

1. THE VISION

Essex is a thriving community with continuing economic and residential growth while remaining largely true to its rural character. Growth is concentrated in a designated sewer core area and focused in the Town Center to encourage pedestrian-friendly development that is attractive to live in and a destination for goods and services for neighboring communities. Compact growth helps preserve open space for agricultural, recreational and conservation purposes, as well as reduce energy use for transportation. Improvements in infrastructure, public transportation and land use will positively influence traffic flow and volume, as well as energy use and conservation.

Definition of “Our Community”

What is Essex’s identity? Perhaps unlike many communities of the past, it’s not any one central place, industry, theme, or folktale. Rather, our community is the sum of its parts. It’s our rich history inclusive of, but not limited to, the Allen forefathers and its Civil War heroes. It’s the ability to support a thriving Town Center at Butlers Corner. It’s the continuing success of the Essex High School athletes and scholars, the influence of IBM, and the bustle of the Champlain Valley Expo. It’s unwavering support of the Circumferential Highway balanced with stewardship of our Town Common and natural resources. It’s the enthusiasm families feel about Essex as a wonderful place to live due to an excellent school system and recreation opportunities. And, it’s all the rest ...

1.1 Purpose

The overall purpose of a Town Plan is to encourage the intentional distribution of population, employment opportunities, and other activities, and to protect residential, agricultural and other areas from undue concentrations of population and overcrowding of land and buildings, from traffic congestion, from inadequate parking and the invasion of through-traffic, and from the loss of peace, quiet and privacy.

Before a plan for our community can be developed, it is necessary to gain an understanding of the issues and opportunities confronting us globally as well as locally. As the assets and liabilities of the community are evaluated, a vision of what we want our community to become over the next five, 10 and 20 years begins to emerge. A statement of goals can then be prepared from the wishes, needs and hopes of the people of the community. All of these elements provide a framework for the rest of the plan.

1.2 Issues and Opportunities

Essex residents acknowledge that the global economy has an increasing influence on our local way of life. We watch as jobs move to places where workers accept much lower wages. We know that businesses have moved to warmer climates and areas with lower taxes and fewer labor laws. Economists tell us that dollars spent locally stay in the community up to three times more than those spent elsewhere, generating revenue to support the state through sales tax, as well as to grow and sustain local businesses. “Buy Local” may leap from a bumper sticker slogan to an economic imperative.

The Town should encourage the efficient use of energy resources. Essex would be wise to carefully examine strategies for the creation of a more sustainable and localized economy. As a community, we can explore ways to build resilience by meeting more of our basic needs through local farming, and industry, as well as renewable energy production.

An understanding of community issues, opportunities and aspirations requires public participation. The following is a summary of comments made during the adoption of the prior Town Plans and in response to the November 2000 and March 2004 Town Plan surveys.

Essex residents take pride in their community because of its many contrasts. They speak of Essex's semi-rural nature and open countryside despite the fact the Town of Essex is located in the most populated and one of the fastest growing counties in Vermont. Essex is attractive because of its nationally recognized school system, its recreational land and facilities, and as the home of an IBM manufacturing plant employing approximately 5,000 people. Its residents enjoy per capita incomes and average wages among the highest in the state. The Town is in the geographical center of Chittenden County and is within easy access of all cultural, recreational, and social activities of the Champlain Valley.

Essex residents express strong satisfaction with recent rates of growth and with the Town's growth policies. Yet the costs of growth are recognized. Some of the negative aspects of being a sub-regional center include traffic congestion, the loss of farmland and open space, increased taxes, and increased demands on municipal services and facilities. Specific issues identified are categorized into five main topics.

Open Space

The Town's natural infrastructure – its trail networks, scenic views, productive agricultural land, wetland, and wildlife habitat corridors – is also important to residents. Community members are concerned about the incremental loss of open space that comes with increased suburbanization. Developing measures to better preserve Essex's rural character and natural resources through more stringent development review standards, creation of an open space fund, and a land trust should be considered.

Essex has hills, valleys, forests, meadows, floodplains and spectacular views of distant mountains. Major roads follow the rivers and lowlands converging at the Five Corners in the Village of Essex Junction. More than three-quarters of the geographic area of Essex is rural with the development clustered in the Village, Essex Center, Sand Hill and Susie Wilson Road areas. Residents desire to retain the rural atmosphere through the protection of important features and those uses that keep lands open. Future growth should be sensitive to views. There is need for more trails providing better access to rivers and natural areas as well as providing linkage to key developed areas such as schools, shopping and business. Creation of an Open Space Fund will assist in the preservation of open land and compatible uses of that land.

Residents want to maintain and improve the quality of life in Essex. Air and water quality continue to improve and clean energy, recycling and solid waste reduction also must be promoted.

Cultural Facilities, Parks and Institutions

Essex residents have consistently expressed a desire to strengthen and enhance a sense of community. Cultural arts and activities are a key factor in reinforcing pride in one's community.

Efforts elevating community spirit include the opening of the Essex Free Library, restoration of Memorial Hall, and improvements to the Town Center.

The purchase of Indian Brook Reservoir placed an important natural resource in public hands for current and future generations to enjoy. Growing use of Indian Brook brings about a need for careful management of the park's resources. The unique RPD-I zoning of Saxon Hill Forest, which has been consistently observed since 1977 in accordance with the initial agreement, must be preserved so that the Town does not lose that precious resource. Cooperation with the Tree Farm Management Group and the Village in developing soccer fields at the Tree Farm property increases recreational opportunities for Town and Village residents.

Maintaining high quality schools is one of the highest priorities of Town residents. Recent additions have been made to Essex Town schools in response to residential growth. Management of the growth rate will help the Town manage the cost of providing educational services.

Residents support continued cooperation among Town and school officials and private groups to make land available for recreational use and to maintain recreational facilities.

Community Infrastructure

Essex has experienced considerable growth over the last 25 years. Town residents see a resulting increase in demand for services. They are concerned about traffic and road conditions. The Circumferential Highway is critical to alleviating traffic congestion and making Essex more accessible. However, residents also want to control development along the highway and at its interchanges. Rather than widen VT Route 15 and other highways, residents prefer use of more efficient intersections, expanded bus service, and construction of sidewalks and multi-use trails.

Housing

A mixture of housing available to all income levels is desirable. Given the aging population, elderly housing is an important need. Residents want housing to be close to services and envision mixed use development instead of segregated land uses. Residential development should not be wasteful in its use of undeveloped land. Rather than extend the growth area into the countryside, the Town's growth centers should be surrounded by open space. Finally, the rate of population and housing growth is a concern and the Town's growth control policies should be continued.

Economic Development

Residents are concerned about the Town's dependency on one major industry and the need to diversify our tax base. Streamlining the zoning and subdivision regulatory review processes is a goal. Residents also want future economic development activities to be in keeping with the Town's character and not to degrade the environment.

1.3 General Planning Goals

- Essex will work to ensure that the general public health, safety and welfare of its residents remain of primary importance as the community plans its future, given the expected local and global challenges ahead.

- The 20th century model of growth and development as detailed in prior plans will begin to give way in this and future plans to a 21st century model of self-sufficiency and resiliency for overcoming the challenges posed by peak oil and climate change.
- The Town will continue to accept a share of the region's growth but will balance this growth with the ability to provide services and facilities consistent with historical growth rates.
- Future development will be consistent with Essex's role as a sub-regional center with the scale of development supportable by a market derived from Essex and its surrounding communities. It is not intended that Essex become the dominant growth center for the county.
- The Town will continue as a good place in which people can live and work in the same community. Maintaining a strong economy, good-paying jobs, reasonable property taxes and diverse housing opportunities will allow people of all ages to stay in Essex and encourage others to locate in the Town.
- Economic growth will be diversified. Mixed commercial and residential development will occur in and around the Town Center. The extent of land and available infrastructure in and around Saxon Hill Industrial Park will be highly attractive for new and expanding business and industry. Employment opportunities will be available both in workplaces and at home and will be supported by changing information technology.
- The community will continue to emphasize high-quality education. Consistent provision of educational services will be facilitated by avoiding rapid change in student population. Educational facilities will be used extensively both during and after school hours by the community.
- The Town will address the housing needs of Essex's projected resident population, particularly low and moderate-income residents. More diverse housing opportunities will be available with a large majority of them being located in the Town's growth centers. Energy efficiency will be a major push, as will the use of locally-sourced building materials.
- The Town will continue to meet its basic responsibilities for providing adequate community services and facilities. A wide range of actions will include maintenance of existing facilities such as roads, managing the capacity of finite systems such as sewers, and incorporating new technology and information in areas such as storm water treatment.
- The future will provide varied modes of transportation with automobile use balanced by increased availability of public transit, sidewalks and multi-use trails. Mixed-use development patterns and home-based employment may help reduce traffic congestion. Changes in travel patterns and more efficient intersection designs will avoid the need to widen existing highways. Completion of the Circumferential Highway will allow local streets to return to their primary function of providing access instead of through-traffic.
- All future land use and development will proceed in a controlled, planned and balanced manner that will be harmonious with the natural and built environment. Development will

occur in growth centers in a compact manner as opposed to scattered development throughout the Town. Areas such as the Town Center will have a mix of commercial and residential development. Development form will be vertical, with taller buildings, as well as horizontal. These higher density areas will be accompanied by largely residential neighborhood growth centers. All the settled areas will have convenient access by non-motorized, multi-use trails to the surrounding open spaces, natural and recreational facilities as well as key developed areas such as schools, shopping and businesses.

- Important natural resources and open space will be protected as part of a more extensive open lands policy. Strong encouragement will be given to those who continue productive use of farm and forestland. Other undeveloped lands will allow Town residents to enjoy recreation and trail opportunities and will provide aesthetic benefits to the entire community. We recognize our duty to leave substantial land undeveloped for future generations.
- The establishment of Property-Assessed Clean Energy districts (known as PACE districts) will be encouraged.
- Energy conservation, energy efficiency, and ways to generate renewable energy will be given a high priority, given expected cost increases and the anticipated need for decreasing our greenhouse gas emissions.
- Safe and affordable childcare and early education for children from birth to age 12 will be available and will meet or exceed state and national learning standards. Current childcare and early education issues will be resolved through proper financing, adequate infrastructure, improved business assistance for providers, and heightened childcare work force development.