

# INTRODUCTION TO THE PLAN

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One of the most vital factors for orderly community growth, as well as resilience, is comprehensive planning. The development of a Town Plan is the process whereby a community seeks to understand where it has been – how past events have shaped it, where it is today – its assets and its problems, and where it is going – the extent of its future needs. It then develops a program that is sufficiently comprehensive to seek solutions to provide for future needs through the utilization of all its assets – human, natural and material.

The plan for the Town of Essex is its residents' vision of the Town's future. It is supported by plans, maps, studies and reports. It considers past trends and future potential, major problems that require solutions, and directions or policies that can be developed as guides to new growth. Taking all of the above into consideration, this plan attempts to visualize the long-range growth and sustainability of this community.

This plan, therefore, is a framework or guide for the Town as a whole to use in shaping its future course over a period of many years. As such, it must be sufficiently general to permit the filling in of such details as they may arise in future years. To serve over an extended period of time, the plan must be flexible. It must allow modifications and adjustment to all of its parts without unduly damaging its basic structure. The plan, above all, must be far-reaching. It must deal with all aspects of the community's growth, not just one small area.

Chapter 1 sets the stage for a discussion of the community's future by describing issues and opportunities, articulating the vision that Essex residents have for the future, and establishing general goals.

Chapter 2 includes a history of the Town, a description of the Town from a state and regional perspective, and a population profile.

Chapters 3 through 10 include the functional elements of the plan: Economic Development; Education; Housing; Community Facilities and Services; Recreation and Parks; Transportation; Natural Resources; and Aesthetic, Historic and Cultural Resources. Each element outlines the existing conditions, goals and objectives and policies of the plan.

Chapter 11, Land Use and Development, divides the Town into sub-areas to provide a location-specific means for addressing the unique set of circumstances found in the different regions of Essex. It also outlines policies and strategies to guide future land use patterns and describes land use districts which will ultimately be included in the Town's zoning regulations.

Chapter 12 is a description of the Town's government and fiscal condition.

Chapter 13 describes the energy sources relied upon by the residents of Essex. It recommends measures that the Town can take to improve energy efficiency in its own operations. It addresses measures which can be taken by the private sector for new construction, as well as the contributions which can be made through the utilization of renewable energy sources.

Finally, the last chapter, Chapter 14, describes the various tools and techniques available to implement the plan, identifies which tools are appropriate for the specific plan objectives, and presents the who, how, and when for implementing the plan.

## **Planning History – Through the Late 1980s**

The Town of Essex has a long and progressive history of planning. In 1965, the Town, including the Village of Essex Junction, secured the services of professional planning consultants, Hans Klunder Associated of Hanover, New Hampshire. This firm, working with the Town and Village Planning Commissions, developed a comprehensive plan for the area which was adopted by the voters of the Town (which includes Village residents) in 1968. This same year, the Vermont Planning and Development Act (Title 24, Chapter 117) was put into effect by the state, encouraging municipalities to prepare a plan and stipulating certain requirements for their zoning regulations.

The so-called “Klunder Plan” provided an excellent foundation for the Town’s planning efforts. Very few substantive changes have been made to the original land use districts over the years.

In 1970, a supplement to the 1967 comprehensive plan was prepared for both the Town and Village which reviewed the progress made in implementing the 1967 plan and outlined a strategy for continuing planning efforts. The need for this supplement was driven by both communities’ concern over the rapid growth occurring during this time frame.

The Town and Village Planning Commissions drew up separate zoning regulations applicable to their respective areas to implement the intent of the comprehensive plan. These were adopted separately by the Selectboard and Trustees following public hearings in 1972.

A Natural Resources subcommittee of the joint Planning Commissions published a comprehensive study of area resources in 1972. Entitled “Proposal for a Quality Environment,” the study considered planning for recreation areas, establishment of trail systems and conservation of natural resources in Essex. Portions of this study were incorporated in later updates of plans for the Town outside the Village, which were adopted in 1974 and 1977. It was not until 1978 that the more substantive recommendations were included. Many of these recommendations have been implemented by the Town, including the acquisition of Indian Brook Reservoir in 1986, the reservation of public trail easements throughout Saxon Hill Forest and the purchase or dedication of numerous community and neighborhood parks.

In 1977, the Town made a significant change to the zoning designation of the Saxon Hill Forest (also known as the Essex Junction Village Forest) from an Open Recreation zone to a Resource Preservation District-Industrial zone. This unique area was established to protect the natural attributes of the area for public enjoyment while allowing limited, well-planned industrial development on a minor portion of this large tract in harmony with the natural surroundings.

From 1977 to 1985, the adoption of an updated comprehensive plan was delayed due to the uncertainty of federal funding for a municipal sewer system and the establishment of a final alignment for the Circumferential Highway. An interim plan was adopted in 1984 with a permanent plan adopted in 1986. A subsequent amendment to the plan in 1987 established design control districts in Essex Center and Fort Ethan Allen.

Interim subdivision regulations were first adopted in 1976 and permanently adopted in 1979. These regulations remained in their original form until 1989 when changes were made to definitions.

## **1991 Town Plan and Recent Planning History**

In the late 1980’s, a major planning effort began in anticipation of a new Town Plan update.

The first step taken in the planning process was the collection and evaluation of background data. An analysis of existing conditions was undertaken via a series of studies and needs assessments during the 1988 to 1991 time frame.

These included:

- Public Safety Facility Needs Assessment Study, Rebanks Architects, Inc. May 1988
- Water System Capacity Study, Town of Essex Public Works Department, June 1988
- Sanitary Sewer System Capacity Study, Donald Hamlin Consulting Engineers, October 1988
- Parks and Recreation Needs Assessment and Capital Improvement Plan, Dubois & King, October 1989
- Open Lands Study, Humstone Squires Associates, July 1989
- Report of the Essex/Essex Junction Affordable Housing Task Force, March 1990
- Town Center Master Plan, Humstone Squires Associates, et. al, April 1991
- Highway Transportation Management Plan, Town of Essex Public Works Department, February 1991

These studies were incorporated by reference in the 1991 Town Plan.

The second step was to formulate the Planning Program. A joint meeting of the Planning Commission and the Board of Selectmen in October 1989 decided the framework for development of the plan.

The third step, the establishment of goals and objectives, began in April 1987 with a telephone survey of a representative sample of residents of the Village and the Town Outside the Village. A second mail survey was undertaken in January 1989 that focused specifically on recreation and parks, as part of a recreation and parks needs assessment. In an effort to generate interest in the preparation of the plan, a public forum was held in December of 1989. Approximately 150 residents attended and were asked to provide their thoughts on what the future should hold for Essex.

As a result of the December forum, 89 residents volunteered to serve on eight subcommittees that included Economic Development, Education, Housing, Land Use, Environmental Resource Protection, Recreation and Parks, Transportation, and Utilities, Facilities and Services. These subcommittees met over four months and submitted reports for Planning Commission review. In fall 1989, an Affordable Housing Committee was formed jointly with the Village of Essex Junction. This committee's work provided the foundation for the Housing subcommittee's report.

In September of 1990, all of the subcommittee reports were further refined and recommendations prioritized by three new committees – Land Use, Goals and Objectives, and Implementation. Committee membership included representatives from the Board of Selectmen, Planning Commission and citizen volunteers. The final recommendations of these committees were used to develop the plan and were the major source of its policies and strategies.

During the identification of community goals and objectives, it became evident that residents were extremely concerned about maintaining and enhancing an identifiable focal point for the Town. The Essex Center area of Town was mentioned time and again as providing a sense of community or identity which was important to preserve. Town officials decided to take a pro-active approach by obtaining the services of a professional consulting team to prepare a Town Center Plan for this particular area of Essex. The encouragement of a Town Center in this location was consistent with historical development of the community.

Four public workshops were held on the Town Center Master Plan to identify goals and objectives, obtain ideas on the design of the area, obtain a consensus on three alternative design concepts, and finally, respond to concerns about the final design.

The Town Plan received final approval and went into effect in November 1991.

In 1992, the Town changed the process by which it adopted Town Plans and amendments to provide for voter approval by Australian Ballot. A number of amendments to the Town Plan were also prepared for voter consideration in that year.

A number of these amendments were approved by the voters in 1993 and incorporated into the Town Plan. Major revisions to the zoning and subdivision regulations were approved in 1995 to implement the recommendations of the 1991 Town Plan as amended in 1993.

The 1996 Town Plan represented an update of the 1991 Town Plan as amended in 1993. With the exception of revisions to demographic and other data, no major changes were made. An area immediately north of the Town Center was revised to allow some commercial and medium density uses. This change was added to the zoning regulations in 1997.

Two long-standing planning policies were incorporated into regulations in 1998. Using information from a 1998 update to the Sewer System Capacity Study, the Selectboard adopted a Sewer Allocation Ordinance which replaced its Sewer Allocation Policy. This document was significant in outlining a boundary for the service area and continuing the Town's policy of restricting new sewer service to properties located within that boundary. Also, the Town's Residential Phasing Policy, which long had restricted the rate of residential growth, was officially included in the subdivision regulations.

In fall 1998, the Planning Commission adopted the following Mission Statement and Goals:

Mission Statement: Our purpose is to provide the planning tools and to make decisions that guide the growth and development of the Essex community toward improving the quality of life for its citizens.

Goals:

- 1) Assist the community in developing a Town Plan that:
  - balances the diverse demands of the present generation with anticipated future needs
  - is supported by reasonable, understandable and fair regulations.
- 2) Administer a decision making process that:
  - is based on the Town Plan and its supporting documents
  - considers the best interest of the community at large.”

### **The Planning Process – 2001 Town Plan**

Planning has been a continuing process in Essex and sometimes overlaps from one Town Plan to the next. For example, adoption of an Indian Brook Management Plan, an important recommendation of earlier Town Plans, was just being completed as the 2001 Town Plan was being prepared. Other implementation efforts continued as the updated goals, objectives and strategies of the new plan were being developed.

The Town began the planning process for the 2001 Town Plan with the belief that most of the goals of the 1991 Town Plan were still appropriate. Development within the Town Center followed patterns recommended by the 1991 plan, and other public and private actions also were taking place in accordance with that plan. However, the Town also felt that the 10-year update in 2001 should be more complete than the 5-year update in 1996.

The first step was creation of new Town Plan committees, mirroring the successful effort from 1989 and 1990. After volunteers responded to a mailing from the Community Development Department,

six committees were formed in April 2000 – Land Use, Transportation and Public Facilities, Natural and Cultural Resources, Parks and Recreation, Housing, and Economic Development. Each committee was asked to review relevant sections of the 1996 plan and to recommend changes in light of current conditions in the Town. A list of major issues was compiled by the Community Development Department to assist the committees in their work.

Several public meetings were held during the spring and summer of 2000. A kick-off meeting in May oriented all committee members to the status of the 1996 Town Plan, major issues to be addressed, and the process for adopting a new plan. A public forum in June sought input from Essex residents regarding planning issues facing the Town. A joint committee meeting at the end of August allowed for discussion of issues that overlapped individual committee jurisdiction, notably land use policies at the urban/rural fringe.

Each of the six Town Plan committees met during the spring and fall of 2000 and produced a set of goals, objectives and strategies. A seventh committee, Trails, was added during this time and provided recommendations on trail mapping and related goals and objectives.

The findings of the committees were presented for public review at a public forum in November.

Work done by the committees and participation in the various public meetings represented a diligent planning effort by approximately 50 Town residents. In an attempt to gain input from a wider audience, planners conducted a survey of residents both of the Village of Essex Junction and the Town outside the Village. A six page survey – with questions on growth rates, general planning goals, open space, housing, commercial uses and transportation – was distributed to voters on election day in November. More than 1200 residents returned survey forms, an impressive return that suggested a strong interest in issues relating to growth and land use planning.

### **2006 Town Plan Update**

Similar to the process used to update the Town Plan in 1996, the Planning Commission and the Selectboard opted to conduct a basic update for the 2006 Town Plan since the Town Center vision and related goals, policies, and objectives remain largely current and applicable. To that end, the Town carried out the following activity:

The Town, with the assistance of the Vermont Center for Rural Studies, conducted a citizen survey beginning with the March, 2004 Town Meeting and running through May, 2004 (refer to the survey results in Appendix A). Three public forums were also held to focus on the adequacy of the 2001 Town Plan's goals, policies, and objectives, supplement the results of the 2004 citizen survey, and consider the recommendations of an ad hoc citizen committee.

In addition, Town staff held meetings with other local planners in the region, staff from the Chittenden County Regional Planning Commission, and staff from the VT Department of Housing and Community Affairs, to collaborate on the goals and policies of other local plans, the regional plan, and plans of state agencies affecting land use.

The Town also used the services of the VT Center for Rural Studies to update the demographic and statistical tables in the plan, and hired planning consultant Michael Munson, AICP in collaboration with the firm Burnt Rock Inc., Associates in Community Planning, to assist with the update. The consultants' primary responsibilities were to make strategic revisions to the 2001 Town Plan, in consultation with the Planning Commission and staff, and incorporate recent key findings from the citizen outreach efforts and special studies undertaken by the Town in the past four years.

## **2011 Plan Update**

The Planning Commission did not perform a comprehensive update of the 2006 Town Plan, finding that the general vision for the Town remained intact. No need was found to change the Future Land Use map or to review the main designated Planning Areas. More emphasis has been placed on implementing the goals and objectives of the 2006 Town Plan through an on-going series of amendments to the Zoning and Subdivision regulations. The regulations were amended in 2007, 2008 and 2010 for the following purposes: to incorporate a new residential phasing policy; to add riparian buffer zone regulations; to change the boundaries of the MXD-PUD zoning district; to make the documents more user-friendly, including substantially revising the development review process; to revise the Planned Unit Development (PUD) provisions; to consolidate and clarify enforcement procedures; to revise the Town's policy on residential density bonuses; to add regulations for telecommunications facilities; to revise exterior lighting requirements; and to add flood hazard area language to meet FEMA requirements, among other revisions.

The process for the 2011 Town Plan did involve a comprehensive statistical and data update, although information from the 2010 Census was not yet available. The Town contracted with the Chittenden County Regional Planning Commission for the statistical and data update work. All Town departments provided updated statistics, charts and tables to reflect changes in the intervening five years.

The Planning Commission conducted four public forums for the 2011 Town Plan and held a formal public hearing. The Selectboard also held a workshop and had multiple public hearings on the proposed revisions.

## **Coordination with Other Plans**

A comprehensive effort was made as part of adoption of the 1991 Plan to ensure that the Town's planning efforts were consistent with those of neighboring towns. The 2006 Plan continued the planning directions that were found to be consistent 15 years earlier. In addition, several key areas of concern were addressed in greater detail in the 2001 Plan and were carried forward in the 2006 update. For example, updated trails maps were prepared after viewing regional maps that showed the location of trail connections in adjacent towns.

Through the years, Village planners have been consulted concerning issues of mutual concern, such as traffic and commercial development. Studies prepared for the Regional Planning Commission, such as the Economic and Demographic Forecast for Northwest Vermont and Chittenden County, 2000 to 2035 and beyond, were used in the preparation of population and housing projections for this plan. The Town also paid close attention to regional policies for growth centers and housing needs, but the Town retained its right as the primary entity responsible for land use policies in those areas.

Efforts have been made to ensure the 2011 Town Plan remains as consistent as possible with the Regional Plan, as well as with accompanying plans such as the Regional Open Space Plan.

The Town of Essex continues to participate in a number of regional and multi-community organizations. A complete list is included in Chapter 12, "Government and Finance."