TOWN OF CHESTER
ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT COMMISSION MEETING
June 24, 2026, Minutes

Board Members Present: Phil Perlah, Bryan Santiago, Damon Tyler, Bob Flint, and Julie Hance at Town Hall.

Visitors Present: Barre Pinske at Town Hall.

Call to Order

Bryan Santiago called the meeting to order at 6:00 p.m.

Agenda Item 1 Approval of Minutes from the Previous Meeting

Bob moved, and Julie seconded a motion to approve minutes. The minutes were approved, as written.

Agenda Item 2, Citizens' Comments

Barre Pinske said he got his new CNC machine running and they made 5 parts in one day. He is really excited about it. Bob Flint helped Barre in 2016. Barre has two machines now and the new one is fast and amazing, which is good news for economic development. Barre has a CNC milling machine to reproduce his work. They rough out on the CNC machine and put the detail in the small bears he puts in front of his shop. Barre bought a teachable robot so they're making half parts on another machine that they're hoping to glue together to get a furniture-grade product that won't crack or split. He hoped to get the robot he's had for over 6 years going, which was paid for. Barre can sell the rough-out parts to other artists. They were working out of a garage, but it was working.

Agenda Item 3, Discuss and Improve Updates to the Business Directory

Bob said it was posted in the last meeting, and it was sent to Shawn Cunningham who provided some updates and Bob had a few updates and sent the modified directory to Preston. Bob also sent it to Julie, Preston, and Shawn and would forward it to the committee. Damon said there was a citizen who listened to the meeting, found the website, and filled out two surveys and provided feedback on the directory. Once it's rolled out, they can set a timeframe with an update to the committee monthly. At some point, it will be publicized.

Agenda Item 4, Discuss and Approve Draft Press Release

Preston wrote it. Bob said there should be a point of contact on the release so the media could contact them if they wanted more information. At the end of the press release, Bob suggested sharing who to contact from the Chester Economic Development Commission, which would likely be Preston, as Board Chair. Otherwise, Bob thought it was fine. Damon had given Preston some feedback; the URL wasn't the right one, but that was all. The QR code also needed to be included in the press release. Damon said every survey has a separate QR code and then the main survey

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page also has one. There was discussion about the ease of completing the survey on a mobile phone versus a desktop. They would provide both options with the actual link the QR code goes to.

Agenda Item 5, Discuss and Improve Public Rollout of Community Surveys

They had done a soft rollout but were ready to get it out to the public. Damon noted he had been the only one testing it and would appreciate someone else doing the same. Julie will include it as an agenda item at the next Select Board meeting. Bryan said once he had the updated business directory, he would make plans to visit those businesses and have them complete the survey on an iPad or similar device. Bryan has already begun speaking with businesses. Having only lived in the community for three years, Bryan said he didn't know how to diffuse resentment from the past. Several years ago, some boards were anti-business. Julie suggested telling them that the town is aware and they aren't going to deny that. There is a new board who is very energetic, and this commission was established because it wants to move forward and be business friendly. Bryan was able to get people energized about it. Bryan had conducted a free marketing seminar and had heard venomous anger, and he tried to steer people to solutions, which was a strength of his. Bryan noted some of the anger had even come from someone more recent who had tried to do something. Julie said if there was stuff that they were missing the boat on, they needed and wanted to know, and it was why this commission was formed. Julie added the Select Board also wants to know and is ready to face the fire. Barre wondered if they were hearing more culture than government. Barre thought people weren't always supportive of someone who wanted to get ahead and wondered if it was culture or government that the businesses were talking about and Bryan said it was a little bit of both. Bryan thought some of them felt they came into town with energy that was repeatedly quashed. Bryan said they still think the former Select Board feelings exist. Bob wondered what they wanted to see. Julie understood that the businesses may not want to reveal who they were and wanted to be sensitive to it, but detail would help. The mindset of boards, 2 or 3 boards ago, were 180 degrees different than the current board. Julie had a board about 10 years ago that felt the town had nothing to do with businesses in the community. Bryan said someone mentioned the previous town manager's view was they take care of the fire department, education, police, and the roads. Woodstock just had a big meeting about Vermont tourism to discuss what Maine was doing right, and what Vermont was doing wrong. Maine promotes the state and makes an insane amount of money. Bryan said what Chester can do to promote the town was in that same ether. Julie pointed out that this was new for Chester and they hadn't really thought that way before. It is a great opportunity to dump grievances and offer solutions and not worry about offending anyone. Many of the people who complained were no longer there and Julie understood some may complain about her and she was okay with that. Damon said the press release would help and the members could use their channels to promote it and let people know that the business directory isn't perfect and welcome their feedback. The Town has Facebook and Instagram, which is where they will share it. Bryan would work on a look for the committee and create a visual. Damon said there were surveys for visitors, and it would be good to consider places they could get visitors and make the QR code available. They should start thinking about target audiences. Bryan has a plastic thing that he can paint the QR codes on. Damon knew Bryan would come up with cool concepts people would be excited about. Phil wondered if they could get restaurants and lodging places to put something on their websites. Bryan suggested slipping something inside their bills, too. Julie thought perhaps even retail could put something in customers' bags. Damon thought it would be helpful once businesses saw the commission doing things for them and giving them something of

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value. Right now, they were asking for their opinions, which was good, but they may see it more as an interruption. Damon wanted to start considering a marketing website to help them. With the 250th Anniversary of the United States approaching, Damon wanted to do something with the Historical Society and create a marketing website where people can donate. History brings traffic to a town, so it was worth promoting historical sites and happenings. Bob noted that Vermont's 250th was next year. Bob said Windsor was already planning for Vermont's 250th next year, even more so than the country's 250th. Julie said if they offered to help with a website for one group, they had to offer it for all and then there would be a question if they were obligated to offer it. Bob thought it may be worth thinking less about the organization and more about July 4th and the 250th Anniversary of the United States and what's going on in Chester. Damon said he could put his citizen's hat on and do it for the Historical Society outside of the commission. Julie was concerned that all the nonprofits may want the same thing and Damon said that may be a good problem to solve. There are 175 businesses in the business directory and Bryan wondered how he should go about making it equal with the businesses he targets. Bryan said he thought he should target the businesses that get the most traffic first – the brick-and-mortar places, as opposed to people providing services that are specifically so localized. Damon said they were all volunteers and thought it would be appropriate to begin with people Bryan knew and become comfortable with the process. Damon is speaking with people he knows. Julie said the goal was to hit everyone and they had to start somewhere. Bob said SRDC hits the larger businesses, so he suggested they focus on the smaller ones, particularly hospitality. Bryan said that was his first go-to and retail. Barre said if the group was perceived as flatlanders coming in trying to change things with their ideas, it could feed into some of the issues. Barre said part of the problems locals had been real, such as people coming in with fire and thinking they're smarter and have a lot of ideas, open their inn or whatever, become involved, and 3 years later they're gone, and everyone is exhausted. Barre suggested they should be wary about volunteering to help groups, like the Historical Society, because they'll feel like they're treading on them. Damon nicely said he didn't care and was a citizen first and would do whatever he wanted with his own time. Julie thought there was an element of what they were doing that was new and different and she didn't want them to be hindered. Bob appreciated the commission was new and said the Downtown Master Plan was a wonderful process that brought people together with different perspectives and had positive results the community is still benefitting from. Julie agreed. This was an opportunity to bring together a different set of people who are a subcommittee of the Select Board and can bring the community together in whatever ways they choose. Julie said the master plan did a lot but what was new to the public was the focus on the economic development side of things. In 2018 things started to shift. Julie said they will encounter those people but there are different people on the board and the conversation they have with Bryan is different than the one with her because she's been there for 22 years and they know her, and they don't know him, which was a good thing. Julie said Barre was correct that there were those people, but she wouldn't worry about them now. Barre thanked Julie for acknowledging that and said they didn't want to be perceived in that way. Barre said they were intelligent people who came with experience and weren't trying to change anyone's lives and wanted to be team players. They were trying to make things happen. Bryan could see himself showing up at certain places with some resistance but didn't care as he is used to people not liking him for various reasons and being different in some ways. Bryan likes going into those experiences and finding ways to navigate them, but he was fine with letting someone else do that when it came to certain businesses but wanted the commission to know he didn't have a problem with that. Damon understood they may have some strategic objections that are focused or targeted. Damon

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said history and art and farming communities draw people and Chester is partly tied to tourism whether they like it or not. Julie agreed it had its place and said there are pillars in the master plan such as rediscovering Chester. Arts, recreation, and history were some of the five. Damon suggested they do more generic things outside of the clubs or groups. Barre said they shouldn't make anyone think they're taking over their game, purpose, or show because a big part of what people's lives are they feel that you're trying to get involved and change that. If you make them feel enriched, valued, and shine a positive light on them, they'll like it.

For the rollout, they have the press release. Bryan will work on what social media messaging may look like. Julie will make an announcement at the Select Board meeting on Wednesday. Bob said the themes were arts, business and tourism, historic resources, character, land use and design, recreation, transportation, mobility, and wayfinding.

Agenda Item 7, Next Meeting Agenda for July 22nd

- Review the promotional material.
- Review survey results to date and the number of responses. If they aren't getting enough under one survey, figuring out how to get more response.
- Bryan mentioned a more communal space with a co-working space for makers, retail sales, and workers and suggested some structures that already existed. Bob said the concept came up and what was the math and deal flow to make it viable: How many people are there? How often would they use it? How much would they pay? And then you can go to a property and ask how much master leasing it would cost and add the infrastructure. Damon wondered if there was an inventory of privately held, low-use, or vacant properties that are commercial or mixed-use. Julie wanted to look at a gap survey to see what kinds of business they're missing. Barre has been messaging with someone who has a vacant building in town looking for ideas for their place. Barre thought if they could make people aware through the website and become a resource, it would be helpful. Bob said they could gather information and bring people together and make something good happen. Bryan was aware of empty spaces, but some aren't attainable, and some can't afford to go in and spend hundreds of thousands of dollars. Julie wondered what kind of spaces they were looking for so that information would be helpful. Damon read a reply they had already received: "Small businesses are what the town is able to support in terms of staffing, yet small businesses and startups do not often have the ability to buy land and construct buildings. A multi-use building with light manufacturing or studio space, retail spaces would be an amazing addition to the town and allow innovation and small business/arts community, the visual arts. We have performances covered somewhat through the Music Town Hall series, but nothing for the visual arts." Damon suspected that would come up often. Damon attends the Bellows Falls Co-Op meetings and they're trying to solve problems that nobody has. Damon said they should avoid dancing and try to find things that have a viable return on investment. It would be included as an agenda item under future goals.

Agenda Item 12, Adjourn

Julie moved to adjourn, and Phil seconded the motion. The motion carried, and the meeting was adjourned at approximately 6:50 p.m.

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