Commission wasn't considering not having more industry. Preston said he wouldn't sound the alarms yet but it was how the conversation was tilting. Bob noted that Drew's was actually Schlotterbeck and Foss.

Barre thought the people who didn't want anything culturally thought anything that came would make their property taxes increase. Barre wondered how they communicated with them because it would probably make everyone's life better. Years ago, Barre obtained an economic loan for machinery and borrowed money for a robot and it was very difficult for him in light industry to grow because of his base cost and trying to find talent he could afford and retain. Barre said they go from Schlotterbeck and Foss to Jeld-Wen and Chester isn't attracting people to live and work there. Barre thought people moved to Chester because of nature and being able to work remotely and less for the culture and amenities. Barre said if they couldn't compete with culture and amenities, people could live anywhere and that's why it was important to have something to offer. Bob said the Chester Economic Development Fund monies came from the sewer line put in for the predecessor to Schlotterbeck and Foss and the loans paid back, so that money was the current fund. Bob said Chester's housing sale prices had increased over 250% in the last ten years, which is double that of any other town in the region, which indicated that people want to

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live in Chester. Bob had thoughts why that was. Carl said that was a good survey question as to why the workforce was leaving and whether it was pay and benefits or lack of housing. Bob noted that Chester has a high rate of around 18% of people receiving public assistance. Bob said a couple of years ago, a fairly large employer had a 60% churn in their workforce which tied into some of the work that Springfield Regional Development Corporation does with the Working Community Challenge that ties into childcare, transportation, and substance use. Savvier employers have worked to narrow down the churn because churn is expensive. Wages are also a factor. Bob noted that Amber from VTel was online and VTel is one of the region's strong employers who treats their employees well and many people are there for a long time. Preston said the Planning Commission may want Bob to Zoom into one of their meetings and Bob responded that he was always available to assist. Bob added that Chester had one of the better elementary schools in the region, which helps attract young families. Preston mentioned that the Planning Commission had started a SWOT exercise and had only gotten through strengths because there were many of them. Carl noted they had left some out. Preston asked Bob what kind of light industry would be a good fit for Chester. Bob said it was impossible to answer because it was more about sites than the town. Phil said the old reserve center was purchased by J&L Metrology who makes optimal comparators. Phil said they were high-tech and didn't seem to generate a lot of waste, nor use a lot of utilities. Bob noted the property didn't have town sewer. Bob said they use the Chester property for storage and someday when the property comes up for sale again, they will try to make it a more attractive site for something. Bryan said they also have trades for small businesses and noted he and Barre had discussed there being a technical school in Springfield and wondered if they could incorporate apprenticeships and mentoring. Bryan said his house underwent a major renovation and the guy who did the sheetrock said when he's gone, so is his knowledge, so there will be a lot of people learning to do things on YouTube and doing them wrong. Bob said Green Mountain High School is a sending school to River Valley Tech Center. Springfield Regional Development Corporation works closely with them trying to get students into the workplace. Bob said Bryan was on the nose and it was a great way to make a living and people were aging out. Bryan noted it took two months to get a plumber when he lived in Newfane. Bob said he was the Chair of the RVTC Board and was happy to have someone from there speak to the commission. Julie said that would be great. Damon said Bob is good at matching land and space with opportunities and making sure they're publicized. There was value in listing amenities in Chester and nearby, publicizing it and keeping it up-to-date. Preston said the Planning Commission felt they could do a better job of promoting what Chester has to offer. Bob said it would be great to go through the gap analysis next month, which Carl and Damon had done a good job with. Damon wanted to share it via Zoom at the next meeting.

Agenda Item 5, Report of Community Survey / Website Working Group

Damon said the surveys were 80% to 90% done and had sent a link to a temporary website. Damon wanted the commission's input and said they could make changes as needed. As they spoke with people, they would come up with new thoughts so they would add to it as they went. Carl wanted to know if they could do an interim meeting between now and the next one and decided to have one on May 13th at 6 p.m. They would focus, primarily, on the website review and review the rest of the materials at the following meeting.

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Budgetwise, Damon said for 10 months remaining, it was $2,325 which included hosting, AI starter, domain names, email marketing, some print costs, and advertising. Damon was happy doing it on his own but wanted the town to secure some domain names and he and Julie would discuss. The cost would be substantially less if they locked it in for longer. This website would be separate from the town's. Printing is a future expense, which would be around $1,300 but wasn't needed until something was done publicly. The website would combine what the Economic and Planning commissions were doing. Damon had AI look at everything and make the website. At some point, they would be marketing and could be satellite websites. Julie would find them funding, as the amount was reasonable. Carl wondered how Julie saw the commissions and Select Board working together. Bob said usually the economic development chapter that towns get thrown by him to make sure it makes sense in the region and wondered if the commission thought they should have some input into the economic chapter of the Town Plan. Preston said they were just beginning the two-year process and Hugh Quinn, Chair of the Planning Commission, was very capable. Carl was on the Planning Commission but Preston thought the other members probably weren't aware of what CEDC was doing. Preston saw the CEDC driving the economic development section of the Town Plan and thought the commissions would need to work together but didn't yet know how that would happen. Julie said years ago they had a joint meeting of all the boards annually; they would need an agenda and instruction but saw it as a good opportunity. Anything the Planning Commission did needed to be adopted by the Select Board. Anything major the Economic Commission and the Housing Commission do, the Select Board needs to have a say in, so it made sense once or twice a year for the boards to meet together. Carl thought the Town Plan could drive the agenda. Preston said the state has housing goals that Chester should meet that Chester needs to decide if they like. The extra housing will increase the population. Carl said they could have done a better job positioning it. Bryan suggested having a representative from each commission attend a Select Board meeting and tell them what's going on. Julie said they've suggested doing it quarterly, and now that there are more groups, it made sense. Phil confirmed they were talking about the Economic, Planning, and Housing commissions meeting with the Select Board; the DRB isn't a planning division and there is a question whether they should be involved since they are a quasi-judicial board issuing permits and shouldn't have a say in designing. Damon said out of all the groups, the Economic Commission has the least amount of overhead and structure which should allow them to run faster. Julie said their goals are different and they're not building housing in between meetings. Barre noted he had been on the Planning Board and was also on a committee and involved in revising the Town Plan about a decade ago and it was like updating a book and wasn't as aspirational. If Carl was looking to the other groups for feedback, Barre saw the Economic Commission as more freewheeling and more aspirational. Preston said the Planning Commission had been consumed the past three years with bylaws, which was technical and thought they needed help with ideas. Bob said with the Downtown Master Plan Better Connections process, historically, Chester had trouble getting on the same page. There was agreement that the end product was nice. Bob suggested figuring it out together. People getting behind economic development was a great bridge builder. Carl had done a lot of good work on an engine they could run ideas through and suggested they look at it but what he created several weeks ago had different dimensions they should evaluate new business through. Damon said if they looked at something they liked with the website, to give them feedback and not wait until the next meeting so they could incorporate it as they go. For marketing ideas for the website, they will need high quality videos and Damon suggested getting community and business involvement. Bob said the

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Downtown Tax Credits had been announced and he was happy to work with anyone on them and the application was due July 1st. Bob hoped there would be more money coming to the program and was happy to work with any property owners who were interested. Julie said they created a booklet and would send it to all the businesses. In the future, they will try to share it on the Economic Development website.

Agenda Item 6, Continue Brainstorm: Mud or Stick Season Art Exhibit, Comedy Festival, Dance Party Events, Chester as a Wedding Destination, Scenic and Themed Train Rides, others?

There will be a celebration taking place on Independence Day on the Green and is doing a version of the Fall Festival during Fall Fest. Damon said if there were ways they could help, they would like to.

Agenda Item 7, New Business/Next Agenda (May 27, 2026)

Preston was happy to talk about a marketing committee at the May 27th meeting.

Carl said the goal before May 13th was to lockdown the website and surveys, if possible.

They decided to set the May 27th agenda at the May 13th meeting.

Damon said they should be gathering surveys and getting feedback and building off the list.

Preston said Woodstock has someone who markets full-time and maintains the calendar and they fund the position through the 1% options tax which Chester had voted to opt out of. Carl said housing was critical to Chester's health and business and wondered if there was an appetite for putting the local options tax up for another vote and dividing it between housing and economic development, which may be appetizing to more people. Julie said they could. Preston noted what helped sell it in Woodstock was that half went to economic development. It was clear to Damon that local business owners he spoke to were against it and didn't feel Chester was pro-business. Damon also saw because it was strongly tied to housing, that it seemed like a tax on a few. Damon said they needed to support businesses and Julie agreed and said it was why the Economic Committee existed. She added that the businesses were all sent emails and personalized letters to attend every Select Board meeting to discuss it and didn't become engaged for seven months until the last minute. So there was a question of how to get people involved. Carl noted that driving up sales may help businesses to afford the tax and Phil pointed out that retailers only collected the tax and didn't pay it, that the customer did. Damon said some people saw their taxes increase and viewed it as another tax. Barre said the Economic Development Fund was strong, so there was money available.

Agenda Item 8, Adjourn

Julie moved to adjourn and Preston seconded the motion. A vote was taken and passed, unanimously. The meeting was adjourned at approximately 6:12 p.m.

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