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2 **TOWN OF CHESTER**  
3 **ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT COMMISSION**  
4 **March 25, 2026, Minutes**

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

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8 Visitors Present: Barre Pinske at Town Hall.

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10 **Call to Order**

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

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14 **Agenda Item 1, Approve Minutes from Previous Meeting (February 25, 2026)**

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16 Carl moved and Damon second the motion to approve the minutes. The motion carried,  
17 unanimously, and the minutes were approved, as written.

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19 **Agenda Item 2, Citizens Comments**

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21 There were none.

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23 **Agenda Item 3, Update on Mission Change**

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25 Julie noted it would be before the Select Board next Wednesday. Preston presented them with the  
26 statement and what was in italics would be added, unless there were changes. There were none.

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

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30 Preston thought the working groups were: Business List / GAP Analysis and Community Survey  
31 and Website.

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33 For Business List, Carl said they merged the Springfield Registry and the AI-generated lists and  
34 consolidated them down. Bob was working on which ones had been decommissioned. Carl  
35 thought they were getting close. Preston and Julie noted it would be a nice resource, when  
36 completed, and allow them to contact businesses by email and also include them on a public list,  
37 if desired. Damon suggested the first draft of the list be presented at the next meeting. Preston  
38 would include it on the next agenda.

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

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42 For Community Survey, Damon said they have a bunch of them and a pretty solid business  
43 survey that he and Carl put together and a lot of other ancillary surveys that had value. Damon  
44 suggested they finalize them between this meeting and next. Carl thought they should be  
45 coordinated with the Town Plan, which would solicit the VOC as part of the plan refresh and saw  
46 no danger in releasing one early. Carl added that it helps them codify who has active email

47 addresses and participating, and may reinforce what happens with the Town Plan. Carl didn't  
48 want to release surveys if the Town Plan was going out soon, as it could cause confusion. Julie  
49 had not heard from Hugh Quinn regarding an update. Preston noted that Carl knew more as a  
50 member of the Planning Commission and said they had a two-year window to get the Town Plan  
51 updated and adopted. They received a municipal planning grant for it and had a kickoff meeting  
52 earlier in March. Preston didn't know that the Planning Commission would send out a survey so  
53 the Economic Development's survey could inform the Town Plan. Preston said the Planning  
54 Commission would hold four listening sessions in updating the Town Plan but wasn't there yet,  
55 so he advised the Economic Commission not to hold back with their survey but make sure the  
56 Planning Commission doesn't do one at the same time. Julie said they would communicate with  
57 Hugh, as Chair of the Planning Commission. As Town Planner, Preston will be involved with the  
58 Town Plan. Damon said there had been a ton of work done regarding the questions they would  
59 ask and the value of the different groups and thought they could move a lot faster than most.  
60 Preston agreed. Damon showed the members the work they had already done. Phil noted that  
61 some people could fit into multiple groups in the survey. Damon noted that based on the work  
62 Carl did, when someone fills it in, it automatically writes to a spreadsheet and makes the  
63 information available immediately to the commission. Bryan and Damon will talk to business  
64 owners and provide QR codes. When completing the survey, they can identify themselves or  
65 remain anonymous. Carl had mentioned it would be great to have a dashboard displaying their  
66 objectives and where they are. Damon thought they could move faster. They want an overall  
67 activity calendar to alert business owners to what's happening so they can use it as a tool to  
68 attract people. Damon also wanted to provide a list of different things Chester offers and have  
69 people value them when completing the survey. Preston found it exciting and they were happy to  
70 utilize Bryan and Damon's skills. Preston saw their work complimenting the Planning  
71 Commission's goals. Carl noted the priorities that are included in the Town Plan will likely  
72 increase their ability to secure grants. Julie agreed. Damon said it was created off a lot of work  
73 Carl had done utilizing AI. Damon noted the tools towns and marketers use are changing and  
74 suggested doing nothing with the main Chester website but rather stand pieces and websites up,  
75 as needed, using AI. It wasn't expensive, but he assumed the town would want to own and  
76 control it so there should be a budget for that. Julie expected that the Select Board would allocate  
77 funds from the Chester Development Funds for work for economic development and suggested  
78 they come up with a budget to present to the board. Carl wondered if they should do it in  
79 piecemeal. Julie suggested that they don't do it in a way that they constantly need to ask for  
80 money and suggested the commission figure out a plan and what is needed to fund the plan for 6  
81 months or a year and then request that from the board. She went on to suggest they decide what  
82 they need to get them going and create a baseline and request that from the board. Carl asked  
83 when the budget was set for the town and Julie noted it was mid-January and explained the funds  
84 for the Economic Development Committee were not taxpayer funds but a separate fund; the  
85 Chester Economic Development Funds that the town uses for capital loans for businesses in  
86 towns. The policy that the board updated a couple of years ago in anticipation of this committee  
87 included parameters to fund economic development of this committee. Because the board  
88 manages the fund, the committee has to request it from them. Damon thought they would be  
89 pleasantly surprised with what the committee can do for the cost. Preston and Julie agreed.

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91 Barre said he has struggled with getting help and had had a bad attitude about young people but  
92 thought the new crop was different from the ones who received medals for everything and now

93 they wanted to work. Barre thought the town needed a better website and social media presence  
94 and the Economic Development Committee was moving faster than other groups had. Barre  
95 suggested getting an intern in the office - someone with enthusiasm and skills leaving the  
96 committee to focus on the stuff they wanted to do rather than get in the woods. Damon  
97 understood what Barre was saying but said times were changing so fast that there were no woods  
98 and the work they're doing moves rapidly. Barre wondered if they needed someone in the town  
99 to do it. Damon, speaking for himself, said they needed plans to help younger people and  
100 anywhere they can do that, they should. Damon said it was all attainable. Preston said he's  
101 worked with interns in the past and sometimes it takes a lot of time to keep them busy. Julie said  
102 they were not creating staff positions. Carl said if there was town staff who was interested in  
103 learning how to utilize some of the AI tools, they could do a lot of stuff and the tools are cheap.  
104 Damon agreed they were more than willing to help transfer knowledge. Damon said the  
105 generalist and specialist will do well utilizing these tools. Preston noted that Amie and Sam  
106 maintain the website and are willing to learn more. Damon thought they shouldn't do anything  
107 with the website currently but proposed they build off of it. Julie wondered how far they were  
108 from getting the survey out and Damon expected they would be finished before the next meeting,  
109 where it could be finalized. Carl said they could share it so it could be included in the packet.  
110 They suggested launching the site with the surveys and selecting a URL that they could direct  
111 people to from the website to print off a QR code for marketing material. Damon noted the  
112 website was public and they could utilize it without having a domain name and mask the URL by  
113 linking it to the main website for less permanent things but noted they could purchase a domain  
114 name for not much money but would probably take longer to jump through those hoops with the  
115 Select Board. Julie said Select Board approval wasn't necessary. Julie questioned concerns with  
116 having multiple domains because of the connection to federal things. Preston said because they  
117 have a .gov site, there may be restrictions. Damon said they're building a website but it would  
118 have town sponsorship and Carl said the .gov extension could limit the connection. Julie clarified  
119 it would not be connected to anything federal and Damon said they could test it out before  
120 connecting it. Damon said the first launch should have a landing page that includes their mission  
121 and the surveys, the initial business listing, and a call for if they missed something and including  
122 an ancillary survey of the things available in Chester and whether people are aware of them and  
123 if they value them. Bryan wondered if they would link businesses to all the surveys or just ones  
124 specific to them and Damon thought they should discuss it. Phil noted specific surveys and  
125 people who screw up the data by logging onto irrelevant surveys and wondered how they control  
126 the responders. Damon noted they would have a hard time controlling visitors but business  
127 owners were easy to control. Damon thought the survey should be anonymous with the option to  
128 identify themselves. Phil said he wasn't looking for an answer tonight but to consider how to  
129 protect themselves from malicious data, make sure everyone can participate to the extent they're  
130 interested and relevant, and prevent people from participating in surveys that are totally  
131 irrelevant. Phil didn't know what the answer was. Damon said they want as much data as  
132 possible, would make it public, and would trust people to be good citizens and not malicious.  
133 They may get some bad data, but that was okay. Carl said one of the survey questions is whether  
134 they want to participate. Carl liked the idea that it was anonymous but noted most people are  
135 more civil in person and more collaborative. Bryan wants to go speak with all the businesses but  
136 suggested for the ones who aren't available, sending them an email directly linking them to the  
137 survey. Damon said it had more value, but was more work and showed they care.

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139 Damon thought they'd be in good shape by the next meeting. They would talk about financial  
140 requests at the next meeting. Carl reminded Julie about their .gov email addresses and Julie  
141 would have Amie do them next week. Bryan raised the issue of using their personal emails and  
142 why it would be better to use .gov and Julie agreed due to open records.

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### **Agenda Item 6, List of Objectives for CEDC (Julie)**

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146 Preston and Julie had emailed the list and Julie noted they were broad and included everything  
147 she had discussed with them at the last meeting. Carl wondered how Julie felt they were doing  
148 and Julie and Preston were thrilled with their energy. Julie noted other towns are figuring out  
149 how to use AI for government and she was happy with the direction the commission was going.  
150 The list was not prioritized. Damon saw them all attainable and wondered if there were any items  
151 that Julie was super excited about. Julie knew it was down the road, but wanted them to get to a  
152 place where they market the town. Julie wasn't sure they have ever had the conversation about  
153 who they are and what they can offer but knew there were people who had ideas. She also  
154 thought some had the old Vermont mentality that municipalities don't market themselves and  
155 were just a town and the government doesn't have a role. Julie said there is still that mindset but  
156 they've begun to move away from it over the past several years. It is their responsibility to bring  
157 people and business and grow the community. Julie wasn't sure they fully understood and needed  
158 to have conversations surrounding it. Carl noted Vermont needed affordable housing to grow by  
159 100,000 rather than shrink and they needed places to work and have demand throughout the  
160 seasons. Carl would love for them to buy QR codes for Houston and Atlanta during August so  
161 people could visit Vermont when the heat is oppressive in the south. Julie said it's understanding  
162 what they have to offer, as a town, and who they are in the region rather than trying to compete  
163 with neighboring towns. At the end of the day, Julie would love for them to have a marketing  
164 plan. Carl said if they even had 15 or 20 more people bringing energy and excitement, it would  
165 help. Barre said what brought him to Chester was he recognized the road and business  
166 opportunity and was in Chester because the road brings him a lot of business and he can sustain  
167 himself. Barre brought up Paradise City, the largest arts and craft show producing company in  
168 Massachusetts. Barre said Bill Lindsay visits regularly and Barre has spoken to artists there  
169 about moving to Chester. Barre thought if they had more artisans in Chester, they could take  
170 advantage of the business the road brings. Barre said they don't have enough places for people to  
171 go to eat in restaurants. Damon said there are some problems they can address quickly and others  
172 will take more time and said he watched visitors walk around the Green at 4:30 and couldn't find  
173 anything open. Damon said the planning meeting mentioned a SWOT analysis and thought that  
174 would be helpful. Julie said the town had never done one in her 20 years there.

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### **Agenda Item 7, Weddings as an Economic Engine**

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178 Bryan said collecting data personally through conversation provides a personal touchpoint and  
179 gets people excited. Bryan had spoken with Miguel and Krista about bringing more weddings to  
180 town and catering and were excited about it. Phil said the DRB over the last year had 3 or 4  
181 applications for wedding venues. Preston said the weddings have been on more remote  
182 properties: the Williams Farm, which hasn't had many; the Old Town Farm on Route 10 but the  
183 new owner isn't interested in continuing them; and the Gulfwaite, who hasn't started. Julie added  
184 that the Stone Hearth has done weddings in the past and negotiations are taking place for the

185 Fullerton and the proposed buyer has a lot of interest in weddings, events, and redoing the space  
186 in the back. Preston said when people want to do weddings in remote spots, the neighbors oppose  
187 it due to the noise and traffic. Phil said people are interested but it's not being consummated.  
188 Preston said his point was businesses around the Green won't have the same issues. Phil said  
189 everyone who came to the DRB they approved.

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### **Agenda Item 8, New Business/Next Agenda (April 22, 2026)**

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- Preston said the current town webpage for this commission only includes agendas and Preston thought the list of objectives should be included when ready. Julie said they were the things she had thought about. Damon thought there was no reason to wait. Preston said he would include the committee members on the page. Julie noted they were only her thoughts and other members may have ideas.

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- Weddings are an economic engine. Preston said Chester has lodging and given some were struggling, he would hate to lose them. Preston thought weddings around the Green was something they may want to pursue. Carl noted the close proximity of the churches and added that the Fullerton has room to host a wedding. Damon mentioned the template and getting ideas from people who complete the surveys. Damon knew weddings were very profitable. One of the companies Damon owned was a wedding film company and was very successful. Damon suggested using weddings as one of the things they put through the template and develop the process and provide it at the next meeting and asked if anyone was interested in being in a group.

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- Damon suggested Barre have an arts and festival group. Barre said he's been amazed by the quality of comics he's interacted with and not as big a fan of his chainsaw carving buddies anymore. Barre mentioned that people traveled 2 hours to get to his place last weekend for comedy and that many travel an hour to perform for 5 minutes for free. Barre suggested a comedy festival and thought it could be done next fall or spring. Barre said they could incentivize it with cheaper rooms or prize money and it was something he could help with. Damon said they would include a comedy festival in the template. Barre said he didn't want to become famous but people who become famous draw visitors to town. Barre wants to have some form of a reality show and said he was 5 out of 1,000 in 2016 with A&E. Barre added that what he posts on Facebook gets 1,000 views and everything has Chester in it, including Pinsky's Rising Tide. Barre wants to clean up his place so it's a good reflection on the town. Barre said a lot of people with money come through the town and he has two art collectors who are billionaires.

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- Julie noted she had a business list, survey, financial requests, and the wedding template for the next meeting.
- Preston said the Carpet Bridge Marathon in Woodstock has blown up so it's hard to predict what will take off. Preston also mentioned the Reggae Festival in Hartford that became so big the Select Board didn't want to host it anymore. Phil said he likes Chester's motto, "The Vermont You've Been Hoping to Find." And said they should remember that when determining what they want to be.
- Bryan noted that Bernie came to town and there was a really high turnout for his really fun dance party. Anne Lamb is going to start a quarterly dance party and she wants to raise money for different places in Chester; the first being the Chester Teen Center. Bryan noted that dance was becoming a big thing again. Bryan suggested a fundraiser for the

231 commission and inviting people to show what they're making or selling and represent  
232 their business in some way and maybe during Mud or Stick seasons.  
233 ● Julie suggested a local business day. Barre is on the Vermont Arts Council mailing list  
234 and he saw something for municipalities and thought there may be assets there and  
235 something they could use for a comedy or arts festival. Julie noted they also receive their  
236 mailings. Barre said Monday was his busiest day of the week for sales and a lot of places  
237 aren't open Mondays. Barre thought the Commission should make people aware that they  
238 should be open on Mondays and have Tuesday or Wednesday have their days off. Damon  
239 noted that people involved in an arts festival don't have to be in Chester, only that the  
240 festival needs to take place in Chester and suggested Barre could let those who he knew  
241 know about it. Barre suggested putting art around town for people to view as it had  
242 worked well in other towns.

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#### **Agenda Item 8, Adjourn**

246 Phil moved to adjourn and Carl seconded the motion. A vote was taken and passed, unanimously.  
247 The meeting was adjourned at approximately 7:20 p.m.