

10. AESTHETIC, HISTORIC AND CULTURAL RESOURCES

Special land use features that reflect the cultural development and character of the Town include its scenic views and vistas, scenic roads, and historic sites, buildings, and districts. The visual character of a community is of great value to its residents and helps to define for them a sense of place or identity.

10.1 Scenic Resources

A landscape which is aesthetically pleasing can only help to contribute to a better quality of life for those who live within and around this landscape. Scenic resources can include natural features only or a mixture of natural and human elements (such as houses, roads, farms, etc.). The view may be a compilation of a vast area containing different elements and textures.

The scenic resources in the Town of Essex include many of the landscape varieties, which have come to represent Vermont. A drive on any of the roads radiating from the center of the Town will put the observer in contact with active farmland, pastures, rolling hills, forests, views of distant mountains, historic buildings, rivers and streams.

The Town has had several inventories prepared on its more significant scenic resources. The “Essex Natural Resource Inventory” prepared by graduate students from the University of Vermont’s Natural Resource Planning Program in 1988, the “Essex Open Lands Study” (1989), the “Quality Environment Plan” (1973), the “Town Center Master Plan” (1991), the Essex Open Space Plan (2008), incorporated herein and by reference, all provide a wealth of information. The UVM visual analysis by Karen Yacos as its primary author offers the most descriptive inventory. Yacos found that the scenic landscapes observed in Essex are the result of the following union of land types:

- Parallel north-south ridge lines running the length of Essex, divided by roadways. These form the backdrop for views from lower areas and also provide high elevations for viewing distant ridges and mid-ground expanses of farmland divided by hedgerows.
- Distant views of Mt. Mansfield, Camel’s Hump, Bolton range, northern mountains and the Adirondacks.
- Large, relatively flat terrain, in the internal areas of Essex, along the Winooski River valley where views of mountains in both directions are possible. This arrangement provides long distance views which are not often available in the hillier areas of Vermont.
- Dirt roads through closer land forms (forested hills and steep slopes) provide for appealing foreground views.
- Several stream beds and flood plain areas create interesting foreground and mid-ground views, especially when close to farmland.
- Historic buildings and homesteads in rural settings or compact settlements.

- A sense of separation of the developed central part of the Town from surrounding lands and towns. This is especially evident on VT Route 15 leading to Jericho, the River Road leading to Jericho/Williston/Richmond, and roads heading north toward Westford. These are gateways to the Town, and are presently visually appealing due to little development in these areas.
- Flat terrain in the vicinity of Old Stage, Chapin, Colonel Page and Towers Roads is comprised of development, farmland, pasture, and open space surrounded by ridges and undulating wooded hill areas.

In 1997, the Selectboard established a Committee on Scenic Roads to look at the principles and guidelines for following the state's Scenic Road designation and to inventory the Town's roads to determine if a scenic road ordinance was needed, justified or recommended. The committee's report was submitted to and accepted by the Selectboard in February 1998. The committee listed six "intrinsic qualities" that potentially merit a road's special designation – natural, cultural, historical, scenic, recreational and archaeological quality. The final report included the following recommendations:

- The Selectboard should not adopt the state's scenic road designation program.
- The Town should follow a locally developed program that would ascribe a Unique Features Designation to certain Town roads in order to protect the special characteristics of the roads and the adjacent landscape.
- Designation of such roads would follow a process including petition to the Selectboard by landowners, input by the Conservation Committee and Planning Commission, and action by the Selectboard.
- Roads approved by the Selectboard would then be added to the Town's Significant Features Map, currently shown on Map 17.

The scenic resources identified in the above sources are listed in D. Most of these areas are also included on Map 18, *Scenic Resources*, which shows areas that are high priority for conservation, based on a broad analysis of the Town.

The Town's aesthetic qualities are not limited to designated scenic resources. All roads and properties can benefit from landscaping. The Planning Commission can require appropriate plantings and green space during site plan and subdivision review. The Town can include those elements in any road improvement or other public facility projects. On-going maintenance of trees and plantings also will enhance the overall scenic qualities of the Town.

In 2008, the Selectboard adopted the Essex Open Space Plan, prepared by Front Porch Planning and Design and Arrowwood Environmental LLC. This project, undertaken by the Conservation Committee and Community Development Department, contained a number of observations and recommendations with regard to Essex's aesthetic resources. These include:

- Scenic Resources are a particular category of "open space."
- The protection of scenic resources was ranked the highest priority among those participating in the planning process.
- The encroachment of development into visually sensitive areas is ongoing, with no regulatory protection mechanisms in place.

- There was strong public support among those participating in the planning process that open space should be protected from the adverse effects of future development.
- Some adverse effects include frontage development along Town roads that block scenic views and abandonment and re-growth of farm fields that have been converted to low density residential use.
- Information on the Town's scenic resources should be updated and effective GIS based development review standards should be implemented.
- The significant Features Map should be updated.
- A scenic overlay zoning district was suggested as a means to protect Essex's Scenic resources.

In response to these recommendations, the Community Development Department initiated a Scenic Roadside Protection Project in conjunction with the Town of Jericho, Smart Growth Vermont, the Chittenden County Regional Planning Commission, and the Metropolitan Planning Organization.

In the summer and fall of 2009, a photo inventory and assessment was performed by citizen volunteers along the roads identified as scenic in Map 18, *Scenic Resources*. The results of the inventory and viewscape rankings along hundreds of assessment points at 500 foot intervals along the roads were converted to GIS – based maps. The objective of the Scenic Roadside Protection Project is to create a manual with specific standards – based protection methods to be incorporated into the zoning and subdivision regulations and be used by the Planning Commission during development review.

10.2 Historic & Cultural Resources

The Vermont Division for Historic Preservation has an extensive inventory of historic resources in the Town. There are a total of 88 individual sites scattered throughout the Town, a significant portion of which are located in what the Division considered the Essex Center Historic District. Fort Ethan Allen has been established as being of national significance and all but a few of the Fort's buildings are included in the inventory. The inventory is included as Appendix D. All of the sites listed in Appendix D appear on Map 19, *Historic Buildings*.

The Vermont Planning and Development Act provides the enabling authority for the creation of a Design Control District for “any area containing structures of historical, architectural or cultural merit.” The Town recognized two areas which clearly fit this description – the Essex Center/Town Common area and Fort Ethan Allen – and established design control districts for them in 1987. A report was prepared as part of the 1991 Town Plan which described the particular planning and design problems of these areas and set forth a design plan which included recommended planning and design criteria to guide future development. The report entitled “Historic Preservation and Design Control Standards for Essex Center and Fort Ethan Allen” (1986) is hereby incorporated by reference herein and should be consulted in the design or review of any project within these areas. Although the Town's Zoning Regulations also have design guidelines, they should be made more specific.

The purpose of designating certain areas within the Town of Essex as Design Control Districts was to maintain and enhance the rich cultural heritage of these areas and to eliminate or minimize substantial character alteration of the buildings. According to state statute, unless a design control

district is established for a specific area, neither the Planning Commission nor the Zoning Board of Adjustment have any jurisdiction over ensuring that the design and scale of a building is harmonious with its surroundings. Because Fort Ethan Allen and the Essex Center area are so important to the community, it was essential that some standards be established to protect them.

The Harriet Powell Museum was established in the early 1990s in the little white school building at 3 Browns River Road next to the Town Library. The Essex Community Historical Society meets regularly at the museum and is involved in researching and documenting Town history. In 2000, the Historical Society assisted in moving the 1805 Schoolhouse from its previous location on Chapin Road and restoring it at a new site on the Town Green.

Essex has many other historic structures and few tools to protect them from demolition or damage to their architectural integrity. Buildings at Butlers Corners, including the 1820 House are at risk, for example. The Town has been urged by residents and members of the Historical Society to adopt comprehensive measures to protect such structures, an effort which should be taken into consideration.

Essex also is the home of The Essex Art League, one of the largest local art groups in Vermont. The league's membership is open to any interested Vermonter.

10.3 Goals, Strategies and Objectives

Goal 10.1: Protect and maintain the scenic character of the Essex Landscape.

Objective 10.1.1: Update the Significant Features Map and use it to guide development review, land acquisitions and public facilities planning.

Strategy 10.1.1.1: Ensure that development proposed in areas identified by the Town as having scenic or cultural resources is designed to support and not detract from those resources. The Planning Commission shall develop guidelines to assist developers in protecting those resources.

Strategy 10.1.1.2: Ensure that development will not compromise prominent ridgelines, particularly in locations identified as being scenic.

Strategy 10.1.1.3: Participate in the Section 248 and 248(a) review before the Public Service Board when new telecommunications facilities in Essex are proposed. Recommend that the PSB take into consideration the standards in the zoning regulations regarding siting and co-location.

Strategy 10.1.1.4: Establish the preservation of significant scenic areas for future generations as a major component of the Town's land acquisition program.

Strategy 10.1.1.5: Ensure that all development within view from major thoroughfares is sensitive to the scenic character of Essex.

Strategy 10.1.1.6: Ensure that the scenic features as seen from the Town's roadsides are recognized and protected by the Selectboard in its road maintenance programs.

Strategy 10.1.1.7: Work with the Vermont Agency of Transportation and advocate for the construction of bridges, overpasses, rail crossings and similar highway accouterments that are the least intrusive on the traditional landscape, using alternatives that are in themselves scenic and meeting applicable engineering standards.

Objective 10.1.2: Encourage rural land uses outside the sewer core that will retain the Town's scenic and historic qualities while providing landowners with options for economic use of the land.

Strategy 10.1.2.1: When rural land is subdivided, require, to the extent possible, that viable farm and forest land be left in manageable condition by keeping the majority of land at a size that will qualify for current use tax benefits, and design lots to allow access for farming and forestry equipment and avoidance of conflicts with residences.

Strategy 10.1.2.2: Encourage alternatives to dairy farming, where it is no longer viable, to make economic use of open lands and improve the quality of life in the community. Alternatives could include agri-tourism linked to other regional tourist attractions, equestrian facilities linked to the Town trail network, and market farms linked to local farmers markets.

Goal 10.2: Use updated information on the Town's scenic resources to minimize the aesthetic impacts of development.

Objective 10.2.1: Employ the data and recommendations in the 2008 Essex Open Space Plan and the 2010 Scenic Roadscape Protection Manual to better protect scenic resources. Regulatory and non-regulatory tools to consider include creating a Scenic Overlay District with underlying review standards in the zoning and subdivision regulations, creating a land conservation fund; updating the Significant Features Map; conservation design subdivision regulations; expansion of existing incentives for permanent protection of open space; strengthen the roles of the Conservation Committee; a transfer of development program; and establishment of a local land trust.

Objective 10.2.2: Employ the data and recommendations of the 2008 Essex Open Space Plan and the 2010 Scenic Roadscape Protection Manual to better protect scenic resources. Update the inventory of significant scenic resources in Essex including historic and cultural sites and buildings.

Strategy 10.2.2.1: Review all previous designations of scenic resources such as the areas shown on the Town Plan Scenic Features Map and in the scenic roads study and amend the Scenic Resource Area on the Significant Features Map to reflect changing land uses and public attitudes.

Strategy 10.2.2.2: Perform a study of the scenic resources along the Circumferential Highway including an analysis of the scenic views, existing development and landforms at the highway intersections. Create a map showing the scenic areas along the highway and development guidelines for reducing impacts on the scenic resources.

Goal 10.3: Improve the aesthetic quality of the Essex landscape and increase residents' enjoyment of their surroundings. Landscape improvements are especially important along high-profile streets and in public spaces, and are as important for their winter contributions as for their summer presence.

Objective 10.3.1: Improve the quality of public trees and landscaping in Essex Town.

Strategy 10.3.1.1: Update and maintain the Tree Inventory and Management Plan for trees within Town rights-of-way, in parks, and on Town property. This inventory is a crucial step in prioritizing tree maintenance needs, and is an important step toward improving the health and appearance of existing public trees. The tree inventory should also include a five-year plan that identifies strategies for planting and maintaining public trees (e.g. applying for grants, organizing volunteers, etc.)

Strategy 10.3.1.2: Adopt a local tree ordinance prohibiting planting large trees under utility wires and encouraging proper tree selection, planting and maintenance methods.

Strategy 10.3.1.3: Involve residents in public tree care by organizing and training “citizen pruners” to supplement the efforts of regular Town maintenance employees and contractors.

Objective 10.3.2: Increase the number of public trees in Essex Town.

Strategy 10.3.2.1: Develop a Tree Planting Plan to direct future tree selection and placement. Identify vacant tree planting sites within Town rights-of-way, in parks, and on Town property, and then develop a five-year plan that facilitates the acquisition of appropriate trees for these vacant sites. Resources such as the Essex Tree Warden and staff from the Urban and Community Forestry Program (a joint venture by VT Department of Forests, Parks, and Recreation and UVM Extension) are helpful for their insights and expertise.

Objective 10.3.3: Improve the quality of non-tree landscape plantings in parks and public spaces.

Strategy 10.3.3.1: Hold regular training seminars for park and public works maintenance staff.

Strategy 10.3.3.2: Increase use of flowering plant material (annuals) in highly visible island beds and in containers around public parks and Essex Town offices.

Objective 10.3.4: Facilitate improved resident involvement in landscape care and planning.

Strategy 10.3.4.1: Stimulate private planting of trees and shrubs by Essex residents through education, such as programs offered by the UVM Extension Service.

Strategy 10.3.4.2: Allow groups of residents, businesses, school or nonprofit groups to “Adopt a Planting Bed” and agree to plant and maintain a landscaped public area under the supervision of a knowledgeable individual.

Strategy 10.3.4.3: Consider forming an Essex Tree Board to help organize and carry out public tree-related projects in the community.

Strategy 10.3.4.4: Consider setting guidelines for the harvesting of wood from Town forestlands by individuals or commercial entities, as the cost of fossil fuels rises.

Goal 10.4: Enhance the historic character of Essex Center by preserving historic properties and improving the livability and vitality of Essex Center.

Objective 10.4.1: Develop and adopt amendments to the Design Control Overlay District regulations that will work effectively and equitably to accomplish the enhancement of Essex Center.

Strategy 10.4.1.1: Revise the Zoning Regulations to discourage new highway-oriented commercial uses and other uses that may be out of character with the intent of the Design Control Overlay District.

Strategy 10.4.1.2: Expand the Design Control Overlay District boundaries to include properties recommended in the Town Center Master Plan, and including other areas of Town as determined by the Planning Commission and the Selectboard.

Strategy 10.4.1.3: Amend zoning bylaws to better preserve historic structures.

Objective 10.4.2: Seek funding for public improvements to implement the recommendations of the Town Center Master Plan for Essex Center and to attract private investment for restoring historic properties.

Strategy 10.4.2.1: Update the 1991 Town Center Master Plan to include an examination of densities, use, and design control, as well as funding mechanisms to complete needed infrastructure improvements.

Strategy 10.4.2.2: Place improvements recommended in the Town Center Master Plan for Essex Center such as sidewalk connections, street trees and the Town Green in the capital budget and actively seek local, state and federal funding to implement the improvements.

Strategy 10.4.2.3: Encourage the formation of a volunteer Essex Center enhancement organization that can seek funding for public improvements independently or in partnership with the Town, to help owners of historic properties find suitable tenants and maintain the historic integrity of the structures, and to promote neighborhood activities.

Strategy 10.4.2.4: In recognition of the fact that design control elements and historic preservation may add costs to a project in the Design Control Districts, the Town should work with developers to mitigate those additional costs, to the extent reasonable, by actively pursuing local, state and federal funding options.

Objective 10.4.3: Encourage Town property to use sculpture and statuary as part of the environment.

Goal 10.5: Promote historic preservation and promote development that enhances historic resources of the Town.

Objective 10.5.1: Update and verify the listing of historic resources currently shown in Appendix D.

Strategy 10.5.1.1: Establish a set of specific criteria to be used when adding sites to the list in Appendix D. Ultimately the list should include all sites on the state inventory, all sites on the Federal Register, and all sites determined to be of historic interest by the Historical Society.

Strategy 10.5.1.2: Establish a threshold age, typically 50 years, for initial consideration of historical interest. Once that threshold is met, the other criteria should be examined. Note that not all 50-year-old structures should be found to be of historic interest.

Strategy 10.5.1.3: Periodically publish the list of historic structures and any proposed additions/deletions from it.

Objective 10.5.2: Require exterior modification to historically and/or architecturally significant buildings and structures to be sensitive to and respect the architectural integrity of the building or structure.

Strategy 10.5.2.1: With assistance from the Historical Society, provide to owners of historic properties information on historically-sensitive restoration including a list of public and private historic preservation experts who can provide detailed advice on restoration or construction projects.

Strategy 10.5.2.2: Before issuance of a zoning permit for the alteration of an historic property, require the owner to obtain the advice of a historic preservationist regarding the special elements of a building and recommended preservation measures. This shall also be required for any proposal for site plan review or conditional use review affecting an historic building or structure. If preservation of the historic features is not possible, the applicant shall, at a minimum, have an approved historic preservationist document the special elements that will be disturbed or removed.

Objective 10.5.3: Develop better methods to ensure protection and preservation of historically and/or architecturally significant structures/sites.

Strategy 10.5.3.1: Regularly update and maintain an inventory of historically and/or architecturally significant structures/sites.

Strategy 10.5.3.2: Record in the Essex land records, by respective deed, acknowledging information that a parcel contains an historically and/or architecturally significant structure/site.

Strategy 10.5.3.3: Appoint a Town-recognized Historical Committee that would collaborate with the Essex Historical Society, provide recommendations to the Planning Commission and the Zoning Board of Adjustment on land development matters especially in the Business Design Control Overlay District, create and maintain the Town's inventory of historically and/or architecturally significant structures/sites, and other tasks determined by the Selectboard.

Strategy 10.5.3.4: Amend zoning bylaws to expand on the requirement for approval from the Planning Commission and create specific criteria for proposed structural demolition.