

‘Got Pot?’

by Irene Wrenner

Burlington and Winooski voters approved the retail sale of cannabis in their cities last November. Richmond voters said “No.”

Now, it’s up to Essex voters to decide if they want cannabis — the drug formerly known as marijuana — to be sold in brick and mortar businesses in the town, including the village.

The issue on the March 1st ballot is **NOT** legalization.

Cannabis use for medicinal purposes has been legal since 2004 in Vermont.

Growth and possession of small amounts of recreational cannabis were decriminalized in 2018.



Since then, more adults and youth are accessing cannabis. Nearly 20% of Vermonters use recreational cannabis on a monthly basis, according to VT Department of Health’s August 2021 [Marijuana Use Report](#).

Vermonters aged 12 to 25

March Vote to Decide on Retail Sales

years reported the highest use in the country according to the US Department of Health and Human Services’ [2018-2019 National Survey on Drug Use and Health](#).

On the upcoming ballot is a question of whether Essex will allow dispensaries of recreational cannabis beginning in October 2022. This is the only opportunity for voters to indicate whether they are willing to live with retail cannabis (RC).

Depending on whom you ask, RC sales would increase trans-

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Four Candidates Run for Three SB Seats

by Ken Signorello

The Town Annual Meeting’s Selectboard ballot is ready. For the two three-year seats, each candidate is a long-time Essex resident:

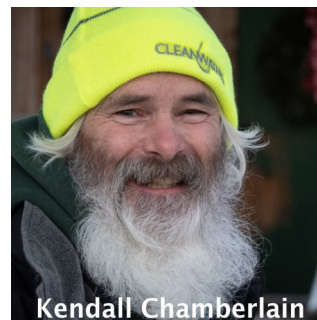
Kendall Chamberlain - Rural Essex resident, 30-year municipal employee for a nearby town,

Andy Champagne - Village of Essex Junction resident, Trustee Candidate on April ballot, and

Dawn Hill-Fleury - Essex Center resident, currently serves on the Selectboard.

For the one-year unexpired term, Rural Essex resident **Ethan Lawrence** is the only candidate on the ballot.

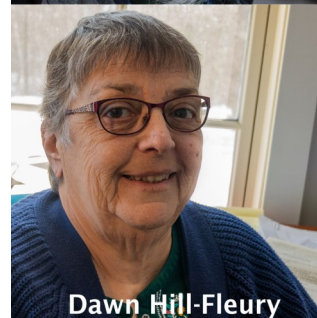
Ballots will be mailed out to all active, registered voters in February. Return postage is included. Polls are open Tuesday, Mar. 1st, 7 am - 7 pm, to cast ballots in person.



Kendall Chamberlain



Andy Champagne



Dawn Hill-Fleury



Ethan Lawrence

parency and tax revenue or would harm users and non-users alike, especially children and young adults.

Dr. Catherine Antley, a Burlington dermatopathologist, expressed deep concerns about RC in a [VTDigger commentary](#) in which she asserted that the costs of RC will greatly exceed any RC tax revenues.

On [Town Meeting TV](#) last February, she cited studies of the effects of cannabis on youth, whose brain development and emotional well-being are reportedly harmed, especially as more potent strains of cannabis have proliferated. (Links to those studies: [Physiciansvt.medium.com](#).)

"In the commercialized states," Antley said, "kids are getting this high-potency THC [the chemical responsible for most of cannabis' psychoactive effects] much more than kids in non-commercialized states. ... [It] is particularly dangerous for the psychosis, anxiety, depression, suicidality – all the really scary mental health issues."

[Another study](#) concluded, she said, that "the more marijuana shops in your neighborhood, the more likely your child is to use and to become addicted."

Physicians' groups across the US have published clear recommendations about legalized sales. The [Vermont Medical Society](#) "strongly opposes the advertising, marketing and promotion of cannabis in the

state of Vermont (including through the use of packaging, flavorings and placement / density of retail locations)."

Speaking with the *Retorter*, Essex Police Chief Ron Hoague noted that his concerns with



RC are the same as with decriminalization: negative health impacts, impaired driving, the black market and drug violence.

Changes in the law and greater social acceptance have led to more cannabis use, according to the chief. He predicted opting in to RC would lead to still greater use.

As a Drug Recognition Expert, he is trained to identify impairment in drivers. VTRANS data show that the number of fatal crashes involving drivers who tested positive for THC was greater in 2021 than in prior years.

When asked if retail cannabis would be different from retail alcohol, Hoague replied, "I don't think it will be anything different. We're acknowledging that alcohol is also a problem and that we're simply going to add on to it by allowing RC."

"We need to be doing more education with youth and adults as to the dangers of all kinds of drugs, not just cannabis," Hoague said.

In fact, some of the potential state tax revenue on RC would

be earmarked for cannabis education. However, no additional tax revenue is expected to flow directly to the Town of Essex from RC. Tax revenue may be a motivating factor for the State of Vermont to allow towns to vote on opting in to RC. ([Massachusetts'](#) cannabis tax revenue for the current fiscal year is already outpacing that of its alcohol tax revenue.)

The chief was clear that he's not taking a position on the ballot issue.

The *Retorter* also spoke with Meredith Mann, owner of Magic Mann, a café that sells confections containing CBD [a non-psychoactive derivative of hemp, a type of cannabis plant].

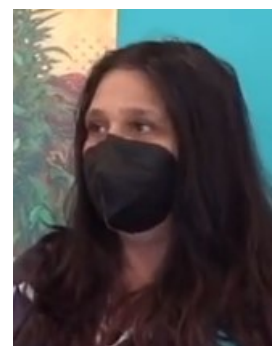
Magic Mann opened a year ago in the Essex Experience shopping center.

Mann, whose business promotes "chemistry and craft," is eager to see RC

pass. "It's time to normalize it. It's really no different than alcohol. I really believe

[regulated retail establishments] will help keep our kids safe."

According to Mann, any knowledgeable, licensed seller of retail THC products would provide information about the origin, purity and dosage to customers in well-labeled, childproof



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Separation Costs Less Than Merger for TOV

by Irene Wrenner

The January 3rd Selectboard meeting included a discussion of anticipated tax increases due to the potential Separation of the Village of Essex Junction from the Town of Essex.

Former Finance Director Sarah Macy has estimated the average Town-outside-the-Village (TOV) household tax increase due to Separation will be \$25 less than the \$372 increase that was projected with Merger just one year ago. This increase would carry into future years.

If Separation passes in the

2020 Assessed Property Value	Merger Tax Hike (if immediate)
\$150,000	\$199
\$250,000	\$332
\$280,000	\$372
\$350,000	\$465
\$450,000	\$598

\$372 on a \$280,000 property is an FY22 estimate from Sarah Macy, Town Finance Director at the Jan. 25th, 2021 Joint Selectboard and Trustee Meeting.

state legislature, this estimated \$347 increase would be reflected in the FY24 budget which, would be voted on by only Town-outside-the-Village residents in March 2023.

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packaging. “On the streets, you don’t know what you’ll get.”

Mann said that she is passionate about keeping children, like her own, safe from harmful substances.

She added that talking with parents about how to keep THC away from youth is important. “We want to make sure our community is safe.”

Mann has been working with the [State Cannabis Control Board](#) as it finalizes its rules around RC. She has spoken to local law enforcement as well.

If RC passes, shops like hers would be reconfigured to increase security and rigorously limit access to those with proper ID.

“We want to educate and engage with the community.”

To that end, Magic Mann will be reaching out to residents to promote RC in the weeks ahead. According to her website, lawn signs have been ordered.

“The first thing that we’ll be able to do, if there is a yes vote, is hire staff and train them.”

Proposed FY23 Town Budget \$16.7m

by Irene Wrenner

On January 3rd the Selectboard warned an FY23 Town General Fund budget of \$16,675,241 for a vote on March 1st.

After taking into account reductions of over \$200,000, the budget shows an increase in expenditures of \$749,113 or 4.7%, over the current budget, down from the 5.4% increase projected in earlier.

Top Department FY23 Increases		
Police	\$292,377	6.2%
Fire	\$121,382	20.1%
Highways	\$219,940	5.7%
Health & Human Services	\$176,774	67.4%

The estimated tax increase to the average \$280,000 property will be \$59.36 if voters approve of that budget.



Bitter Together, Better Apart

Many of us have epiphanies, moments of clarity that come upon us unexpectedly.

For me, that occurred last summer on a trip up Brigham Hill Road to Full Circle Gardens.

I was out of my pandemic bubble, walking amid a glory of perennials: purple cone flowers, irises, hostas. I felt as if I were in a world apart ... at peace. I could breathe.



Such a contrast to the previous four years of inter-municipal squabbling.

In 2018, when the latest merger effort kicked off, a pro-merger T-shirt bore the slogan "Better Together." Events since have proved we were anything but. We are worse.

Merger debates haunted us, seeding our political environment with toxic feuds, Face-

book ripostes and Front Porch Forum sniping. Against that backdrop, the ride to Full Circle Gardens was a balm for my soul.

East on Route 15 from Five Corners, left on Old Stage, left on Brigham Hill and again once more into the gardens. A scant four miles. Symbolically, it seemed a distance as vast as the Earth is to the sun.

The contrast between the gardens and Five Corners is as different as different can be.



One, flowers; the other, fumes. The buzz of bees, the squeal of brakes.

Just as oil and water don't mix, town and village would perpetually have clashing needs and contrasting visions. The former predominantly rural and spacious, the latter largely urban and constrained.

Yes, if the Legislature allows the Village to secede from the Town, my taxes likely will go up, just as they would have under merger. And yes, under the Village's secession movement, their taxes might go down but not necessarily.

This though is not about taxes. It is about two distinctly differ-

ent geographies, each with its own "personality."

For me, I'm imagining a future for a new town, not a city. I will no longer publicly differentiate myself as someone who lives "in the Town outside the Village," as if the "Village" is the center of our local universe and I am some kind of second-hand citizen because I do not live there.

Handled fairly, the establishment of a new Town of Essex (perhaps Essex Center?) and a new City of Essex Junction can be a win/win for both.

Now that would be a revelation!

Bruce S. Post, a former Essex Selectboard member, often writes and lectures on Vermont environmental history.

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