

2. THE SETTING

2.1 Brief History of Essex

On June 7, 1763, the boundaries of the Town of Essex were set by charter as part of the New Hampshire grants by authority of King George II of England. Essex is one of the few Vermont towns whose boundaries have never been changed and whose original charter is still in existence. Other Vermont charters were returned to England during the Revolutionary War.

According to the charter, Essex is an area six miles square containing 23,040 acres, bound on the south by what was then known as the Onion River (now the Winooski River). Official acreage is now listed at 23,316 acres. This area was divided into 72 equal shares among 66 grantees with the famous Allen family receiving 49 of the original grants. The name Essex was chosen at the time of charter, but the reason for the choice is speculative.

In 1773, several men, including Ira and Ethan Allen, formed the Onion River Company in order to survey, purchase and promote settlement of lands. Permanent settlement did not begin until 1783, after the Revolutionary War when the first six settlers located their homes on Browns River Road between Weed Road (about four city blocks) toward Westford. By the following year, more and more families began arriving, drawn by the promise of land and of work with the Allen family's sawmills and lumber trade.

In 1786, the first Town Meeting was held and town taxes levied for the maintenance of roads. This first Town Meeting was held at what is now known as the Siegrist property on River Road. As time went on however, Town Meeting locations alternated between Page's Corners (in various taverns) and Essex Center.

From the earliest settlement to 1820 the hub of the Town's activities was at Page's Corners – the junction of Colonel Page Road and Old Stage Road which was the main route running north to St. Albans. During the embargo period starting in 1807, Page's Corners was much used by those engaged in illicit trade with Canada, since the four routes forked out nearby and offered escape from officials in pursuit. At its prime, Page's Corners consisted of four taverns, two stores, a post office (mail was transported on horseback once a week), a potash factory, a sawmill on Alder Brook, an iron works developed on Colonel Page Road and a wheelwright shop.

Between the years of 1805 and 1813, Essex Center began to develop. Frank Bent, in *The History of Essex* (1963) describes how Essex Center eventually became designated as the "center" for the Town.

It was the established custom of New England towns to have a town common or green. This place was generally purposed to bring those things of a communal nature to one central point, where it would be most convenient to all. It was not always possible to choose the geographical center of a locality because of physical terrain limitations. As exceptions to the general rule were allowed, political expedience or power entered into the settlement of the matter.

Essex grew without such a central point for a good number of years. Cattle were limited in number these first few years and common pasture was not found to be necessary. The dead were buried on the family land at the very first. By 1794 the Town felt the need of a common burial ground and so voted at that Town Meeting. Such a need brought the Town to the realization of setting out a

common as well. The common burial ground chosen was the cemetery adjacent to the former Fiske Grain Store, across VT Route 15 from the Essex Free Library, and is currently a commercial and residential building. As has been indicated earlier, the common and meeting house site were staked out on a piece of pasture on the Perry Towers Farms. This was the geographical center of the town. Soon objections were raised. First, there was no road to the location. Also, the location was surrounded by wet low land. As such it would not be suitable for a burial ground. Besides, a burial ground had already been started. Those at Page's Corners felt it should be located near where the present business center was situated. So the matter was laid on the table until September 1800. At this time the matter was brought to a head by a vote to build a much-needed meetinghouse within seventy rods of the existing stake laid out in 1794. At the March meeting in 1801 it was decided to abandon the original site. A new committee was created to 'stick the stake' in a new location and record the same at the county seat in Burlington. The present common was laid out and marked in a general nature. The whole matter rested on general consent for another two years. In the spring of 1803 the erection of the meetinghouse on the common began.

Although the meetinghouse was erected in 1803, town meetings were seldom held in it. As had been shown in the organization of the town, official meetings were held mainly at Page's Corners Tavern, in the Sam Buell Tavern or the Billie Bishop Butler Tavern (most recently known as the Merle Wood Country Store site). The freeman's meeting, held annually in September, was held in the meetinghouse regularly. This was the meeting at which the freemen of the town came and cast their vote for governor, and other state officers. Other than this meeting, the meetinghouse was strictly limited to church services for the townspeople.

Various sources indicate that the "center" of Town even moved briefly to Butlers Corners from 1822 to 1826. The Town had previously voted in the year 1800 to erect a signpost for public notices and a pair of stocks for the punishment of criminals in the Butlers Corners area. A post office was also established at Butlers Corners in 1825. The Buell Tavern was located on the west side of Upper Main Street in this same area and was a noted stopping place for travelers between Johnson and Burlington. Roswell and William Butler built both the brick house and white clapboard structure on the east side of Upper Main Street. The white clapboard house was also operated as a tavern at one time. The story goes that Roswell Butler appealed to the Town fathers to establish the Town Center at Butlers Corners but they did not support this request.

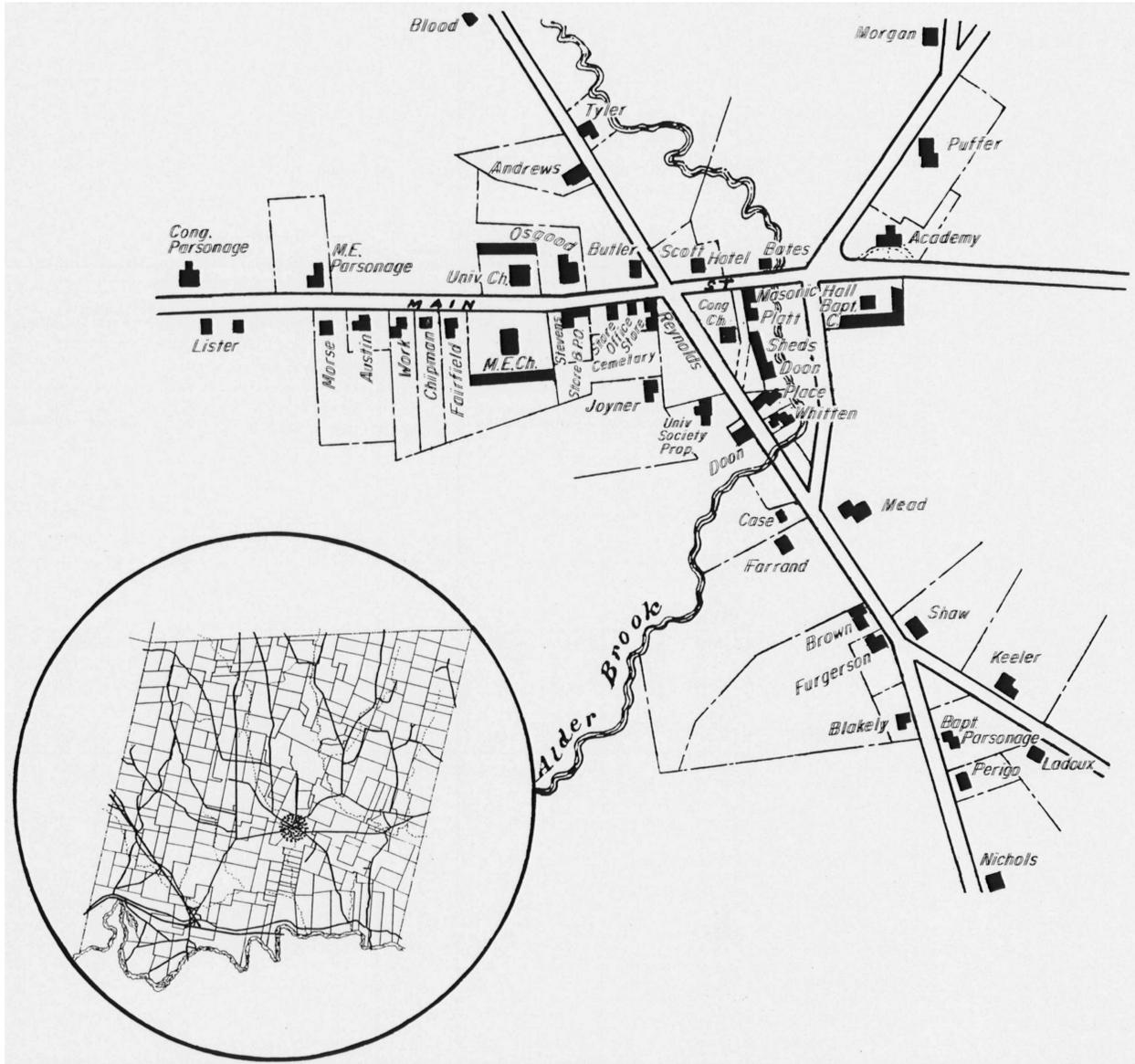
Meanwhile in the southern part of town, called Hubbel's Falls, business and industry grew around a succession of dams and mills built and rebuilt across the Winooski River. The first was constructed for Ira Allen by Abram Stevens who later built the tavern in 1820 now known as Lincoln Hall.

In 1850 Hubbel's Falls was renamed Painesville, after Governor Paine who brought the railroad through Essex, but by 1862 the railroad station and surrounding area were known by everyone as Essex Junction. During this period, J. K. Drury came to Essex Junction from Milton and started the Drury Brick Yard, which operated until the late 1960s.

The railroad brought increasing business to the Junction. In its heyday, six lines converged here as 35 passenger trains passed through daily. As the population increased, the need for services grew, and in 1892 the General Assembly approved the incorporation of the Village of Essex Junction, an area of 3.8 square miles with approximately 1,131 inhabitants. In the remaining 32 square miles of the town lived 1,062 people.

FIGURE 2-1: Historic “Essex Center”

Source: Community Development Department



Gradually the many creameries in the Town were consolidated into the creameries in the Village since the railroad could carry the milk to the New York and Boston markets. Farmers in Essex Town made trips to Essex Junction every day to deliver milk and purchase grain and oats which were ground at the Johnson Mill. Cattle were shipped to the stock yards in the Village for shipment to market. The Town became a farming community and the Village was known as the prosperous center of industry.

In 1893, Fort Ethan Allen was built on land taken from the towns of Colchester and Essex as a permanent army post. Experience in the 17th and 18th centuries had shown that invaders gained easy access to our country through the St. Lawrence River and its tributaries. At the recommendation of Vermont Senator Redfield Proctor, Congress cleared the way for the establishment of this military post to protect the country from invaders from the north. Several gentlemen of Vermont offered 600 acres of land near Essex Junction without cost to the United States to be used for the fort. Originally, cavalry troops were housed at the fort, but through the years it has been used by many different military and civilian groups.

In 1952, the command of Fort Ethan Allen was formally transferred to the Air Force, and Fort Ethan Allen became Ethan Allen Air Force Base until the Air Force officially relinquished the base in 1961. Between 1962 and 1965, a number of private individuals and the University of Vermont acquired various properties in the Fort. The University received the property at no expense but had to keep it for 20 years for housing. Then the University would be free to dispose of it as it chose. In 1990, UVM sold a portion of its land holdings to the Vermont Housing Finance Agency for an affordable housing project. As part of this project, the Parade Grounds have been deeded to the Towns of Colchester and Essex. Currently, the Fort is being used by St. Michael's College, the University of Vermont, Vermont Highway Department, educational and private television stations and various private businesses.

The incorporated Village of Essex Center was established in 1951 primarily to provide a water system for its residents. A president and four trustees were responsible for the maintenance of the water supply, but in all other matters Essex Center was served by the Town of Essex and its residents were voters of the Town.

The Village of Essex Center began buying its water from the Champlain Water District in 1974, and the following year its residents voted to convey a reservoir property off Sand Hill Road to the Essex Town School District. The Village eventually merged its system with the Town Water Department which evolved with the advent of the Champlain Water District and rescinded their Charter in 1976.

In 1954, the Winooski woolen mills were suddenly shut down, leaving 1,900 persons jobless. To promote desperately needed new industry, the Greater Burlington Industrial Corporation (GBIC) was set up and financed by local towns. As a result of its efforts, International Business Machines (IBM) was encouraged to locate a plant in Essex Junction. In 1957, IBM opened its doors to 500 employees; it now employs approximately 6,000.

In 1964, the government of the Village of Essex Junction and the Town launched a detailed study to determine the advisability of merging into one government in order to economize and end unnecessary duplication of municipal departments. The question of merging the two governments as well as separation of the governments was voted on a number of times during the 1970's and early 1980's but was turned down each time. At the end of the century, Village residents voted to separate from the Town and residents of the Town outside of the Village supported consolidation of the two governments into one City of Essex Junction. The issue was sent to the Vermont

Legislature for resolution in 2000, but the Local Government Committee returned it for another attempt at local agreement.

In April 2005, a non-binding merger vote was held by Australian ballot. As a result of the affirmative vote (1,107 for, 275 against), the Town Selectboard and Village Board of Trustees appointed a joint task force charged with developing a charter for the merger of the two parts of the Town. Their plan of merger was voted on in November 2006. Merger passed in a town-wide vote (4,376 for, 4,167 against) as well as in a separate village vote (2,922 for, 1,085 against). Because the town-wide vote spread was smaller than the number of voters that appeared to have missed the question, which was on the reverse of the town ballot, as well as for other reasons, citizens petitioned successfully for a town-wide re-vote on the matter. In January of 2007, the current plan of merger was rejected (2,890 against, 2,699 for).

The population of Essex has grown rapidly in recent years. From an essential rural area, Essex has developed into a thriving residential and business community.

2.2 State And Regional Context

The Town of Essex is located in northwestern Vermont in the geographical center of Chittenden County. Chittenden County is the state's most populous county and is the home to the largest city in Vermont. Essex lies within easy access of the social, recreational and cultural amenities of the Champlain Valley as well as some of the more spectacular wilderness opportunities offered by the highest point of the Green Mountain range.

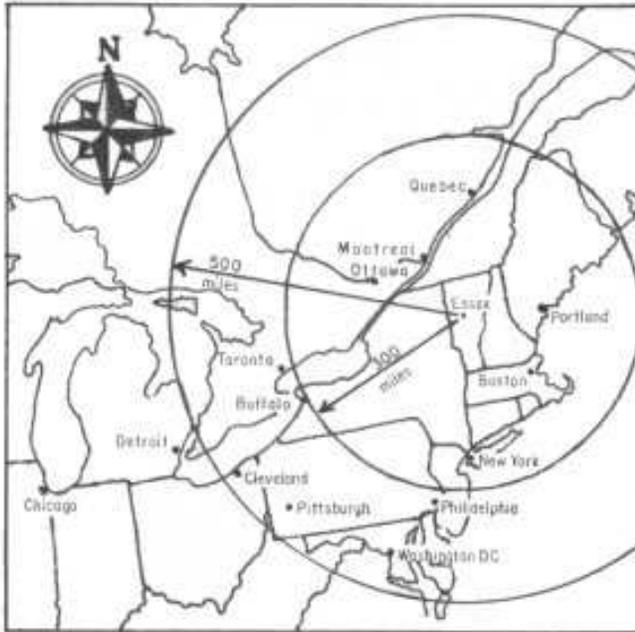
Essex is bounded to the west by Colchester, to the north by Westford and to the east by Jericho. To the south, the Winooski River runs the whole length of Essex and separates it from Williston. The Village of Essex Junction lies within the Town's boundaries and is located in the southwestern corner of the Town.

Because of its location, Essex is the second largest community in Vermont. Its population in 2009 is estimated at 19,779 in a county of 153,791 people. Essex (including Essex Junction) is the second largest community after the City of Burlington in Chittenden County. It is not only a regional employment center, but one having statewide significance as people commute from all of the surrounding counties to IBM, among the state's largest private employers.

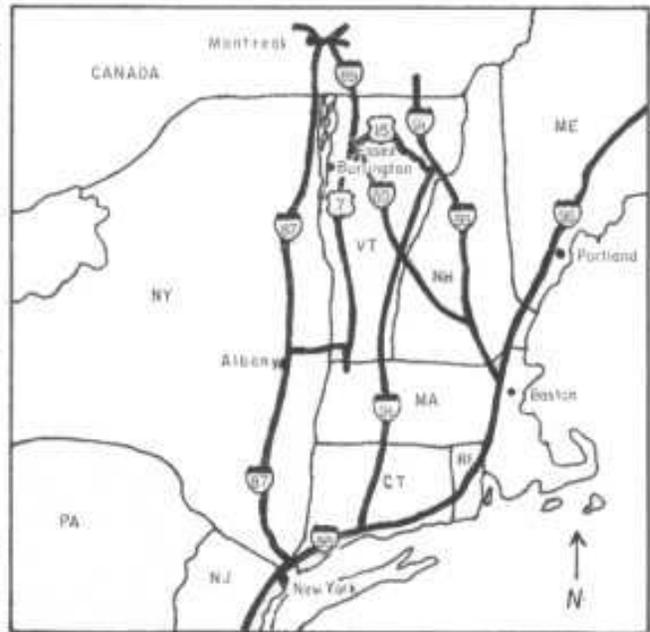
Essex historically has been a hub of transportation as a Native American trail, post road, terminal freight point and ferry crossing for the Winooski River. All roads still lead to Essex with four state highways and a fifth under construction, rail, bus service and easy access to Interstate 89 all making it a point which must be traveled through to get to a destination. VT Route 15 is designated as federally significant because it provides a critical transportation route linking New York to Eastern Canada and Maine.

FIGURE 2-2: State and Regional Setting

Source: Community Development Department



Northeastern Accessibility



Major Transportation Network



State of Vermont



Chittenden County

Essex serves as both an employment center and a residential community with nearly 50 percent of the Town's employed work force working in the same community in which they live. It is also an important sub-regional retail and service center for the more rural communities in the county. The surrounding area utilizes the Essex Community Educational Center and the Center for Technology – Essex, a regional technical center and recreational facilities such as the Champlain Valley Exposition, the Educational Center's indoor skating rink, Saxon Hill, the Winooski and Browns Rivers, Indian Brook Reservoir and the VAST snowmobile trail system.

The Burlington Metropolitan Statistical Area, of which Essex is a part, underwent rapid growth over the past two decades, and Essex experienced a proportional share of that growth. As a result, the once quiet farm community has become a bustling, growing town, and the changes are expected to continue.

2.3 Population Profile

The US Census is considered to be the most accurate source of population data. According to the 2000 Census, the population of the Town of Essex (including the Village) was 18,626, which is an increase of 2,128 persons (or 212.8 persons per year) since 1990. This represents a continuation of the trend during the 1980's when the total Town increased by 2,106 persons (or 210.6 persons per year).

The 2008 Census reports estimate that the Town Outside the Village's population was 10,591, while the population of the Village was 9,058. Between 2000 and 2008 the population had increased by 1,023 people in the Town as a whole. Population figures for the state, the county and the Town from 1910 are shown in Table 2-1.

The Town as a whole experienced substantial growth during the last half of the 20th century. During the 1940s the Town gained an average of 87 persons per year. In the 1950s that growth rate increased to just more than 315 persons per year. This continued to increase to a peak in the 1960s of more than 385 persons per year, falling to 344 persons per year in the 70s, and leveling off at just more than 210 persons per year for the past two decades. For the 50 years prior to 2000, the Town averaged 293.9 new residents per year.

Through the 1950s, most growth occurred in the Village, but since then most has occurred in the Town Outside of the Village. Over that 50 year period, the Village has accommodated roughly 30 percent of the Town's growth.

Table 2-1 Population Trends, Town of Essex, 1910-2008											
	1910	1920	1930	1940	1950	1960	1970	1980	1990	2000	2008
Town	2,714	2,449	2,879	3,059	3,931	7,090	10,951	14,392	16,498	18,626	19,649
Village	1,245	1,410	1,621	1,901	2,741	5,340	6,511	7,033	8,396	8,591	9,058
Town Outside the Village	1,469	1,039	1,258	1,158	1,190	1,750	4,440	7,359	8,102	10,035	10,591
Chittenden County	44,742	41,373	47,467	52,094	62,567	74,425	99,151	115,515	131,761	146,571	152,782
State	355,956	352,428	359,611	359,231	377,747	389,811	444,732	511,456	562,758	608,827	621,270
Percent of Chittenden County											
Town	6.07	5.92	6.06	5.87	6.28	9.53	11.04	12.46	12.52	12.71	12.86
Village	2.78	3.41	3.41	3.65	4.38	7.18	6.57	6.09	6.37	5.86	5.93
Town Outside the Village	3.28	2.51	2.65	2.22	1.9	2.35	4.48	6.37	6.15	6.85	6.93
Average Absolute Growth (persons per year)											
Town	-	-26.5	43.0	18.0	87.2	315.9	386.1	344.1	210.6	212.8	102.3
Village	-	16.	21.1	28.0	84.0	259.9	117.1	52.2	136.3	19.5	46.7
Town Outside the Village	-	-43.0	21.9	-10.0	3.2	56.0	269.0	291.9	74.3	193.3	55.8
Chittenden County	-	-336.9	609.4	462.7	1,047.3	1,185.8	2,472.6	1,636.4	1,624.6	148.1	621.1
State	-	-349.8	718.3	-38.0	1,851.6	1,206.4	5,492.1	6,672.4	5,130.2	4,606.9	1,244.3
Source U.S. Census, 2008 U.S. Census Population Estimate, Vermont Indicators Online											

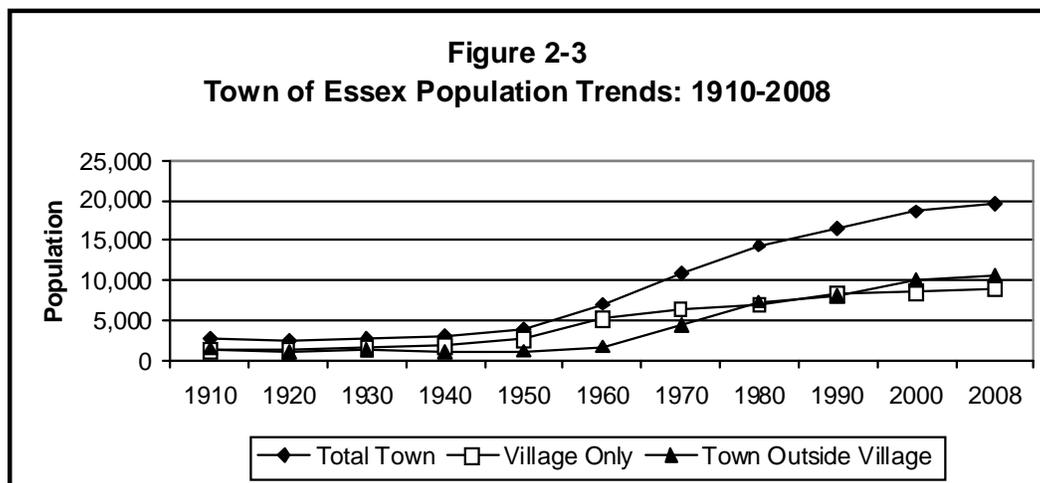


Figure 2-3 presents the data graphically for the Town of Essex and shows relatively linear trends over the long period. It is clear a major change occurred at about 1960 when population growth increased substantially. The major shift occurred in 1950, driven primarily by growth in the Village. From 1960 to 1980, growth in the Town outside the Village exceeded that of the Village. During the 1980s, both portions of the Town grew at about equal rates. During the 1990s, the growth rate of the Town outside the Village outpaced the Village.

The total population for the Town held constant at about six percent of the County's population until 1950 and then increased rapidly to 12.46 percent in 1980. The Town's percentage of County population continued to rise slowly to 12.86 percent in 2008. The initial rise was due primarily to population growth in the Village. A Village high of 7.18 percent of County population was reached in 1960, but reduced availability of undeveloped land in the Village caused a steady decline since then. The Town outside of the Village reached its highest percentage of County population in 2008 with 6.85 percent.

In 1985, the Town outside of the Village adopted a residential phasing policy to manage the growth of the community in accordance with its ability to provide services and facilities. All new residential projects were phased to ensure that the annual increase in population did not exceed a rate of three percent of the 1985 population of 7,537, or 226 persons per year.

The phasing policy proved to be effective as actual population growth rose from 7,537 persons in 1985 to 10,035 persons in 2000. The overall increase was 2.2 percent, or 167 persons per year, well below the growth ceiling of 226 persons per year.

In 2008, the Town adopted a new residential phasing policy to maintain a population growth rate between 184 and 226 persons per year over the coming years. The mid-point of this range is 205 persons per year. Other objectives of the residential phasing policy were to maintain a continuing balance between population growth and the Town's ability to provide facilities and services; to establish a target of at least 80 percent of new housing within designated growth areas; and to reinforce other objectives of the Town Plan. At the time of the adoption of the 2011 Town Plan, the population growth rate had recently been well below the mid-point of 205 persons.

2.4 POPULATION FORECASTS

Updated census information was not available for this Town Plan update. As a result, an update of the Population Forecast section was not conducted.