

Council Minutes

July 6, 2026

A duly warned meeting of the Newport City Council was held on July 6, 2026 in the council room in the Newport Municipal Building. Present were Mayor Rick Ufford-Chase, Council President Carter Finegan, council Members Sharon Pare', John Monette, Andrew Touchette, City Clerk/Treasurer James Johnson, Financial and Office Administrator Kari Schulze, Assist. Clerk/Treasurers Robyn Churchill and Ashleigh Brock, Zoning Administrator Frank Cheney, Dave Laforce, Joe and Bria Gunter.

Mayor Offord-Chase called the meeting to order at 6pm.

Additions/Deletions

Mr. Johnson added an extension to the Vendor Permit for Roy Heath (Baptized in Butter) to include Gardner Park city events.

Consent Agenda, Approval of Minutes 6/15/26, 6/24/26, AP Warrants 6/30/26, 7/2/26, PR Warrants 6/17/26, 6/24/26, Permits, Northeast Pizza, Memphremagog Pushcarts, Memphremagog Community Maritime, 802 Eats, Memphremagog Arts Collaborative, Eden Ice Cider

Mr. Touchette moved to approve the consent agenda as amended. Seconded by Ms. Finegan, motion carried.

Public Comment

Ann Chiarello commented on the City Manager interview/hiring process on June 24, 2026.

Kristy Griggs commented on the drunkenness at the gazebo on the waterfront.

Introduction of Assistant Clerk/treasurer Ashleigh Brock

Mr. Johnson introduced new Assist Clerk/Treasurer Ashleigh Brock and also Assist Clerk/Treasurer Robyn Churchill who moved into the position formally held by Stacey Therrien

Action to Approve and Sign Contract with Joe Gunter to Serve as City Manager (see press release)

Mayor Ufford-Chase introduced Mr. Gunter who gave a brief statement and introduced his wife Bria. Ms. Finegan moved to approve the contract negotiated on behalf of the city council with Joe Gunter to serve as City Manager. Seconded by Mr. Touchette, motion carried. The contract will be effective August 10, 2026.

Appreciation for City Manager Search Committee

Committee chair Carter Finegan gave her appreciation on behalf of the city to Dominic cloud and Members of the Committee for their hard work on this selection for City Manager.

Decision Regarding Selection of Communication Firm to support City of Newport Development Strategies (memo attached)

Mr. Touchette approved moving ahead with the contract with Morris Strategies and authorize the Mayor to sign the contract. Seconded by Ms. Finegan, motion carried.

Action Regarding Transfer of Tax Stabilization for Track Drive LLC (attached)

Ms. Finegan moved to approve the transfer of the agreement when sold to Track Drive LLC and authorize the mayor to sign the agreement if the transaction is before the new city Manager takes over. Seconded by Mr.Touchette, motion carried. Mr. Monette abstained.

Review of Finances with Chip Stearns

Chip Stearns from NEMRC review the Due/to Due /from Report and the previous year Balance Sheet with the council.

Potential Action to Establish the FY27 City Tax Rate

Tabled until July 20, 2026 meeting.

Mayor's Intention to Sign on to the Mayors Alliance to end Childhood Hunger

Mayor Ufford-Chase intends to sign onto the alliance.

Task Force Reports

Water/Sewer, working on the budget and waiting for the City Attorney to review amendments to the ordinance.

Financial Reporting and Fiscal Practices, working on preparation for the audit.

Fire Department Strategic planning, waiting for program software

Charter Committee, meeting weekly working hard on charter revisions

Public Comment

Mr. Touchette noted that I91 access will be closed from Passumpsic Bank to Western Ave until September for bridge work.

Ms. Pare' commented on the vagrancy at the gazebo on the boardwalk would like to talk with Chief Bingham about it.

New Business

None

Old Business

None

Next Meeting Date

Ms. Finegan moved to set the next meeting for July 20, 2026. Seconded by Mr. Monette, motion carried.

Adjournment

Ms. Finegan moved to adjourn at 8:20 pm. Seconded by Ms. Pare', motion carried.

Attested _____ this _____ Day of _____ 2026

_____ Mayor

For Immediate Release

Contact: Mayor Rick Ufford-Chase (845) 608-4056

Joe Gunter (603) 340-2633

Newport Poised to Select New City Manager

At Monday evening's City Council meeting, the Newport City Council will sign an employment contract with Joe Gunter of Middletown Springs, Vermont to be the next City Manager. Gunter was selected from a pool of 30 candidates in a national search.

Gunter has most recently served as the Fair Haven Town Manager. During his 8-year tenure, he reinvigorated long-shelved public works projects, attracted \$12 million in new grants for infrastructure and community revitalization initiatives, and led the Town's efforts to attract new housing development projects. Prior to Fair Haven, Gunter held a similar position in New Hampshire and led a \$130 million municipal infrastructure program in Afghanistan with U.S. AID.

Originally from Michigan, he earned his B.A. in International Relations at the University of Michigan and completed an M.S. in Economics: Commerce and Economic Development from Northeastern University. He also spent seven years as a heavy equipment repair technician and served in the Peace Corps in West Africa.

According to Newport Mayor Rick Ufford-Chase, "Joe is uniquely qualified to fill this important role. Our search committee interviewed six candidates and had a strong enough pool to highly recommend two of them for Council consideration. The council agreed that we had two very good candidates but ultimately decided that Joe Gunter is the strongest possible match for this moment in the City of Newport."

Cathy Valley, a Newport resident who served on the search committee, was pleased with the news that he had accepted the offer from Newport. "Joe's 'find a way' spirit and approachable manner is a great fit for our community. He won me over when he stated the City Manager role is a lifestyle."

Newport Police Chief Travis Bingham, who also served on the committee, concurred. "I'm really excited for the opportunity to have such a professional leading the City of Newport. His background in economic development, professional leadership and community engagement is exactly what Newport needs at this time."

Community Resident Lizzie Alexander was similarly enthusiastic: "Joe is the real deal. His experience advocating for rural Vermonters at the state level is going to prove important for our sometimes-forgotten corner of the Northeast Kingdom. His strong character, proven skills, and

confident-but-humble demeanor are exactly what Newport needs right now in a leader. Just like our community, Joe is multi-faceted, and will defy any box you try to put him in. I can't wait for him to surprise all of us in the best possible way."

Council Member Andrew Touchette, who also sat on the Search Committee, said that he was particularly impressed with Gunter's ability to connect with the community in Fair Haven. "Joe told us that his first job is to be accessible to everyone in town, and to treat every person with respect. He's a great match for the effort we have been making to get our community members more deeply involved in solving our biggest challenges."

Touchette mentioned a project Gunter championed in Fair Haven that particularly caught his attention. "They created an internship with the local high school to get young people involved in their Public Works, Police, and Accounting Departments, and have ended up hiring some of those young people into long-term positions. This is the kind of creative thinking that we're really looking for in Newport," said Touchette.

According to Ufford-Chase, Gunter clearly has the experience, qualifications, and energy to encourage Newport's ambitious redevelopment plans. "Joe Gunter has been cultivating his experience in economic development work his entire adult life. From Northeastern University to Afghanistan to Fair Haven Vermont, he's been preparing himself to partner in the Newport Initiative. I think he will be a great asset."

Council President Carter Finegan, who chaired the search committee, appreciated all the work that has gone into this effort. "We are grateful to the members of the Search Committee, and especially for the guidance we received from Dominic Cloud and the Vermont League of Cities and Towns. We knew that we needed our next manager to be a stabilizing force, and a consensus builder. Given Joe's genuine excitement talking about Newport opportunities in economic development as well as his interest in connecting with our community residents, we really felt he checked all the boxes."

According to Gunter himself, "I am thrilled with this opportunity. Newport has so much going for it – from its location on Lake Memphremagog to the strong sense of determination and community pride. I'm especially eager to participate in the redevelopment of its downtown and the long-term strategies envisioned for the City's revitalization."

Gunter expects to attend the City Council meeting on Monday night, July 6th, and to sign the contract with the City Council at that time. He will make brief public comments and address questions about the timing of the transition before the council moves on to other matters.

Memo to Council

From: Mayor Rick Ufford-Chase

Re: Recommendation to contract with a Communications Firm

Date: 7/02/2026

Council Members,

Newport Downtown Development and Consultant Stephanie Clarke from White and Burk Real Estate Advisors have circulated a Request for Proposals seeking a company to help develop and implement the City's community education and communications strategy regarding long-range economic development efforts.

The RFP described the task as follows:

Newport Downtown Development ("NDD"), in partnership with the City of Newport and regional stakeholders, is seeking proposals from qualified communications, public relations, and community engagement firms to support a long-term public awareness and education initiative related to transformative economic development and infrastructure investment efforts in the City of Newport, Vermont.

The selected consultant or consultant team will assist with strategic communications, public outreach, media relations, educational content, and community engagement activities associated with "The Newport Initiative" — an effort focused on revitalizing key downtown properties, supporting housing and economic development, modernizing infrastructure, and expanding the City's Grand List in a manner intended to stabilize or reduce the municipal tax burden over time.

As Stephanie Clarke explained to us at our last meeting, a dedicated communications strategist plays a crucial role in the economic development process. Good community engagement means creating ongoing and sustainable education, facilitating feedback loops, and keeping an eye out for opportunities to meet people where they are.

White and Burke received three proposals on the City's behalf. All three offered a monthly fee for a projected timeline of twelve to eighteen months. Morris Strategies proposed \$3500 per month. Katherine Levasseur's proposal came in at \$4,000 per month. Junapr proposed a fee of \$4500 per month.

Based on a careful reading and evaluations of the proposals, the NDD Team has selected two of the firms with whom they hope to carry out interviews by video conference in advance of the Council meeting on Monday night. If successful, they will come to the Council meeting with a recommendation for Council's consideration..

If Council is prepared to move ahead with this contract, we would need to pass a motion authorizing the Mayor to review any proposed contract with the City's legal counsel and sign the document with our attorney's approval.

Funding for this contract would come from one of the following three sources (in order of preference):

1. A grant from the VT Community Foundation if the way be clear. This is our first choice in order to reserve the following two sources of income for other needs.
2. Allowable 80% from the USDA RBDG funding that NDD is administrating on the City's behalf.
3. The City's Walmart/Economic Development Fund to cover the remaining 20% match for the USDA RBDG grant.

MEMO

July 2, 2026

To: Newport City Council
From: Frank Cheney, Tax Assessor
RE: Tax Stabilization Agreement

The Newport City Council approved the execution of a 5-year tax stabilization agreement with the Northeast Kingdom Development Corporation (NEKDC) on 2/2/2026 for its property located at 172 Bogner Drive, the effective start date was 4/1/2026. The original agreement contained a provision that at the City Councils discretion that it could be transferred if the property was sold during the stabilization period.

Track Drive LLC is now purchasing the property and is requesting that the City of Newport transfer the established Tax Stabilization Agreement to the new ownership.

I have attached a copy of the original and draft agreement for your review and consideration.

Frank Cheney