TOWN OF CHESTER
ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT COMMISSION
January 29, 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: Cathy Hasbrouck at Town Hall.

Call to Order

Julie Hance called the meeting to order at 6:00 p.m.

Agenda Item 1, Organization of Committee.

Julie said they needed to establish a chair, vice chair, and secretary and noted they had a minute taker for the town, Sue, who composes the minutes from Zoom so the secretary would not be responsible for that, which would make it easier.

Julie asked for nominations for board chair. Julie nominated Preston and Phil seconded the motion. Preston said because he was a staff member, it felt a little weird but was willing to do it for at least the first year. Julie asked the other members if they were okay with a staff member being a chair and nobody objected. Preston said he has served in similar positions and held the belief that the chair doesn't impose their will on the other members and would remain as neutral as possible. Julie asked if anyone else was interested in serving as chair and there were no takers. Phil thought it was a fine idea. A vote was taken and the motion carried, unanimously. Preston thanked them for their vote of confidence.

Preston asked for nominations for vice chair. Damon nominated Carl for vice chair and Bryan seconded the motion. The motion passed, unanimously.

Preston asked for nominations for a secretary and noted they didn't take the minutes but would receive anything important the commission needed. Julie said there wasn't much to do. Damon nominated Bob and Carl seconded the motion and Bob agreed to do it. The motion carried, unanimously.

Julie asked if Preston wanted to set the standard meeting night. Preston said they could meet any night but should advertise on the website that there is a standard meeting night. Preston asked if Thursday worked for everyone. Julie said the meeting room was available on the first and fourth Tuesdays, the second and fourth Wednesdays, and on Thursdays and Fridays. Carl said anything other than Thursdays worked for him. Tuesday wasn't good for Bob. Phil was not available the second Wednesday of each month. They decided on the fourth Wednesday of every month.

Julie explained what open meeting law was for the members. She explained that there must be a record of email communication when it involves a majority of board members; to err on the side of caution, they typically distribute stuff to the board from a staff member at Town Hall which

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makes it cleaner, especially for public records requests, which are dealt with regularly. They are allowed to communicate to a majority of the board via email to establish meeting dates but any other communication, they should avoid. They can get together to work on projects, as long as it isn't a majority of the board. Julie advised them to remember that everything they do, the public needs access to. She asked the members if they wanted a chestervt.gov address or would rather continue to use their personal emails. The consensus was to use their personal emails. Carl asked if there was a SharePoint site for Chester that was available to the public that they could use for working documents which people could view or read but not edit. Julie said they have SharePoint but don't use it internally. Julie said they shouldn't be editing documents unless it was the entire board or a subgroup. A subgroup of 2 or 3 could work on something without the entire group. Bob reminded the other members that if someone subpoenaed them, they could subpoena their emails if they used their personal emails. Most of the members opted for a chestervt.gov email. Bob Flint would use his Springfield Development email.

A packet will be prepared a few days before the meeting. If members want something included in the package, they will email Julie and Preston ahead of time.

Phil wanted to modify the mission statement in the bylaws. Phil thought increasing the grand list of taxable property was paramount. Julie noted the Select Board would need to modify it but that could be done. Increasing the grand list for the town of Chester was the statement they would wordsmith. Damon and Phil noted one of the goals was to increase the taxable value of the land. Damon wasn't interested in increasing the scope of the committee to increase the grand list and Phil thought they should. Bob thought they should wordsmith the statement to include a sustainable economy and demographics so they could tack it on at the end so it would be inclusive and a goal but not the goal. Damon understood Phil to be saying that the purpose of the committee was to increase the tax revenue for Chester. Bob suggested businesses provide goods and services compatible in industry and manufacturing with consideration of increasing the town's grand list. Julie suggested emphasising and forecasting on tourism and growing businesses and all those things would inherently impact the grand list. Phil wasn't sure he agreed and used re-opening the Free Range restaurant as an example. Julie was thinking of growing and bringing businesses like light industry and manufacturing. In Phil's view, increasing the grand list was shorthand for bringing new businesses to town. Carl wanted a stated goal of bringing new businesses to town. Julie said as the grand list grows, the municipal budget stays the same and taxes come down. Carl wondered about increasing tourism and if the sales tax would help Chester. Julie said if they had a local option tax, it would help. Phil thought it was earmarked and Julie explained it would need to be for retail. Julie proposed that they add the discussion on the next agenda and wasn't sure it really fell under organization. It was a discussion that bore some thought. Preston said he and Julie would provide some examples at the next meeting.

Agenda Item 2, Additions or Deletions to the Agenda

There were none.

Agenda Item 3, Citizens Comments

There were none.

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Agenda Item 4, Discuss Next Steps and First Efforts

Preston had made a copy of a housing snapshot that the Regional Planning Commission has on their website for Chester. From Preston's perspective, he thought if someone read it who wasn't familiar with Chester, they would think the town was dying, and it isn't. The whole idea that the population had a small decline and the population is aging and the average income is under the county average, Preston found a depressing picture and was why the Housing Commission was working on it. Preston suggested the members take it home and read it. Julie thanked them all for willing to serve on the committee and said she has wanted to have an economic development committee for years. She said it wasn't her wheelhouse and she didn't know a lot about it. Julie said Chester was a large small town and more was going on that a lot of people realized and more went on than most towns of similar size. Julie said they do a lot of grants, bonding, and projects. Economic Development can focus on the businesses of the town and growing those businesses and taking what Chester has to offer and marketing it to the world. It has been talked about at Select Board meetings but nothing is ever done because it requires a group of people who are focused and skilled and able to do that, unless you want to pay to have a professional do it. Julie is excited about having the committee. Bob said his organization is creating a master business list for the region and they were happy to share that. Bob said they cover the same region that is covered by the Mount Ascutney Regional Commission. They are RDC for this part of Vermont. The state has a Department of Economic Development within the Agency of Commerce and Community Development. They contract with 12 organizations to cover specific geographic regions of the state and RDC is part of that and receives a chunk of funding but is not the state. Bob said they work with everyone, whether they're starting a business or are the largest employers in town. It can mean money or helping people develop business plans. They have tentacles to Apex Accelerator who does government contracting. They are tied to the Small Business Development Center, which provides free and confidential counseling. They are SCORE, a society of senior and retired executives. Help can mean building stuff or workforce development. They've been involved with the Federal Reserve of Boston the last few years on the Working Communities Challenge, which involves training and they are a liaison to the products and services for the state. They try to keep tabs on the value-added business in the region, which includes north of Windsor, south to Springfield, and west to Ludlow, which includes 10 towns including Chester, Springfield, Ludlow, Windsor, Cavendish, Andover, Reading, and West Windsor. They receive funding from business members and towns. They have splashier projects in other towns. They are doing the Park Street School redevelopment for the Black River Innovation Campus, which they've invested $7 million on. They built the Blake Hill Preserves building and a building which is now a dispensary but had been a cheese company. RDC is able to get funding through the Vermont Economic Development Authority. Bob said they provided loans over the past year to Meditrina and to Miguel at Alder Bakery who they shepherded through funding. They are a C(6) organization and are non-profit but not a charity. RDCs exist in statute but not SRDC. They are very active politically. Julie said Bob was their connection to what is happening in the state. Julie has never felt like she's had a solid understanding from local businesses about what they're doing and doesn't hear from them directly. Julie suggested they take some time to hear from different businesses and provide a space for them to let the town know how they can help. Damon had begun those discussions with folks he knew and he would be interested in talking to them and figuring out the right questions to ask and conduct a survey. Damon preferred to speak with them face to face. Preston pointed

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out they try not to talk about people's businesses in a meeting like this because it's public record. Preston encouraged Damon to speak with them one-on-one or invite them to a meeting or share what they said if they agree. Damon thought a survey would be good and would make sense to speak to businesses that have closed and find out why. A few months ago, Bryan conducted a free marketing seminar for small businesses in town with only a week's notice and 5 people attended and received a lot of feedback. Bryan planned on continuing that, as long as there is interest. Going forward, Bryan would provide a summary to the committee. Phil wondered what the typical businesses were who attended. Bryan said jewelry, household goods, specialty products, and retail stores. Julie said it would be interesting to have a gap inventory done to see what businesses Chester needs. Phil wondered if a survey was done before and Julie said Tim Roper had conducted one years ago. Phil suggested they review it. Carl suggested a refresh of the survey to see how things had changed. Preston had a report that was given to the Planning Commission when it was done but noted it had never been disseminated to the public. Preston recalled being pleased with the response. Carl wasn't a fan of additional taxes but said the data provided insight to what was growing or shrinking. Carl wondered if the state could tell them by sector what the sales taxes were for specific zip codes. Preston was able to get a number when the Select Board had asked. Bob said they need 10 or more businesses who paid in to be able to get that information. Preston said 10 or less businesses were too easy to pick up proprietary information. For sales, Preston thought they could get it. Bryan asked why the campaign, Meet Chester, didn't work out. Bob said sometimes the community has a difficult time coalescing around things and felt he could say that, as he grew up in the area. The Chester Economic Development Corporation, which is defunct now, had done that because there was frustration about the lack of marketing for Chester and the people doing it had burned out. Julie noted it was a private group who were basically business owners. It was a different Select Board then who felt business and government did not mix. New leadership and master planning changed things. Julie will provide it to the members and noted it was from 2018 and probably outdated. Damon wanted any documents that were successful. Julie said she doesn't like plans where money is spent and nothing done. Bob said going back to sales data for the fiscal year of 2025, it increased slightly. Julie said the Select Board now understands there is a relationship between the town and businesses and they want it to be a positive one and should work together. Chester has things they can market to the world, like the internet and water and sewer infrastructure. Julie said rather than being Woodstock or Weston or somewhere else, they need to figure out who they are and where they contribute in the region and saw that as a task for the committee to figure out what they have that's amazing and to market to the world. Carl wondered what Bob's timeline was for having the inventory of all the businesses done. Bob thought it could be done before the next committee meeting. Julie said the Planning Commission is rewriting the town plan and this committee could help with that. Bryan wondered how it worked for businesses on the Green to change from commercial to residential and vice versa. Preston said he was hired as Zoning Administrator four years ago and now Hugh Quinn is in that position and Preston is Town Planner. Preston has been in zoning for about 20 years; he has had several people ask if he had the power to stop the last owners of the Free Range from selling all the equipment and Preston said it was a free country and he didn't have that power. Preston suggested creating a climate in the zoning bylaws that reduce obstacles and make it easier to do certain things. Bryan wondered where people could find commercial spaces as he was aware of people who wanted to start businesses in town but didn't know where to go. Bob said SRDC has a commercial sites inventory on their website and tries to keep it up-to-date. In the past, Bob said there wasn't

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consensus on where they were willing to have development. Preston has been approached by people asking about available properties and he didn't have that information and said they could do better. Cathy Hasbrouck said it helped to have access to the MLS. Preston said there are vacant properties that the owner isn't interested in doing anything with. Carl said it sounded like SRDC was doing amazing work and saw part of their mission as making things as friction free as possible. Preston knew of a commercial property in town that was sold to an out-of-state person who remarked that the price was so good that they couldn't resist buying it. They may do something with it when they retire but in the meantime, it sits empty, which is frustrating.

Preston asked how long they wanted the meetings to run. Damon advocated for an hour. Julie said the Housing Commission was that way.

Agenda Item 5, Carl Henshaw Presentation

Carl said when they thought about where they were today as a community. Communities who set a vision and strategy over a course of 10 or 20 years, look materially different than those who don't. Carl thought they should consider what table stakes they wanted to make it a community that people want to move into and are able to move into over the next 10 or 20 years. Carl said they weren't trying to be Springfield, Boston, or New York, but the best version of themselves and they should ask what those qualities look like. Carl mentioned the youth and how they get mentorship and internship programs, training and housing. That would attract more businesses. Where Carl grew up in Texas, they manifested themselves as the restaurant capital of Texas and at the time, had only two restaurants; they now have 86. Carl said Chester had 64 miles of snowmobile trails but didn't have connectivity and didn't have a railroad stop. If they tweaked some things, it would help everyone. The first step was using the data, running experiments, and making it transparent. Carl suggested finding businesses who want to be part of the journey. They need to be willing to acknowledge their deficits in order to address them. Carl and Damon were impressed with the podcast. Julie had listened to some of it. Carl said it dovetailed the next sequences. Carl suggested they listen to the podcast and consider how to incorporate it into an agenda item, as well as dividing into subcommittees. Carl's wheelhouse is outreach and analysis and he wanted to be involved in those subcommittees. Carl mentioned the Fullerton and said they were pivotal and if they are successful, everything on the Green goes up. Carl wondered how they make sure bed and breakfasts are operating at full capacity. Julie suggested considering subcommittees as an agenda item for the next meeting. Carl wanted subcommittees and wondered what their vision for Chester was and suggested building a strategy that coalesces around supporting that vision. Carl was impressed that they would already have an inventory by the next meeting. Cathy asked if the subcommittees would have to jump through hoops as far as posting meetings and Julie said as long as it didn't involve a majority of the board, they did not. Three people could be on a subcommittee to avoid that. Damon said they had a survey of businesses and what questions to ask and had how to invest in Chester and streamline people to the right opportunities and the overall vision for Chester. Damon liked creating opportunity and mentorship but wasn't sure how they got there yet. Carl wondered what high school students did once they graduated and if they went to school, trade school, and how they felt about opportunities. Carl said Chester couldn't just be an aging community but rather grown and in 20 years, discuss where the next school is going to be built and not if it's going to be shut down. Julie would provide the members with the master plan. Bob said it was an opportunity to talk

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about the community center and he was always partial to the Green and how it could be a focal point and a vibrant center of the community. Damon mentioned there are other geographic areas that are commercial and Bob agreed and said he was just using that as a starting point for discussion. Bryan wondered if they would address specific buildings and why they weren't active and Julie said they could. She didn't want to go into too many directions at the first meeting but was thrilled there was so much excitement. She suggested they consider what they were going to target to get a baseline and get grounded and have those conversations later, along with the gap analysis. Damon said some of the things he thought might be easier and surprise them was how fast they could be done given the tools they had. Damon was going to tackle gap analysis pretty quickly. Carl said the grand list increase was a key performance indicator they are doing their job and it wouldn't happen overnight. Carl said an increase in sales taxes and things like that would be their north stars as to what they were doing right. Damon said if businesses were important to Chester and its continued success, how to support them was something they didn't know right now. Julie agreed and that was the information she was focused on. The consensus was excitement among the members. Damon said Chester wasn't a destination but a pass-through. There are large attractions that are close. Damon wondered how they could make Chester more of a destination to encourage people to stop. It could be as simple as people feeling they're not going to get pulled over and ticketed driving through Chester. Damon has had people tell him they avoid driving through Chester for that reason. Damon suggested making the Green attractive at Christmas and growing it from there. Bryan asked if there would be a marketing budget for Chester and Julie said they have the Chester Development Funds, which are a little over $400,000, a revolving loan which they use to help local businesses. They have access to those funds and the Select Board is working on a rewrite of the bylaws and how the funds can be used, so the committee can have access to some of the funds for necessary things. Julie said they wanted to have a few meetings before doing that so they can provide the board with how the funds would be used. Julie said it could eventually end up in the budget. Carl suggested sources of Vermont and Federal, as well as possible other funds, and Bob said they were difficult to get for marketing. Bob said a unique thing about Chester's Revolving Loan Fund is that the source of money allows the town to invest it more aggressively and creatively than other towns, so Chester has made a lot of money from them. Bob said they have to have collateral material and a call to action. Bob added there was a chamber in the region, too. Julie said there are grants they can find. Carl said they're not an island and suggested coordinating and integrating with neighboring communities. According to Julie, some have asked why Chester can't have a playhouse and she wonders why they need one when people can go to Weston. Chester can send people there and Weston can send people to Chester for something. Chester has a beautiful disc golf course and recreation facility. There are tournaments there and people come from all over. Carl said he's been in Chester for 3 years and is still learning about it. Julie said the institution of the town is running a police department and a highway department and they never venture into marketing the town. Bryan mentioned people visiting Ludlow saying they should stop at DaVallia when they leave. Bryan said there is so much potential. Preston mentioned when he first started working for Chester, he looked at the window and was happy he could see the train. He said it would be a lot to get Amtrak to come to Chester and the track isn't maintained to a high enough standard. Carl wondered if they could do it with a grant. Preston said the Chamber gets the holiday train and it's a money maker but it cost $20,000 for the railroad for two days to charter the train. But they could do more of that type of thing. Julie said foliage trains used to be very popular in Chester and before COVID they had died. Preston said chartering a train through

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an existing railroad doesn't require meeting the same incredible rules required for Amtrak. Preston saw ways they could get there and more things they could do with the rail. Bob said in normal times with a different administration, you could take advantage of the fact that you have access to the Vermont government. There are two senators who could be helpful but everything federal, right now, is a mess. Preston lives in Woodstock and has for many years. He was on the Select Board there for a while. Preston wasn't saying Chester should be like Woodstock but noted they have an impressive budget for marketing. Preston said some of the residents in Woodstock are saying the town is becoming unlivable because of the tourists. Preston compared it to Chester's festival happening 6 or 8 times a year. People will come but it needs to be in the New York Times, Yankee Magazine, and other publications. Cathy said it was worth considering what happened to Woodstock over the years with the hollowing out of small businesses and parking issues. Preston noted that Chester has parking options and there was a problem with being too successful but Chester didn't need to worry about that yet. Bryan mentioned Woodstock only had one road but Chester had two. Preston said people who drive from Bellows Falls to Rutland don't even know Chester has a Green because they don't drive by it. Bob said the same applied to ski traffic. Julie noted that something they may want to watch and pay attention to is about the municipal budget and the Select Board is working on doing a deep dive and reviewing and evaluating services that Chester offers and helping taxpayers to understand what Chester offers and if they are services they want. Julie said there are people who want to cut the Rec Department which would have a big impact on the growth of the community. This will help educate everyone. Julie will keep the committee updated.

Agenda Item 6, New Business/Next Agenda

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- Bylaw review and establishing a mission statement.
- Business list.
- Subcommittees.
- If Julie has the gap inventory before the next meeting, Damon will try to have some preliminary surveys. Julie reminded the members not to have more than three people if they discussed anything together. She also reminded them the agenda can include things not mentioned at this meeting if they let her know ahead of time. Bob will try to parse out the sales tax information. Damon will process everything Bob sends through multiple AIs and compare them with other regions.

Agenda Item 7, Adjourn

Preston asked for a motion to adjourn and Damon moved and Phil seconded the motion. A vote was taken and passed unanimously. The meeting was adjourned at 7:20 p.m.

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