

Hi Senate Government Operations Committee,

Note:

I will mention I am running for selectboard and trustee in Essex Junction. For the record I'm not trying to improve my campaign and wasn't during the selectboard meeting (more on that later). I don't even really know how to campaign. I've been invited to two debates. I went because why not. I have an email, and discord channel setup. No one has emailed me and no one has joined my discord. I didn't get signatures that wasn't required. If that was required I wouldn't be on the ballot. All I did was fill out a form and now I'm on the ballot. That's it! Definitely not campaigning. You could say I benefit from separation not passing because then if I won I would be able to keep my selectboard seat. However, those meetings are very boring, very long and you don't get paid very much for it either. Plus it's right after work. I constantly ask myself what am I doing? But it's too late now. I've put my name on the form I'm going to follow through with it. Come what may.

I'm Andy Champagne, an Essex Junction resident in the village. I'm sure you are aware of H.491 separating the village and town of Essex Junction VT which was passed by the house and I would appreciate it if you do not pass it. It's true the town and village hate each other, but what they really need to do is learn to work together and not split up. Not to mention neither has the skills to do something as complicated as separate nor are they in the position to have a successful outcome.

The main problem is that the real power in town is the Selectboard of Essex Town which has five members. When the villagers get three members on the Selectboard they leverage the village trustees and the Selectboard to get things in favor of the village. However, when the Town outside the village has three members on the Selectboard the trustee's do everything they can to stop the town's Selectboard from doing anything that is against the villagers. Which makes it an unfair advantage in favor of the Villagers. For example if the villagers don't want to pay for something that just benefits the village. They'll go to the town and get them to pay for it and then the people outside the village have to help the village pay for it.

A little bit of history. Essex Village and Essex Town have been trying to merge and separate since like the 1950's. They haven't been able to do so because they just don't have the votes for it. We can't seem to get the votes either way. So the first thing we tried was [H.95](#) (1) and that passed the town and village by 6,640 to 2,611 in March of 2020. This would put six members on the selectboard three from the village and three from outside the village. When Elain Haney the Selectboard president at the time saw this pass she put together a merger plan. They also actually hired Evan Teich to help with the merger. Now Elaine Haney is a villager who lives right down the street from me. Since she was the Selectboard president and there were three villagers on the Selectboard they made sure the merger plan favored the village by making it so that the villagers taxes would go down for the first twelve years. This is wrong because this is the village trying to take advantage of the town and I voted against it. Another thing that was going on during the vote was there were PACs in Essex Junction saying that if we didn't merge then we would separate. Which I took as the villagers trying to force the town to merge on something that didn't benefit them. Merger failed by nineteen votes and Elain Haney lost her seat to Tracey Delphia by two votes in March of 2021. I voted for Tracey and helped her

campaign. So come April of 2021 the villagers Elaine Haney and Annie Cooper who resigned her Selectboard seat got enough signatures to get a petition on the ballot "[nonbinding resolution to advise the village government to draft a separation charter](#)" (2) which passed. One thing to remember is the H.95 bill and the resolution to separate was put on the ballot from citizens petitioning the town, not the trustee's or selectboard.

The architect of separation is Brad Luck. (Fun Fact: I went to high school with Brad, sat next to him in biology class 1995. Man I'm old... We weren't buddies or anything but I do know him.) Brad Luck has been an employee of the village for like 15 years. He's now the Parks & Rec Director and [Interim Village Manager](#) (3) which he shares with Wendy Hysko. So let's just start with the obvious. It seems strange to me that a Parks & Rec Director gets assigned to come up with a separation plan. That doesn't seem like that department would know how to do that. The Parks & Rec department also paid for it. The Parks & Rec department spent [\\$10,000 for community conversations](#)(4) (Page 3, line 134). Then a [formal budget](#) (5) (page 3) of \$46,000 to \$61,000 was appropriated for it. Ok, they passed something that allowed them to research separation, but no one said anything about tens of thousands of dollars to do it. Brad is also struggling to manage his parks. If you go to the [EJRP Parks & Facilities](#) (6) two parks are missing from that website. [Steven's Park](#) (7) and [Pearl Street park](#) (8). Steven's park is being neglected. There's nothing in there except for an old swing set and down trees. Not to mention that park was donated to the village back in the 70's and that property now has to be worth millions of dollars now because houses around it are worth 500k. It's sad because this is how they treat things that were given to them. In fact all the parks in Essex are being neglected. There's graffiti, down trees, broken equipment and other problems. He also can't handle kids fighting in [Maple Street park](#) (9) (page 106). That park has been around since at least the 70's and is the crown jewel of the Parks & Rec department. I'm quite certain the Parks & Rec department has had to deal with kids fighting in the park over the decades, but apparently that information on how to deal with it didn't get passed down over the years because his solution was to just call the police and arrest them. I'd like to think they would be a little smarter than that.

Something else that is very concerning is the fact that Eliane Haney was the chair of the separation committee and also part of [Our Village Our Voices](#) (10). It is my understanding that a government body can't finance or promote a political issue and she seems really too close to one. She was also screaming merger and since that barely didn't pass she's now screaming separation. I would think that since it's her merger plan then she would just modify the merger plan a little bit and vote for it again, but no. Now she doesn't want to merge at all. Also the trustee's held public meetings around town and they really felt like they were promoting it.

The vote for separation was really weird. I had thrown away my mail in-ballot so I had to go to the high school to vote. I get my ballot and there is literally ONE question on it "Should the Village separate Yes/No". That election cost \$25,000 to do so it really was a \$25,000 question. Really weird. The town is really weird too. They didn't even have an election for it. Nor did the selectboard vote on it. Nor did they even approve a budget for it. So the town is operating with no budget and no authorization to do it. All the joint meetings the trustee's and selectboard are having shouldn't be occurring and all the time and resources the town employee's are using to deal with separation are not appropriated for it. I think the trustee's are just pissed off at the town and the town just doesn't want to deal with the villagers anymore.

The most concerning thing is that we have had real problems in Essex Junction Vermont last year

1. July 2021 [Protest at Essex Police department made national news](#) (11). Tanya Vyhovsky was there. They kicked the case out of Essex and we haven't heard anything since. Please look into this. No one around here wants to.
2. August 2021 [Failure to read managers contract](#) (12) cost the town and village eighty five thousand dollars and then allowed him to keep his job till february 2022. No employee, trustee, selectboard member figured this out before it was too late. Totally incompetent.
3. March 2022 [Messed up a portion of the mail in ballots](#) (13) for this year's town election which can cause votes to not be counted. Last year Tracey Delphia won by two votes and separation failed by 19 votes. The town learned every vote matters. Yet they mess up the mail in ballots. This is really bad since everyone in the country is screaming about rigged elections.

So clearly they can't do their job and this is what is coming at them.

1. Two, possibly three new selectboard members.
2. New Town and Village Manager.
3. All these [committee seats](#) (14) need to be filled.
4. New Finance director, New human resources director.
5. Possibly a new trustee member

If separation passes add these to the list of problems:

6. Police department the town owns won't be in the Town of Essex so that will look funny and they'll have to do something with that.
7. The town and village are going to have to create contracts to finish and implement with the village/city.
8. Separate IT between the town and village.
9. The town is going to be half its size in population.
10. They don't know what they don't know. Surprises are going to occur and given what has happened in the last year I don't think they can handle them.

These are just the issues they need to deal with to keep the government running, forget about issues that are affecting regular citizens like housing, Globalfoundries, covid19 and all the others. I don't think they want to deal with those either. Sometimes I think separation/merger is just something that grabs the town's attention so that they don't have to work on the real issues.

After messing up the ballots this year I finally started to really think about everything that has been going wrong here and I don't think they care. When I confronted Andy Watts about this during a [selectboard meeting](#) (15). He interrupted me, accused me of campaigning and then muted me. He clearly didn't want to listen to me at all.

So yeah. Separation is a bad idea. The people's motives around it are questionable. The people who designed it struggle with their day jobs. The town struggles to just handle elections. Not to mention all the problems that we're going to have to deal with in the future. Please just tell them no and don't let it out of committee.

ps. Please add my email to the public comment section.

Thanks.
Andy.

References:

1. H.95 - https://www.essexreporter.com/essex_merger/essex-reps-re-introduce-3-3-selectboard-makeup-charter-change-as-bill-h-95/article_1c5b29ec-606b-11eb-b9ef-cf488e6bfd15.html
2. Nonbinding resolution to advise the village government to draft a separation charter - <https://vtdigger.org/2021/04/13/essex-merger-fails-by-slim-margin-in-2nd-vote/>
3. Intrim Village Manager - <https://www.essexjunction.org/news/item/essex-junction-trustees-name-hysko-and-luck-as-interim-co-managers>
4. \$10,000 for community conversations (page 3, line 134) - https://www.essexjunction.org/fileadmin/files/Board_of_Trustees/Minutes_2021/20210427_VB_draft_minutes.pdf
5. formal budget page 3- https://www.essexjunction.org/fileadmin/files/Board_of_Trustees/EJI_Work_Session_April_27_2021.pdf
6. EJRP Parks & Facilities - <https://www.essexjunction.org/departments/rec/facilities>
7. Steven's Park - <https://goo.gl/maps/2x22sadT9kvDF9fJ9>
8. Pearl Street Park - <https://goo.gl/maps/JP1zumbMue1diFkq6>
9. Maple Street Park page 106 - https://www.essexjunction.org/fileadmin/files/Board_of_Trustees/2021_Packets/01_20210824_VB_Packet.pdf
10. Our Village Our Voices - <https://www.ourvillageourvoices.org/who-why>
11. Protest at Essex Police Department made national news - <https://apnews.com/article/police-race-and-ethnicity-racial-injustice-vermont-c804b210a406f065c98af8ff3802bfb0>
12. Failure to read manager's contract - <https://www.essexretorter.com/20211229-manager-owed-severance>
13. Messed up a portion of the mail in ballots - <https://www.essexretorter.com/wrongballots>
14. Committee seats - <https://www.essexvt.org/352/BOARDS-COMMITTEES>
15. selectboard meeting - <https://youtu.be/854VcKrdG3s?t=122>.