

Takeover of Tree Farm Facility Fails

by Irene Wrenner

At the August 23rd Joint Selectboard and Trustee Meeting, Brad Luck, Director of Essex Junction Recreation & Parks (EJRP), put forth a formal proposal to supplant decades of successful partnering with the Tree Farm Management Group (TFMG). He would have the Town and Village Recreation Departments take over management of that facility.

Anxious Tree Farm stakeholders, including soccer players, coaches and league managers, reacted with disappointment, skepticism and concern.

Collectively, they made a case to the governing boards to maintain the working partnership with TFMG.

Most members of the public who spoke agreed that this renowned soccer facility is well-run by a bevy of volunteers, who hire staff as needed.

Luck himself, in fact, lauded the TFMG in his formal proposal, titled "Future of the Tree Farm Recreational Facility":

The Tree Farm Management Group has done a fantastic job and provided a great service to the community over the last twenty years. They have improved and maintained the property, created a known quality facility for soccer and rugby, all while operating a self-sufficient venture that has not required support from public tax dollars.

Yet, Luck's proposal urged this change: "We want municipal recreation [together] to manage the Essex Tree Farm Facility" based on how "[t]he municipalities ... work harmoniously in many ways."

A recent rift between the departments was not mentioned by Luck, nor by staff or elected officials. In fact, he had quietly asked EPR last month to move out of his administration building by summer's end. (See "[EJRP to EPR: You're Out!](#)")

[Ken Willetts](#), a 17-year Essex resident, soccer coach and player, found the current proposal analogous to "parents [who] are going through a

divorce, and in the middle of litigation, they decide to have a baby."

Willetts, who has played soccer all over the US, praised the Tree Farm as "unique, precious and at capacity."



Drawing American Football Line Art Clip Art - Soccer Ball Kick Png

Willetts has "dire concerns" about Rec Dept. staff taking over, rather than allowing stakeholders to continue to maintain the Tree Farm.

[He presented](#) an example of a parallel partnership in which volunteers provide extraordinary care for the Foster Road baseball fields because the Rec Department, despite ownership, has "pretty much ignored" that municipal sports facility.

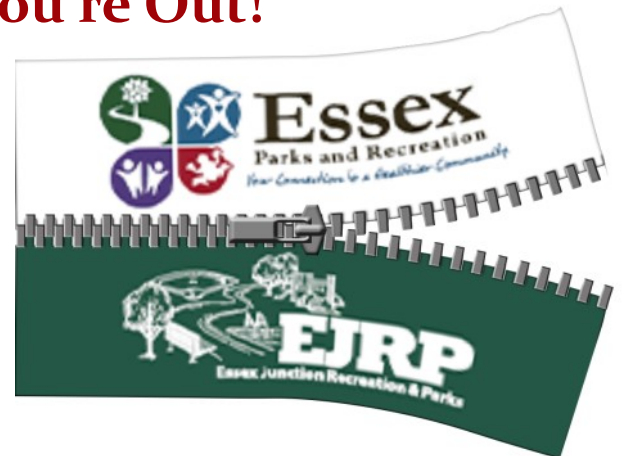
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EJRP to EPR: You're Out!

by Ken Signorello

Essex Parks & Recreation (EPR) personnel moved into Essex Junction Recreation & Parks' (EJRP) Maple Street Administration Building in a much-touted co-location back in 2019.

Prior to that move, Brad Luck, EJRP Director, and Ally Vile, EPR Director, promoted co-location — at the December 5th, 2018 Joint Selectboard and Trustee Meeting — as convenient, one-stop shopping to better



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(Soccer, continued from page 1)

Village resident [Andy Champagne pointed](#) to parks that are not being properly maintained, such as Stevens, Cascade and Maple Street Parks.

His concern is that with EJP not maintaining its current park inventory, the Rec Departments are not reliable enough to co-maintain a 100-acre sports and trails facility.

Rec department disenfranchisement of seniors was cited by another member of the public.

First and former TFMG President [Eric Senn cautioned](#) Luck and Essex Parks & Rec Director Ally Vile that current volunteers and TFMG staff work very hard — at night and on weekends, outside the scheduled workday for municipal employees.

“I’m not sure that you [Brad and Ally] understand the amount of work that really goes into managing that property.” During a large tournament, Senn explained, they start at 6 am and work until dark day-after-day. People must be hired to park hundreds of cars at a time.

Maintaining “the best grass in the state” takes water, seed, money, and effort.

Senn urged Luck and Vile to do more research to understand what goes into maintaining a facility that “takes a mountainous amount of work.”

[Jill Lampron](#), Tree Farm Scheduler for 10 years, revealed that the TFMG had not heard until tonight about issues raised by

some attendees: trail maintenance, dog restrictions and conversion of soccer fields to other uses.

She answered questions and welcomed hearing directly from folks in the future.

Veteran members from various soccer clubs cautioned against making changes to a well-oiled machine.

Soccer coach [Ed DeMulder said](#) he was in the room when the Tree Farm’s designation as a sports facility was granted by the State. He stated that some aspects of Luck’s proposal would not be permissible per the terms of the initial agreement signed with the state.

Adding other sports would affect this current, robust soccer community.

DeMulder runs a special needs soccer program each fall. The TFMG has “bent over backwards” to help him run this program that serves the entire county.

Given the relatively small size of his program, he said he is afraid of “being squeezed out.”

[One self-identified “soccer crazy” player implored](#) the boards to consider the number of new American children and adults that enjoy these soccer fields.

Coming to the US from all over the world, they have settled into American life, but they hold soccer dear to their hearts.

Luck’s proposal to open these fields to other sports would limit soccer access.

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(Move, continued from page 1)

serve the public. [Luck said](#) he also expected close collaboration to benefit both staffs.

Several officials and members of the public anticipated operational efficiencies, like those seen in the recent consolidation of police functions nearby.

Previously, EPR was housed at 81 Main Street. Remnants of its presence still remain. That space now hosts the Town Finance Department.



When their co-location was proposed in 2018, talk of the latest Merger plan was just beginning. Members of the SB and public had [expressed wariness](#) about these departments moving in prematurely.

Now, with failed Merger votes in the rear view mirror, the Trustees are preparing a plan for Separation. Public input over the course of their work sessions does not favor merging Rec Departments as originally proposed by Luck.

On July 6th [Luck emailed Vile](#) declaring, “Seeing as there is

not a viable path forward to becoming one department, I do not see any value in co-location.”

Luck determined that Vile and her department should vacate the Maple Street Park Administration building by August 23rd and relocate somewhere outside the Village: “My best and most honest recommendation is that EPR find a new home at Memorial Hall.”



The stately but energy-inefficient Memorial Hall has been used for Rec programs on occasion but is also the long-time home of the Essex Community Players theater troupe.

Unified Manager Evan Teich’s response: EPR and EJRP will continue “co-locating until [he] decides otherwise or is provided guidance from either the Selectboard or Village Board.”

Meanwhile, EPR is seeking office space and a room suitable for programming, preferably in the center of Town along the Route 15 corridor.

(Soccer, continued from page 2)

Willetts, the long-time player and coach, addressed the affordability of community soccer leagues, a key element of the soccer world.

Participation in private leagues can be cost-prohibitive to many families.

Not every town has a resource like the Tree Farm that enables everyone to access soccer at low-cost. Willetts added, “And we can’t afford to screw it up!”

Willetts asked the boards not to approve the staff’s recommendation to transfer management responsibility to the municipality.

“We’re taking something special, ... a world-class facility,” he said, but the Rec Departments have no detailed plan for running the facility.

Willetts stated that parents and players need assurance that their “hundreds of thousands of dollars” of investment in this asset are safe.

Willetts suggested a 5-year renewal with the TFMG to allow them to assess and address the concerns raised tonight for the first time.

SB Chair [Andy Watts expressed](#) concern about losing a season or two if the municipalities don’t come to an agreement over how to manage this property. “Would it be more appropriate to wait 5 or 6 years or something to let the dust settle on Separation?” he asked.

Watts also noted that the contract was supposed to have been reopened three years ago, not at the eleventh hour, to discuss an extension or a change.

Scheduler Lampron also mentioned that scheduling is done three years in advance.

Neither governing board made the motion recommended by staff to transfer the management to the municipality.

Luck vowed to come back to a future meeting with more data to support his proposal.

Staff: Merge Budgets Before Separation Vote

by Irene Wrenner

At recent public forums on Village/Town Separation, the Unified Manager proposed that Village Staff, Capital and Fire budgets be merged into the Town’s budget for FYE23, and possibly beyond.

Attendees at the August forums resisted staff’s merged-budget plan, reminding them that the TOV still has no dedicated representation at joint Selectboard and Trustee meetings, although the Village does; that the Town just voted NO on Merger twice; and that the boards are negotiating a plan to Separate-and-Share certain departments, which may be voted on in November.

For more coverage of these forums, see the [entire article online](#).



Before My Very Eyes

Until the Merger/Separation debates heated up, I never heard of “gaslighting.” Friends defined it for me, but I still had no clue what it meant.

I read such definitions as:

“Gaslighting is a tactic of behavior in which a person or entity, in order to gain more power, makes a victim question their reality. ... It is a common technique of abusers, dictators, narcissists, and cult leaders” (Psychology Today). Again, no clue.

Then, two things happened. I remembered the first commandment of good writing: “Show, don’t tell.” And I participated in the Selectboard forums on Separation. There, before my very eyes, Separation advocates attempted to “gaslight” those who did not share their points of view. Suddenly, I saw what definitions could not fully capture.

The gaslighters’ tactics included:

1. Delegitimization: Using undocumented charges of “misinformation” against unidentified people who had another point of view in order to cast doubt on their beliefs;

2. Disempowerment: Opposing a TOV-only advisory group to plan for a new Town of Essex, apart from the new City of Essex Junction. Using the old refrain “We are residents of the Town, too,” the separatists sought to sit on

both sides of the negotiating table, thereby disempowering Town residents who would be left behind if the Village separates;

3. Shaming: Maligning those who do not agree with them as angry people, full of vitriol, while they – the accusers – alone were virtuous; and

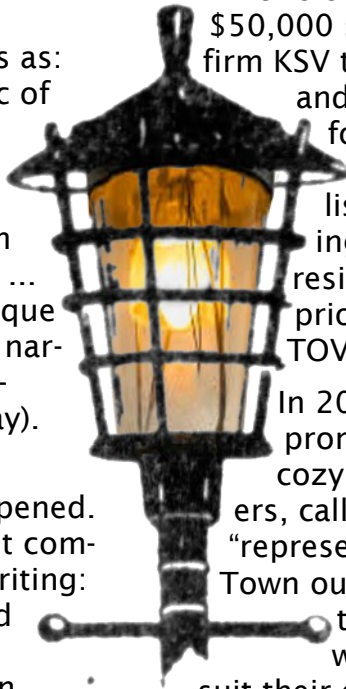
4. Revisionism: Discrediting the \$50,000 study by consulting firm KSV that sampled Town and Village opinions before the Merger vote. The results established multi-district voting as the top choice of residents – a persistent priority, particularly of TOV residents.

In 2019, George Tyler, a prominent member of the cozy clique of Village insiders, called the KSV results “representative of both the Town outside the Village and the Village.” Now, when those facts don’t suit their current purposes, I hear Village residents bury the KSV survey as no longer relevant.

Such gaslighting is not spontaneous; it feels like the perpetual, highly coordinated, behind the scenes tactics of the clique referenced above.

Left unchecked, gaslighting is dangerous. To recognize such statements as a callous, repetitive manipulation of the truth will enable us – as George Orwell once wrote about most political speech – to cast “it into the dustbin where it belongs.”

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



Remember when *The Gaslight* was a restaurant in Essex Jct.?

This monthly issue contains some but not all recent articles.

Please visit our webpage for the rest, and follow our Facebook page for still more posts, including Breaking News bulletins.

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